# THE PERFECT POPULIST STORM?

## The Elections of March 2018 and the New Italian Government in Historical and Comparative Perspective

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**Summary**

The Italian general elections of March 2018 caused a sea change in the political system. The article seeks to analyse the elements of novelty present in the vote and the subsequent negotiations for the formation of a governing coalition by focusing on the two victorious parties, the Lega and the Five-Star Movement. Their ideological appeal is placed within the context of the Europe-wide surge of populist parties, but also traced back to the long-term determinants of political dissatisfaction characterizing modern Italy. Future scenarios, together with broader theoretical implications regarding the general conceptualization of populism, are discussed and evaluated.

**Keywords**

Electoral volatility, Five Star Movement, Italian politics, Lega, Party system change, Populism

After the General election held on March 4th, 2018, Italy is the only West European country in which two populist parties are now in government. They Five-Star Movement (M5S), led by Luigi Di Maio (32.7%), and the Lega, led by Matteo Salvini (17.4%), support a government led by Giuseppe Conte, a University professor of Law with no previous political experience, who had been indicated by Di Maio as a possible Minister - on the eve of the election - in a future M5S government. The main losers of the election were Silvio Berlusconi’s Forza Italia

(reduced to second place in the Centre-right coalition, with 14 percent), and especially Matteo Renzi, the leader of the Democratic party (PD, which went from 25.4% to 18.7%). In the 2014 elections for the European Parliament, Renzi had bucked the trend of decline experienced by most social-democratic parties around the continent, gaining an astonishing 40 percent. Having bet his leadership on constitutional change, Renzi had already resigned as Prime Minister after the defeat in the 2016 Constitutional Referendum. He left the job to his party colleague Paolo Gentiloni, but was also confirmed as party leader a few months later. As the PD has now been 'normalized' in the context of social-democratic decline, in this article we will focus our attention on the dynamics of what can perhaps be seen as a 'perfect populist storm': the success of M5S and Lega and its possible implications for Italian democracy.

Many themes of the 2018 Italian election speak to long-term trends in public discourse and opinion. Hence, to analyse the different shades of populism offered by the parties now in government, we identify the peculiar stratification of layers of crisis and discontent emerging in various stages of development of Italian democracy. This allows us to assess the changing dynamics of the quality of democracy, and to elaborate on the possible challenges that the combined success of the two main victors might pose to the political system.

## 1. "The earthquake:" what really happened in the 2018 election

Over the past decade, the term 'earthquake' has often been used to describe astonishing electoral results in many democracies. In parliamentary systems, one of the standard

indicators to assess the magnitude of change is electoral volatility[1], which in the May 2012 Greek general election peaked at 48.5, an unprecedented level in any election in Europe since 1945. Between 1945 and 2015, levels of volatility over 30 were also registered in Spain in 1982 (43.8), Iceland in 2013 (34.6), and the Netherlands in 2002 (31.3). Although the value registered in the 2018 Italian election stops short of 30 (26.7), Italy is notable for being the only European country in which as many as three elections have seen levels above 25 in the past quarter of a century: besides this year, it was 39.3 in 1994 and 36.7 in 2013 (see tab.1).

Table 1 The Ten Most Volatile Elections in Western Europe (1945-2018)

| **Country** | **Year** | **Total volatility** |
|---|---|---|
| Greece | 2012 | 48.5 |
| Spain | 1982 | 43.8 |
| France | 2017 | 40.7 |
| Italy | 1994 | 39.2 |
| Italy | 2013 | 36.6 |
| Iceland | 2013 | 34.6 |
| Netherlands | 2002 | 31.3 |
| Ireland | 2011 | 29.6 |
| France | 2002 | 27.7 |
| Italy | 2018 | 26.7 |

Note: Data from the volatility dataset https://cise.luiss.it/cise/dataset-of-electoral-volatility-and-its-internal-components-in-western-europe-1945-2015/ as reported in https://constitution-unit.com/2018/05/08/how-italy-experienced-yet-another-electoral-system-and-why-it-may-soon-change-it-again/ (accessed on 15 May 2018).

One might be tempted to identify these last two as landmark elections, signposts for the

[1] The index used here is Total Volatility, as calculated by V. Emanuele, see https://cise.luiss.it/cise/dataset-of-electoral-volatility-and-its-internal-components-in-western-europe-1945-2015/

end of the First and Second Italian Republics, respectively. While this is correct with regards to the party system, for Italian democracy as a whole the distinctions between these three phases are not so clear-cut. Indeed, despite the record number of institutional reforms implemented in the 1990-2010 period (Bedock 2017), both main governing coalitions (the centre-right and centre-left) failed in their attempt to reform the Italian Constitution (as a result of two Constitutional Referendums held in 2006 and 2016, respectively). Hence, the political system is now characterized by a peculiar mix: an un-reformed overall constitutional architecture, built on a rather cumbersome combination of symmetric bicameralism and a double investiture procedure for new governments to be sworn in, and new political actors. The oldest party in business is the declining Forza Italia (itself resurrected in 2013 after disappearing in 2009), although the Lega is simply the branding of the party formed in the early 1990s as Lega Nord, and is therefore almost 30 year old.

