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All to play for

In these troubled economic times, Italy's general election was always going to be a tense affair

It is a weary electorate that will go to the polls on Sunday to vote for Italy's next government. GDP is still 5.7 per cent down on 2007. During this phase, industrial output was up to 25 per cent below pre-crisis levels. Unemployment is (at least) 11 per cent, with youth unemployment at a staggering 32 per cent.

In southern Italy, home to a third of all Italians, the situation is even more critical: unemployment stands at 17.3 per cent, while youth unemployment is 60 per cent. Even well-qualified young Italians have few prospects, hence the large-scale 'brain drain' in recent years that has seen young academics look north of the Alps for jobs they currently cannot find.

With only a couple of days to go until the Italian elections, who will win a majority in the two chambers – the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate – is anyone's guess. There are three alliances in the mix, and only one of them, the centre-right grouping, has a serious chance of scraping a narrow victory: in the latest opinion polls, the alliance centred on Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia and the populist right-wing Lega is on just under 35 per cent. The social democratic ruling party, the PD, scores 22.6 per cent by itself, and just under 28 per cent in conjunction with its smaller cohorts – including +Europa, led by former European Commissioner Emma Bonino. However, the largest single party is the 5-Star Movement (M5S). Headed by the smart 31-year-old lead candidate Luigi di Maio, this protest party is on 28.6 percent.

These figures indicate that no alliance can really expect a majority in both chambers. Yet the centre-right could still just about gain a majority of its own – if it manages to win most of the seats in the south. If M5S wins here instead, this group would be the largest single parliamentary party. But Matteo Renzi's PD has its own chance of achieving that status.

A strange quirk of the election rules counts against M5S: votes cast for small parties that are allied in a list and fail to pass the 3 per cent barrier

are allotted to the biggest party on the list rather than being discounted. As a result, the PD could ultimately still edge out the Grillini, as M5S's members have been dubbed.

Promises, promises

With this in mind, election night on 4 March promises to be a tense affair all round. Not that you would guess this from the current election campaign: all alliances are playing to their core issues and core voters. Controversial issues – immigration features among them – are avoided at all costs, except by the right, who hope to ride the wave of anti-immigration feeling.

While the International Monetary Fund states that any Italian government would have to raise taxes and cut public spending with the national debt standing at 132 per cent, the contenders in the election campaign are promising the exact opposite: lower taxes and increased spending. Essentially, all parties are pursuing a kind of fiscal populism that differs only in terms of target groups.

This is all very unrealistic – as the electorate is probably aware. Once again, the king of promises is Berlusconi. As well as reviving his idea of a flat tax, he is also pledging all kinds of tax breaks and state benefits. 'Il Cavaliere' is focusing mainly on older voters here, dangling such prospects as free dentures and veterinary appointments paid for by the state.

By contrast, the PD's election campaign is failing to gain such momentum, despite the government's essentially respectable record in recent years. So far, the party has not managed to focus its manifesto items on a couple of widely known core concerns. In addition, although the PD boasts one of Italy's most popular politicians in prime minister Paolo Gentiloni, in Renzi it also has one of the least popular lead candidates (apart from Senate president Pietro Grasso of the left-wing LeU, though his poor opinion-poll ratings probably owe more to his party than to anything personal). Renzi's image still seems to be suffering from the failed constitutional referendum and a generally combative political style.

If things remain as they are, a grand coalition of the PD and Forza Italia looks the likeliest potential government. Both parties and their leaders say they have no intention of entering into any such coalition after the election. Even so, there are no tangible differences between a more centrist PD under Renzi and a Forza Italia in which Berlusconi rekindles his love of Europe and the euro.

Current opinion polls suggest a genuine two-party coalition is not on the cards. Yet the extra votes would probably be easy to come by in the highly fluid party and parliamentary system: after all, 36 per cent of MPs switched allegiances in the last legislative period – some of them more than once. So there should be no lack of *stabilisatori* to uphold a small majority after 4 March either.



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