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Winners and losers. Turnout, results and the flows of vote

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ABSTRACT

Not all general elections can be considered as being equal: some are placed in continuity with the previous political phase and therefore do not change the most relevant features of the party and political system; others, however, tend to represent a watershed between distinct political phases. Without a doubt, the 4 March 2018 Italian general elections belong to the latter category. This article analyses those same elections from three points of view: firstly, it reconstructs and explains electoral turnout, both following a long-term diachronic perspective, as well as comparing the various areas of the country from a territorial point of view. Secondly, similar diachronic and territorial comparisons are conducted with respect to electoral results, so as to clearly identify winners and losers of the 4 of March. Finally, it presents flows of votes in thirty-eight different territorial contexts (cities or electoral constituencies): in this way, it is possible to precisely reconstruct the reasons behind the 'electoral earthquake' of 4 March 2018.

KEYWORDS Italian politics; elections; turnout; electoral results; flows of vote

1. Introduction

AQ1 [1]~~Not all general elections can be considered as being equal: some are placed in continuity with the previous political phase and therefore do not change the most relevant features of the party and political system; others, on the other hand, tend to represent a watershed between (more or less) distinct political phases.~~ In this latter case, electoral volatility is generally particularly high, competition between parties and coalitions is structured around different (and 'new') axes, and 'challenger parties' tend to gain (many) votes at the expenses of the so-called 'mainstream parties', who on the contrary risk to – and, sometimes – actually lose their pivotal role in the party system. Without doubt, the 4 March 2018 Italian general elections belong to the latter category: in continuity with other electoral earthquakes that have upset Western democracies in last years – above all, the so-called Brexit UK referendum vote in June 2016 (Baldini 2016) and the U.S. presidential elections in November 2016 – the electoral cleavage between 'establishment' and 'anti-establishment' political parties represented the main

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(although not the only) axis of political competition (Valbruzzi and Vignati 2018), and thus oriented the electoral behaviour of Italian citizens, who clearly rewarded the latter at the expenses of the former.

This article focuses precisely on this 'watershed elections', with the aim of presenting their main features and explaining their main results. More in detail, the 4 March Italian general elections are analysed from three different points of view: firstly, we focus on electoral turnout, both following a long-term diachronic perspective, as well as comparing the various areas of the country from a territorial point of view. On this, we will shed light on especially three aspects: (1) the uninterrupted decline in electoral participation that has been the trend in Italy over the course of the last forty years, with the results of 2018 – 72.9 per cent electoral turnout – being the lowest in Italian Republican history; (2) the demobilization of large parts of the Centre-Left electorate (above all, in the regions where Centre-Left parties were traditionally prominent); and, on the contrary (3) the re-mobilization – above all in Southern Italy – of many citizens who in 2013 decided not to vote, but who in 2018 came back to polls, in so doing rewarding especially the Five Star Movement (M.5.S.).

Secondly, similar diachronic and territorial comparisons are conducted with respect to electoral results, so as to identify clearly winners and losers of the 4 March. In this respect there is no doubt that the M.5.S. and the League have to be considered as the main winners of the elections, whereas *Forza Italia* (F.I.) and Democratic Party (P.D.) are the sure losers. More precisely, where electoral results are concerned we also want to develop three lines of inquiry: (1) the comparison between electoral results in 2018 and 2013, to highlight which parties and political areas gained more votes in the last five years and which, by contrast, lost great part of their previous electoral consensus, during the same time period; (2) the territorial differences, which mattered very much in these general elections, with the League (and, more broadly, the Centre-Right pre-electoral coalition) representing the North and the M.5.S. representing the South; and (3) the role of the electoral system – the so-called *Rosatellum* – in transforming votes into seats, and a focus on the differences between proportional and majoritarian competition.

Finally, we present flows of votes in thirty-eight different territorial contexts (cities or single member districts) with the aim of reconstructing the reasons behind the 'electoral earthquake' of 4 March 2018. The main focus of this section is the flow of votes from the P.D. to the M.5.S. More precisely, we show the rather ambiguous relation between the party founded by Grillo and the left-wing parties. We also analyse the differences between Northern regions (where M.5.S. gains votes from the P.D. but loses a great deal in favour of the League) and Southern regions (where the League is much weaker and M.5.S. gains votes from across the whole political spectrum).