Furthermore, the electoral law used in 2018 was the fourth different iteration devised since 1993, a mainly proportional Mixed-member system (67 percent of seats assigned with PR, the remaining ones through Single Member Plurality). It was approved in 2017, after two major interventions on previous laws by the Italian Constitutional Court (Baldini and Renwick 2015).

Apart from the success of so-called populist parties (to which we will return later), three elements make the 2018 election truly distinctive in a comparative West European perspective: the tri-polar dynamics of the party system, the geography of the vote (which correlates with strong territorial economic inequalities) and the lack of credibility of the governing party on the main issues in the eyes of the electorate.

The first element to be noted with regard to the party system is that – contrary to the 1994 and 2013 elections – high total volatility was not matched by strong party system innovation (PSInn, equal to 2.6), defined as the aggregate level of 'newness' recorded in a party system at a given election (Emanuele and Chiaramonte 2016). Much more significant was the new balance of power between the parties that were already the main actors in the previous elections of 2013. The overtaking of Forza Italia by Salvini's Lega and the number of votes lost by the PD were the most prominent results within the two traditional coalitions, but the most surprising and important outcome was the magnitude of the success of the M5S, a party founded in 2009 which is now the most-voted political force in 15 out of 20 Italian regions. Hence, Italy now has an anti-establishment party which, by gaining almost a third of the popular vote, has strengthened its challenge to the left-right competition that emerged since 1994, during the so-called 'Second Republic'.

This brings us to the second element, a geographical division that was perhaps last seen on a similar scale in the June 1946 Referendum on the form of State, when Italy was cut in two, with all constituencies north of Rome voting for the Republic and the South supporting the Monarchy. To be fair, the M5s obtained more than 20 percent in all the Northern regions, as well. Yet, it lost votes in some Northern provinces while enjoying a spectacular growth in the South, almost reaching 50 percent in Campania, Di Maio's region. Interestingly enough, and replicating a pattern already emerging in the 'NO' vote in the 2016 Constitutional referendum, the M5S' success was correlated with high unemployment and low economic growth. A mirror-image development occurred with the Lega: while the dropping of the

term ‘Nord’ broadened its successful appeal to a nation-wide audience, the party still got more votes than average in the North, by far the most productive area of the country.

These territorial patterns can be clearly related to issue ownership by the two main winners: Salvini’s proposal of a flat tax was particularly alluring for the wealthy electorate (the North), while Di Maio’s proposal of a basic income attracted particular interest in the South. When we consider that Italy has the highest sub-state economic imbalances in Europe,[2] it becomes clear that on the economy the victory of the two parties was built on very different interests and constituencies, not easily reconcilable within any governing coalition.

Even more interestingly, survey data on issues shows that the M5S was perceived as the most credible force with respect to the most important ‘shared goals’ (e.g. economic growth, reduction of poverty, renewal of politics). By contrast, and as opposed to what happens to incumbent parties elsewhere in Europe (Emanuele and De Sio 2018), the PD owned only some divisive issues and, decisively, was not perceived by the electorate as the most credible party in *any* of the ten most important issues: unemployment, health, corruption, cost of politics, poverty, crime, economic growth, terrorism, tax evasion, and stemming the flow of refugees (*ibid.*). Tellingly, when compared to other countries that voted in 2017 (Germany, France, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Austria), Italy shows a lower salience for terrorism, and a higher one for unemployment, but also an unparalleled attention to corruption and the costs of politics.

[2] See data provided by Eurostat in February 2018: http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/GDP_at_regional_level

But if the success of the two parties can be explained by their credibility in the decisive arenas in which the electoral battle was fought, how are we to make sense of their populist appeal? A recent analysis on the determinants of the success of populism in Western Europe (Taggart 2017) has identified four main factors that populist forces can politicize: immigration, identity, corruption and Euroscepticism. As a quick glance at the issues mentioned above indicates, these factors have all (with the possible exception of Euroscepticism) been salient in Italy for at least two decades now. So, since prominent experts have identified Italy as a 'promised land of populism' (Tarchi 2015) or even 'the (…) location par excellence of populism's triumph over the traditional parties' (Hermet 2001, cit. in Tarchi, *op. cit.*: 274), we now must turn to the context of this surge, in order to identify the long-term determinants of the rise of the populist challenge.[3]

