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The Italian left might pay a high price for disunity

In the upcoming elections, the Italian left has once again failed to present itself as united — much to the delight of Meloni, Salvini and Berlusconi

Is the race already over? On 25 September, Italians will elect their new parliament, and if the election research is to be believed, the result is already certain. The right can hope for an outright victory, and Giorgia Meloni – leader of the strongest right-wing party, the post-fascist Fratelli d'Italia (FdI; 'Brothers of Italy') – could become Italy's future prime minister.

At first glance, it is not at all clear why the right should have already won. According to the latest polls, Meloni's FdI comes in with 25 to 26 per cent, the right-wing populist and Eurosceptic *Lega* under Matteo Salvini is given 12 per cent, and Silvio Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* is predicted to have a result of 7 to 8 per cent. The entire right-wing bloc can expect around 46 per cent.

However, the forces left of the political centre also recently achieved a similar figure of around 45 per cent. The moderate left *Partito Democratico* (PD) under Enrico Letta is predicted to win 20 to 22 per cent and its allied small parties another 6 per cent, the *Movimento 5 Stelle* ('Five Star Movement', or M5S) under former Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte is polling at 12 per cent, and the middle list of the two small parties *Azione* and *Italia Viva* can count on 6-7 per cent.

So, it actually looks like a neck-and-neck race, much like 2006 when the centre-left alliance, then led by Romano Prodi, defeated the centre-right under Berlusconi by a razor-thin margin. This time, however, a photo finish is not to be expected – for the simple reason that in this race the right is united, while the centre-left camp is split down the middle.

A shift of power within the right

Italian electoral law rewards unity and punishes division, with 37 per cent of seats in the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate being allocated according to the majority system in the individual electoral districts. The right-wing parties are fielding one common candidate across the country, while the centre-left forces are running three candidates per constituency: one for the PD and its small allied parties, one for the M5S, and one for the *Azione-Italia Viva* list alliance. That's why it's already taken for granted that the right will win the bulk of the direct mandates and can ultimately count on at least 60 per cent of the seats in parliament.

It's this right wing that's causing concern in Europe, and for good reason. Berlusconi is trying to reassure other European countries by saying that his *Forza Italia* guarantees European reliability – after all, it belongs to the EPP family in the European Parliament. However, Berlusconi, leader of the strongest force in the centre-right camp from 1994 to 2018, is now only the small junior partner and has been clearly overtaken by the *Lega* and the FdI; unlike *Forza Italia*, these do not belong to a liberal-conservative tradition, but rely on hard right-wing populism.

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The *Lega* was the first to score with this course of action in recent years. Emerging as a force that represented the interests of the rich north against the country's 'thieving Rome' and the 'parasitic south' to the point of secessionism. Starting in 2013 it took a 180-degree turn under Salvini's party leadership. From one day to the next, the *Lega* mutated into an ultra-nationalist force ('Italians first') and from then on, their bogeymen were migrants and the international 'elites' in Brussels. In 2018, Salvini used this approach to win 17 per cent for the *Lega*, which was still bobbing around at 4 per cent in 2013; then he formed the government with the M5S under Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte and took over the post of interior minister, which he used for his anti-migrant policy of 'closed ports'. All of this in turn catapulted Salvini to a sensational 34 per cent in the 2019 European elections, after which he broke with the M5S coalition in the hope that elections would be held immediately. However, this hope was dashed as the M5S formed a

coalition with the PD, again under Conte.

Competition over cooperation

Over the next three years *Lega*'s consensus eroded in favour of Meloni's FdI. Programmatically, the two parties differ very little: they stand for 'traditional values' and thus against LGBTIQ+ rights, want to stop immigration, and don't think much of the EU in its present form. But Meloni has always remained 'coherent' in the eyes of the right-wing electorate and has been in opposition to all governments over the past ten years. While *Lega* recently also joined the emergency coalition of national unity under Mario Draghi that has been in government since February 2021. As a result, Meloni became the new ray of hope for the right-of-centre.

Meloni knows only too well what concerns she triggers beyond the Italian borders, especially in Europe, and is therefore conducting an election campaign that is completely atypical for a populist, by which she primarily aims at sending out reassuring signals. She never tires of emphasising that under her, Italy will remain resolute in supporting Ukraine and fulfilling its European obligations, and that she cannot make any big promises to voters – while Berlusconi and Salvini, as usual, outdo each other with promises of tax cuts.

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The election campaign clearly shows that she has the best chance of becoming the future head of government in Rome. On the other side of the political spectrum, the question now arises as to whether centre-left forces could have prevented such a scenario.

After all, since the formation of their governing coalition in the summer of 2019, for over three years the PD and M5S had both been working towards the creation of a progressive alliance. PD leader Letta wanted *campo largo*, a 'wide field', with the broad centre-left alliance in the next elections. But then the two parties fell out in July 2022 when the M5S left the emergency coalition under Draghi under Conte, who has since risen to their party leader. Letta's PD, on the other hand, defended this coalition with great determination – and after its break, also saw the alliance with the M5S thrown overboard.

Since then, the two parties have been competing, mainly on the left, instead of cooperating. Both rely on a progressive profile and primarily want to appeal to the lower- and middle-income groups. And in the political centre, too, the PD faces competition from the *Azione-Italia*

Viva list, which represents a line of reform in the style of Emmanuel Macron. Thus, the centre-left forces are campaigning primarily among themselves, rather than forming an alliance against *Fratelli d'Italia*, *Lega*, and *Forza Italia* – much to the delight of Meloni, Salvini and Berlusconi.



Michael Braun
Rome

Dr. Michael Braun is a research associate at the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Italy. He studied political science and wrote his PhD on Italian unions.