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This article is organized as follows: in the next section we focus on electoral turnout, analysing the 2018 general elections both diachronically and from a territorial perspective, while in section 3 we deal with the results of general elections of 4 March 2018, again both from a diachronic – comparing 2018 results with 2013 results – as well as a territorial – focusing on the cleavage in the results between Northern and Southern Italy – point of view. The fourth section takes a step further and analyses the flows of the votes among parties and political areas, while the last part of the article (section 5) offers some concluding remarks and reflections on the future of the Italian political system.

2. Electoral turnout: the exception of Southern Italy in a context of long-lasting decline

Since the very beginning of the so-called 'Second Republic', the dynamics of the electoral turnout in Italy offer a privileged perspective for understanding long-lasting transformations in both Italian political system and society. More precisely, it is possible to differentiate between three subsequent stages. In the 1990s citizens who preferred not to vote where those less equipped with the cognitive tools necessary to follow real-world politics and its dynamics and processes: citizens who were no longer mobilized by mass parties. But starting from the first decade of the new millennium, the characteristics of the non-voters have been changing and began to include people interested in politics, who are socially integrated and highly educated but who started protesting against political parties that no longer represented them. In other words, they preferred to withdraw their electoral support for the mainstream parties as a response to the parties' inability to interpret their own (changing) needs and requests. As a result, both the territorial and socio-political profile of non-voters has changed: from the small towns of Southern Italy to the big cities of Northern Italy and the so-called 'red belt', from the inactive (housewives and pensioners) to subordinated workers (Tuorto ~~2016,~~ 2018). The motivation of 'protesting against the system' went hand in hand with apathy as a drive for disaffection, reflecting the growing ability of citizens to acquire information on politics and also to critically evaluate political performances of governments (Dalton 1996; Klingemann and Fuchs 1995; Pharr and Putnam 2000). The decision not to vote started to assume, in contrast to the past, a particular political value precisely where the mobilization and de-mobilization of politically-oriented voters has started to influence decisively the outcome of political elections by selectively penalizing mainstream parties.

In the last decade, the economic and financial crisis has had an impact on this complex and deeply changing scenario: the worsening of working and income conditions for a big portion of the population has led to a great increase in inequalities which in turn has also increased the perception of

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insecurity and frustration by people who no longer feel protected by political parties and political institutions more broadly (Crouch 2005). In this unfavourable context, negative economic conditions have stimulated and reinforced electoral disaffection, especially where the main parties and coalitions formed 'grand coalitions' which have, in fact, generated great confusion in the electorate which lost its main points of reference. It is no coincidence that this has happened especially in the so-called 'P.I.I.G.S.' countries – including Italy – which have been very much affected by the economic and financial crisis (Perella 2009; Kriesi 2012).

As a consequence, any attempt to fully grasp the evolution of electoral turnout in Italy should go hand in hand with the analysis of the different options of 'voice' (Hirschman 1970) that citizens have at their disposal as well as the non-vote (above all, the possibility to vote for M.5.S.). Indeed, during this period of economic and financial crisis, the dynamics of electoral turnout tend to be more and more intertwined with the growing anti-establishment leaning among Italian citizens. On the one hand, the widespread anti-political climate can further delegitimize the decision to go to the polls; on the other hand, the emergence of new challenger actors makes it possible for citizens who want to 'voice' to do that both 'inside and against' the political system as a whole.