## 2. The context: the long history of anti-politics in Italy and the populist waves

Over the past two decades, populism has become a buzzword. We have no general theory of populism, and scholars even disagree on how to define the concept, but we have a measure of consensus on some identifying elements. Populist leaders depict themselves as the saviours of the country, often with a nostalgic reference to a long-gone past. They make a strong appeal to the people, in which the latter – variously defined as nation, class, or demos, sometimes in combination – is always considered to be a pure and homogenous entity, and contrasted to a guilty elite. The elite is always blamed for the crisis which is

[3] In this regard, we share Pappas' (2016) view on the need to tackle one of the most widespread drawbacks in the study of populism, namely the 'lack of historical and cultural context specificity'. In this respect the recent books by Giovanni Orsina (Orsina 2018) and Clarke, Jennings, Moss and Stoker (Clarke et al. 2018) are very thought-provoking.

strangling the country, and the 'performance' of the crisis is in itself an important part of populist rhetoric (Moffitt 2015).

Now, looking back at the post-war period, one can identify several crises in Italy: the difficult process of consolidation of democracy, the long and dramatic season of terrorism in the 1970s, and, more recently, the decline of the so-called First Republic with the judicial investigations of *Tangentopoli* in the early 1990s, and the bond market crisis which brought down Berlusconi's government in 2011. However, for crises to be a channel for populism, they have to be related to deficiencies in the functioning of party government, and in particular in the representative function of political parties, i.e. their inability to cope with the (increasing) tensions between responsiveness and responsibility (Kriesi 2014).

Italy has traditionally been dominated by low levels of social capital (Putnam et al. 1994); among the difficult legacies that Italy still bears today, one can identify a chronically dissatisfied society (Morlino and Tarchi 1996), whose sources of dissatisfaction are related to the weak form of legitimacy that prevailed when democratization first took place, and have never completely disappeared since.

During the First Republic, Italy was a polarised political system with a 'high ideological temperature' (to borrow from Giovanni Sartori) and the two main Italian parties acted like 'political churches'. Moreover, the country built its economic success – especially during the 1980s – on high public debt, and this meant that as the ideological temperature finally went down, Italy was obliged to face particularly severe constraints in its budgetary policy.

With the obvious proviso that context makes direct comparisons rather difficult, one can say that the two winners of 2018 – and especially the M5S – have constructed their discourse on a combination of elements that were present in the previous three major waves of Italian anti-establishment movements, as well.

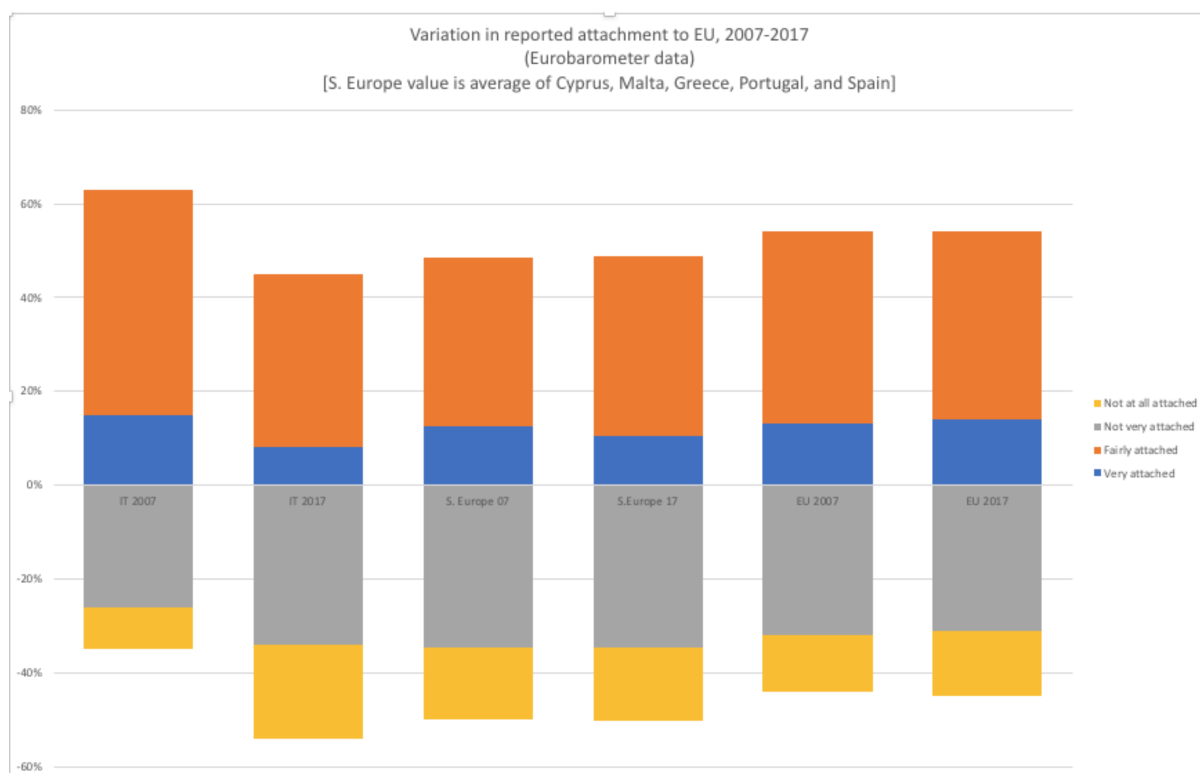
In the late 1940s, the country experienced what can be considered the first European expression of populism by an anti-political and anti-establishment party with Guglielmo Giannini's *Uomo Qualunque* (Common Man), a flash populist-libertarian movement which attracted many votes – especially in the South. This movement depicted all parties as equal, and fascism and democracy as alike, all aiming at squeezing the poor citizen in a vice (which became the party's symbol). It over-simplified politics, claiming a good accountant (*ragioniere*) should ideally be in charge, and also became a source of inspiration for the following manifestation of populism in Western Europe, namely *poujadisme* in France a decade later. Giannini's language was as irreverent as that of the former comedian and M5S party founder Beppe Grillo (especially in its foundational phase.)

Twenty years after Giannini, though with very different dynamics, many social movements of the 1968 generation brought key challenges to established parties. As diverse as they were, Marxist, anarcho-libertarian and dissenting Catholic groups formulated a similar challenge to the process of political (and trade union) delegation. Contrary to what happened in other European countries, only a few minuscule movements became institutionalized, while others chose violent means, so much so that the 1970s for Italy were a decade of violence (with a dynamic that, again, had no parallels in Europe).

Then, in the early 1990s, the collapse of the First Republic was the result of the combined pressures of judicial investigation, European constraints, a new electoral law, and the birth of parties such as the Lega Nord and Forza Italia. These parties, together with a mildly-reformed neo-fascist party, rallied behind Berlusconi's leadership in his fight against the old *partitocrazia*, depicting the old political class as rotten. This became a key element of their success.

As the late Peter Mair showed in his posthumous work, *Ruling the Void* (Mair 2014[2]), Western democracies have been hollowed out by the crisis of political parties, and by the tension between responsive and responsible government, that is to say the gap between what is promised in opposition and what can be fulfilled in government – which is where we can locate the rise of populism. But while this tension now regards all democracies, and especially the countries of the Eurozone, Italy has had a long-term tradition of dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy that, cemented by a ballooning public debt, made the European monetary constraints particularly biting.

The two latest crises – the economic and the migration crises – belong to the last ten years, and Italy's experience of them has differed in degree rather than in kind relative to other European countries. In both instances Europe has become a perfect target of populist discourse. It is not surprising therefore to see that Italy is the country with the highest decrease in attachment to European institutions over the past decade (see fig.1)




In sum, the roots of the success of anti-establishment forces are much deeper than normally recognized. The populist nuances of the two main winning parties speak to different kinds of voters. Hence, before asking ourselves whether Italy is now finally moving – almost thirty years later – towards a New Republic, we should wait and see how Italian populism responds to the challenges of governing.

## 3. Breaking the deadlock: forming the populist government

The path leading from the elections to the creation of the populist-alliance government proved in no way linear or self-evident. The government headed by Giuseppe Conte and supported by the Lega and M5S was the result of the longest governmental crisis in the history of the Italian Republic. In the nearly three months between the March 4$^{th}$ election and the swearing-in of the new cabinet, many different political formulas with variable

parliamentary support were explored, including a minority government of the centre-right, an alliance between it and the M5S, a government of the M5S supported by the PD, and a caretaker government sponsored directly by the President of the Republic. Although in the end the formation of the government mirrored the outcome of the election, with the two winning parties coming to power together, the protracted negotiations were reminiscent of the era of pure proportional representation under the 'First Republic.' In many ways, a similar transactional logic prevailed, beginning with the breaking of electoral alliances, and culminating with the impossibility for the leader of any party to aspire directly to the position of Prime Minister.

The process, however, also featured significant innovations. The final equilibrium was negotiated publicly, in conscious emulation of the detailed coalition programs common e.g. in Germany, but was given the form of a notarized private-law contract between the leaders of the two parties. Within the document, the ideological hegemony of the junior partner, the Lega, appears rather clearly, in what is ostensibly a trade-off against the larger number of M5S members in key governmental posts, thus continuing a general Lega strategy of issue ownership in particularly sensitive areas such as immigration and national identity. The two leaders both became part of the executive, Salvini as Interior minister, Di Maio as Labour minister, in order to signal the government's commitment to the key planks of their parties' electoral programmes. A significant proportion of government personnel (including the Prime Minister), however, can be labelled as technocratic, or at least as lacking close, organic ties with the governing parties. In this aspect, at least, populism and technocracy

show their similarities in opposition to the norm of party government (Caramani 2017, Bickerton & Invernizzi Accetti 2017, Bickerton & Invernizzi Accetti 2018).

The most significant event in the formation of the government, in any case, was the incident that nearly led to the collapse of the coalition and the calling of new elections under a caretaker government, namely the vetoing by President Sergio Mattarella of the appointment of Paolo Savona, a noted academic critic of the single European currency, as Finance Minister. The event was significant in demonstrating how certain pillars of the European integration project, such as the Euro, are considered by one of the chief counter-majoritarian powers within the institutional structure to be out of bounds for everyday political negotiation (especially given that the abandonment of the Euro was not a policy on which any main party campaigned during the election). However, while the 'third-rail' status of the Euro was reaffirmed, the incident was also notable for illustrating the very sharp limits to the political latitude of the President of the Republic when faced with a determined parliamentary majority in the making. In particular, the reaction of the international financial markets (to calm whose apprehensions the entire vetoing operation of Paolo Savona had explicitly been conducted) demonstrated that the alternative to the populist government, i.e. the appointing of a caretaker government and a second election within the year (with a high likelihood of a similar outcome), was even less appealing.

## 4. What happens next? Key variables in the Italian political equation

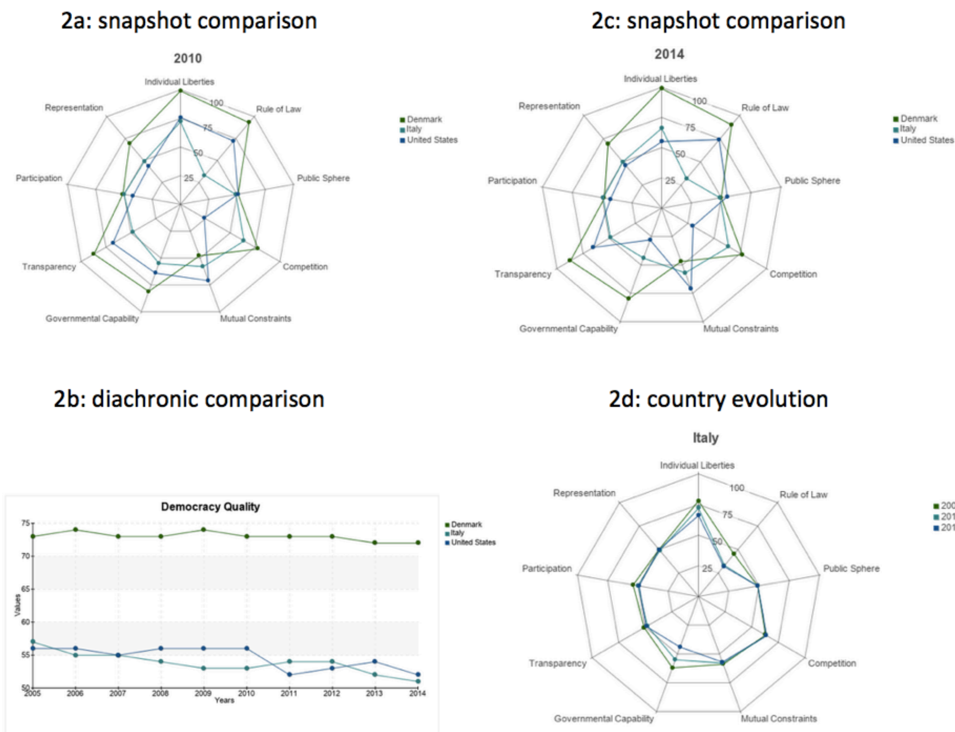
In light of the country's past experiences with waves of populism, what can we predict with regard to the effects of the March 4$^{th}$ elections and the new government? We might

perhaps view such an exercise as an evaluation of risk factors. Specifically, we will focus on four: democracy, liberal institutions, relations with the EU, and the organizational-ideological prospects of the victor parties themselves.

First of all, it is worth considering what these developments portend for a theory recently advanced, among others, by Foa and Mounk (2016 and 2017), according to whom what we are witnessing today is an era of democratic deconsolidation. While not wishing to minimize such a risk (given the volatility of the political outlook), the preceding discussion should make clear that Foa and Mounk's position suffers the drawback of being articulated from a general, ideal-typical standpoint, which fails to take into account the particularities of each country's democratic experience. The lived perception of democracy within the polity matters quite a lot, we would argue: specifically, the balance between responsibility and responsiveness, which populist parties attempt to shift, can legitimately be experienced as a trade-off within – not a measure of – democracy. In order to determine whether the current populist wave indeed places Italy's democracy at risk, we believe it is useful to adopt a somewhat more refined social-scientific measure of democracy. For instance, the multi-dimensional tool developed by Wolfgang Merkel[4] and his team, the Democracy Barometer, allows us to unpack the different aspects of institutional functioning, popular perceptions, etc. contained within the term democracy. This permits us to seize the long-term differences between countries similarly considered democratic[5], while also observing the impact of specific social and political changes.

[4] http://www.democracybarometer.org/index.html. For a comparison of the quality of different democracy indicators, see Pickel et al. 2015.
[5] For instance, in Freedom House rankings.

Figure 2: Democracy Barometer




For example, comparing the decade up to the last available data point (2014) in three established democracies, Italy, Denmark, and the United States, several observations become apparent. First, different countries are democratic in different ways, and such differences often persist over time (fig.2a). Second, similar-looking cases of overall democratic decline, such of those of Italy and the US (fig.2b), may be driven by very different sorts of crises (fig.2c). Third, with reference to Italy in particular, problems with democratic quality in the course of the decade in question stemmed essentially from three dimensions: individual liberties, rule of law, and governmental capabilities (fig.2d). Of these, the decline in liberties and capability was overshadowed by a steeper decline in the US; the true outlier was the rule of law indicator, which is a historic area of weakness of the Italian polity. Equally interesting is the fact that topics that have been very salient in public debate,

such as the concentration of the media (public sphere indicator), the long-term fall in electoral turnout (participation), and the barriers to entry into the political game (competition) can be seen to lack major empirical corroboration. Such a disaggregation will allow us to observe the 'populist impact' going forward, shorn of confounding factors.

Focusing on the quality of democracy, however, leads us to a somewhat different articulation of the question. Is the upshot of March 4th a crisis not so much for democracy, but for liberalism? Indeed, many observers (see for instance Takis Pappas, *op. cit.*) interpret the rise of populism as a challenge to the liberal checks and balances embedded in democratic constitutions. In evaluating such a claim, some unpacking is again in order. In terms of basic rights, there are differences within the Italian populist spectrum, both on ethical issues such as the rights surrounding end-of-life decisions and on identity issues such as the transition to a multicultural society. It is hard to speak of a populist/anti-populist cleavage on such matters. In terms of liberal institutions (i.e. anti-majoritarian counterweights such as the separation of powers), in some cases paradoxically there was a weakening of the salience of the issue during the campaign. For instance, for the first time in a generation the claim that the judiciary was overstepping its prerogatives and assuming a political role was not a major locus of partisan animosity[6].

Furthermore, the initially deadlocked outcome of the election placed a significant amount of influence in the hands of the President of the Republic. Such a protagonist role for the Head of State, well beyond the letter of the Constitution, has been a recurring characteristic of

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[6] This is not to say that the checks and balances between branches of government have achieved a durable equilibrium. It seems safe to assume that on ethically and culturally sensitive issues, as well as on the continuing oversight of the redefinitions of the electoral law, there is the potential for future explosive confrontation between the judiciary and the elected branches.

the Italian system ever since the 1990s, a development intended to respond to external (mainly financial) shocks and mitigate the parliamentary consequences of the shifts in popular sentiment in a climate of extreme partisanship (Pasquino 2012). These interventions, and especially the latest to date, the replacement in 2011 of the elected Berlusconi government with a technocratic executive headed by former European Commissioner Mario Monti, were not without controversy. Despite the crisis in institutional relations caused by the Savona nomination, the outcome of the confrontation showed that the President still retains a certain ability to influence key dossiers. The fact that the counter-majoritarian institutions of the Italian state appear for the moment able to withstand the populist challenge may be one factor accounting for the overall tranquillity and wait-and-see attitude with which international financial markets have reacted to the electoral result and the new government. One may assume that investors reserve the right to vote with their feet when and if the populist parties' electoral promises that require deficit spending are actually implemented. This of course will also be a major factor in partisan calculations in the process of negotiation of priorities within the government.

Perhaps the main aspect of the country's institutional-policy balance to be upended (if we ignore the ominous, near-universal silence on foreign and security affairs during the electoral campaign, followed by some very heterodox initial statements on relations with Russia) is its historic commitment to the EU project. As mentioned, this tracks a broad evolution in the electorate's Euroscepticism over the past decade. But again, what its concrete impact will be remains unclear. It would be wrong to have a catastrophist approach to the prospects of Italy's participation in the EU, based for instance on the

legislative behaviour of the Lega or the M5S in the European Parliament. Already, talk of exit from the Euro has effectively been sterilized. While it appears evident that the future Italian Prime Minister will not join Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron in the driving seat of a new EU directorate for the relaunching of the integration project, a full-fledged boycott of the European institutions on Italy's part appears highly doubtful. The clearest area of friction to date has been the Dublin framework for the Union's dealing with refugees, but it hardly can be stated that Italy was alone in its opposition, or that the change in the Italian position has decisively altered the status quo on the dossier.

Are we then to conclude that the main subjects at risk from the current election results are the winners themselves, the populist parties who now represent over half the electorate? Put somewhat more provocatively, is Italy turning into a Central-East European country, where the de-structuring of the party system has led to an ever-changing variety of populist manifestations, a 'party churn' in which successive populist generations chase each other from power, without appreciable effects on policy?

Certainly, questions of organizational and ideological cohesion are apparent for both governing parties. With respect to the M5S, the question is whether the lure of office will destabilize what has been a fairly successful strategy of Leninist-like democratic centralism, which led to the expulsion of several MPs from the party group in the previous legislature. In particular, the selection method of its political personnel, through the 'online primaries' known as *parlamentarie* would seem to run counter to strong centralized control of the parliamentary party, especially in an environment long known for its *trasformismo* (in the past parliament, for instance, 36% of MPs switched parliamentary groups). In this regard,

the private-law contracts the party leadership required its parliamentary candidates to sign, agreeing to payment of six-figure damages to the party should they abandon the parliamentary group once elected, are almost guaranteed not to survive a court challenge, and should thus be interpreted chiefly as a propaganda stunt. On the other hand, the scarce name recognition of all but a handful of M5S MPs points to the power of the party brand as a source of discipline. Should the routine of government take its toll on the M5S's overall electoral prospects, it is reasonable to assume that parliamentary discipline would crumble rapidly.

But what is at stake in the governance structure of the party has broader implications for political culture. The classic populist goal of political disintermediation has been identified by the M5S, to a degree unequalled anywhere else in Europe, with a brand of techno-utopianism centred on the ability instantaneously to consult 'the base' through an online platform on any important political matter. The *parlamentarie* were only the most consequential instance of a practice the M5S views as central to its way of doing politics. The (rather aptly named) Rousseau platform, however, is a proprietary software owned by a private consulting firm, Casaleggio Associati, which contributed to the foundation of the party. It is worth noting in this respect that, while in the Italian context the M5S has achieved issue ownership of IT as a means for a new stage of democratic development, its actual implementation, the Rousseau platform, appears to run counter to the core values of open-source freedom, transparency, and accountability typical of IT-politics activism elsewhere in Europe (as championed for instance by the Pirate parties). The future of this experiment with direct participation at the policy level, including the management of its

contradictions, will predictably have vast repercussions on the conceptualization of democracy present in the Italian body politic, especially for the younger generation.

With regards to the Lega, the problem is somewhat different, having to do with the ideological consistency of the party, its target electorate, and competition within the centre-right coalition with Berlusconi's Forza Italia. The Lega, as the Italian incarnation of a radical-right populist party, is much more committed to a series of positions and concrete policies (xenophobia, welfare chauvinism, and the like) that identify with a specific stratum of the population. Although it accomplished the historic feat of becoming the senior partner in the centre-right coalition – no doubt also thanks to Berlusconi's judicial woes and advanced age – it did so essentially by cannibalizing the Forza Italia vote, rather than expanding the coalition towards the centre. Hence, the centre-right as a whole did not fare too differently from 2013, and, even as leader of it, Salvini faces the unappetizing prospect of remaining the junior member in any possible broad governing coalition in the future. Also, it remains to be seen whether the Lega's (semi-)hostile takeover of the centre-right has staying power: in the medium run, will the productive strata that formed the backbone of Berlusconi's support for the past generation accept to be hegemonized by a party with a radical agenda?

For both the Lega and the M5S, furthermore, coalition government raises acute questions regarding the stakes of intra-populist competition. It appears clear that, given the anti-establishment thrust of the electorate, if the new government had included one of the two main populist parties and not the other, the excluded one would have been able to benefit massively from the predictable weakness of the resulting executive. Hence, the current Conte executive and the populist alliance is the natural equilibrium point of this mutual

threat. However, this has obliged Salvini both to break his alliance with the centre-right and to assume a subaltern role, at least in terms of governmental personnel. On the other hand, one of the clear results of the long crisis was that there was no appetite for a *Grosse Koalition* including Forza Italia, with or without the participation of the defeated PD, because the classic function of such a government, to manage a transition and reassure financial markets and European partners, is one of the few things all populists agree to oppose.

Finally, a concerted attempt by the populist victors to change the rules of the game, giving the country its fifth set of electoral laws in a quarter-century, cannot be ruled out. Such a scenario would likely lead to new general elections before the natural conclusion of the parliament. Furthermore, an attempt to tweak the electoral law to provide a governing majority to the coalition enjoying a plurality goes against the claims of disproportionality as a form of anti-democratic trickery, loudly voiced in the past parliament; such a tweak is not guaranteed to deliver the desired effect in any case, and may furthermore face legal jeopardy in Italy's Constitutional Court, which, as mentioned, has struck down parts of two previous systems. Lastly, it would fail to reward the prowess with which the M5S, for instance, has navigated a return to the PR system characterizing the First Republic: the M5S's refusal to enter into pre-electoral coalitions was an asset in the past campaign, but could be a liability in some versions of a more markedly majoritarian system.

## 5. What does it all mean? The Italian election and competing theories of populism

If the March 4th elections were indeed the populist earthquake they have been cast as, we should be able to glean from them some additional evidence of value in advancing our theoretical understanding of populism. There is a tradition in the literature, as mentioned above (Morlino and Tarchi, *op. cit.*, Tarchi, *op. cit.*), that stresses the idiosyncratic nature of Italian politics in its historical receptiveness to populism. This certainly dovetails with our historical account of the recurrent waves of populist sentiment, and with the turning point of the 'sunset of ideologies' following the end of the Cold War, with all the consequences for political culture and the organization of the party system it entailed in Italy. However, if Italy indeed is the "promised land of populism", such a promise to populists must seem always slightly out of reach: indeed, over the past quarter-century, the institutional structure has seemed ultimately capable of absorbing and 'normalizing' populist breakthroughs, and of guaranteeing a path of public policy development much less prone to radical changes than political rhetoric would lead to believe.

Moreover, although there was a measure of context-dependency in Italian populism, it is also undoubtedly the case that the dynamics leading to the crisis of the political system's bipolarity can be traced to Europe-wide phenomena, from the long-lingering aftershocks of the financial crisis to the refugee wave of 2015. Italian and foreign populists also had similar targets available to single out, from the corruption of the political establishment to the technocratic leadership in Brussels.

Indeed, perhaps the most consistent element of the country's uniqueness in this field is the fact that Italy offers examples of many varieties of populism, simultaneously (Mueller 2018).

Where in other contexts radical right “ethnos-based” populist parties or centrist “demos-based” ones tend to hegemonize the anti-establishment segment of the electorate, in Italy both can score a resounding victory in the same election. A consequence of this result was that the traditional Right-Left cleavage was subverted: while the Lega maintained a rather recognizable Right-wing connotation (especially in terms of law and order and low taxation), the social-democratic credentials of the PD and its linkage with the working classes were shown to lack credibility, and the M5S actively promoted itself as being beyond Right and Left. A further indicator of the plurality of Italian populisms was the fluidity with which reputations shifted, following the pattern highlighted by theories of ‘populist generations’ and ‘party churn’ caused by the loss of credibility associated with governmental participation (Verbeek and Zaslove 2016). Berlusconi, who had last been ousted from power in 2011 as a consequence of a crisis of confidence on the part of the international financial markets, posed as an internationally-credible, dependable leader. At the other end of the spectrum, even Renzi –in a certain phase of his governmental trajectory– adopted the personalist style of a populist leader, although during the electoral campaign the PD opted for a depersonalized message of “safe hands” responsible stewardship of the national interest.

Ultimately, the political-science literature on populism often implies a normative evaluation, linked to the perceived appeal of the alternative, the liberal-democratic establishment and the process of globalization. The respective positions have been argued perhaps most forcefully on the one side by Jan-Werner Mueller (2016), on the other by Stavrakakis and Jäger (2017). For those in the former’s camp, populism represents a moralizing, emotional

response to the complexities of contemporary politics: as such, it always, intrinsically contains the threat of illiberal excess, a temptation to engage in tyranny of the majority, whose final equilibrium point is authoritarianism. Their chief example is Hungary. For their opponents, however, the formal institutions of liberal democracy have already been completely corroded by the forces of international capital and globalization. They point to Greece as the counter-example of a country in which a populist uprising dismantled a political establishment in which the will of the people had been made broadly irrelevant.

In closing, can it be said that the March 4$^{th}$ result offers ammunition to those who see populism as a threat, or to those who believe it can be a corrective (Kaltwasser 2012)? Considered from a macro-economic perspective alone, Italy did not experience the sort of massive, disruptive shock from the forces of hyper-liberal globalization seen elsewhere in Southern Europe: wages stagnated, GDP fell, unemployment soared, but there was no default, no international bailout, no conditionality, no imposed dismantling of the welfare State as witnessed in other countries. Seen in this context, the corrective does seem disproportionate to the crisis. Somewhat ironically, perhaps, given how the topic of mandatory vaccinations was a key flashpoint of the electoral campaign, Italy as a whole appears poised to discover the consequences of assuming massive doses of what is intended to be an inoculant. On the other hand, on the basis of the foregoing analysis, we are not prepared to conclude that the populist wave of the 2018 Italian general election is best interpreted as an unalloyed threat to liberalism and democracy.

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