As we have said, the decline in electoral turnout in Italy is a long-term process (Pritoni et al. 2017). Its relevance does not derive from the absolute number of citizens going to the poll for political elections (which is still one of the highest in Western Europe), but from the uninterrupted declining tendency over the course of the last forty years (see figure 1). More precisely, in 2018 electoral turnout decreased in comparison with five years before

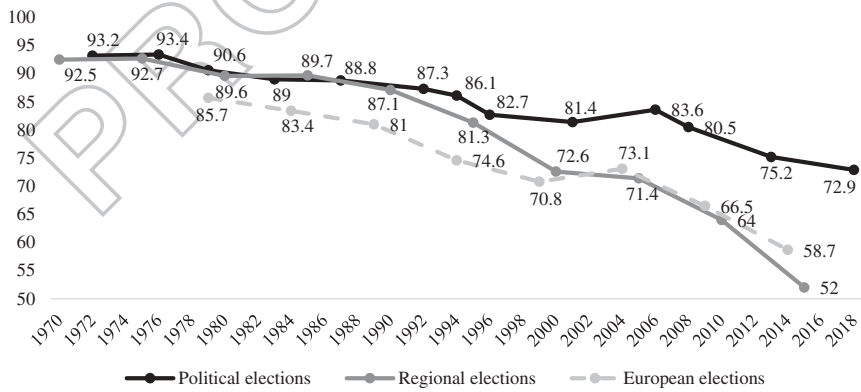

Figure 1. Electoral turnout in Italy (1970–2018): political elections, regional elections, and European elections.

Source: Authors' own compilation. Data from: Italian Ministry of Internal Affairs (http://elezioni.interno.gov.it/).

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(75.2 per cent), reaching 72.9 per cent: the lowest value in the whole Republican history. Therefore, a negative trend is once more confirmed. However, this trend seemed to slow down. In some ways, it is indeed possible to argue that turnout has substantially remained stable which is evident too if we compare political elections with 'second-order elections' (Regional and European), which have been affected by very low electoral turnout in recent years in Italy. This means that in contrast to the pessimistic expectations that circulated among public opinion, experts and the media before vote, voters continue to make a big difference and to consider the vote for the renewal of Parliament far more important than any other electoral event.

The confirmation, in 2018, of the previous levels of turnout, can be explained as a consequence of counterbalancing incentives and disincentives to going to vote (Pritoni et al. 2018). On the one hand, all the pre-vote polls indicated that Centre-Left parliamentary majority would suffer a substantial loss in general elections, and this probably incentivized a process of selective de-mobilization of the voters of the Centre-Left coalition. Indeed, it is very likely that this actually happened, and the P.D. has been very much penalized by a good share of their 'traditional' voters who preferred not to vote in 2018 political election. The unflattering result for *Liberi e Uguali* (L.E.U.) (3.2 per cent at the Chamber of Deputies), which could have been a collector of the critical vote against the party guided by Matteo Renzi, confirms the thesis of an asymmetric non-vote that mainly penalized the Centre-Left camp. Secondly, not only the Centre-Left voters were discouraged by pre-election polls: the expectation of an inconclusive result and, in turn, of a hung parliament without any potential parliamentary majority, could also incentivize both voters of Centre-Right coalition and of M.5.S. that the decision to go to the polls would made relatively little change in the final result. Thirdly, even the impossibility to express a separate vote between candidates and lists, as well as the absence of the preferential vote, could have represented another factor pushing for de-mobilization, especially in Southern Italy, where these dynamics and processes were more widespread.

On the other hand, the re-composition of the political offer and the positioning of parties within (and outside) coalitions had an impact as a factor pushing for mobilization. With regard to the 2018 political elections, voters may choose among a great variety of political options, both within coalitions competing for government and outside them. Moreover, citizens could vote for parties that – *at the same time* – were competing for government *and* protested against the political system, which is a true novelty for Italian politics. From this point of view, the case of M.5.S. is paradigmatic: the party led by Luigi Di Maio, in fact, has been able to monopolize the need for 'change' that has mounted in the electorate, especially in Southern Italy and among citizens who reject the

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government's management of the crisis. In other terms, it represented the perfect 'voice option' for voters who wanted to protest and, in doing so, to reward a (maybe, *the*) challenger party. However, it is not just a matter of voice. The perception that by voting for M.5.S. one could re-activate (new) channels of intermediation between Southern regions and the central government, in particular in this particular period when the P.D. is in great trouble and the Centre-Right coalition is guided by the League, had a huge impact.

With regard to territorial differences on electoral turnout, it should be noted that Italy has for a long time been characterized by a very heterogeneous territorial distribution of electoral turnout, especially if we compare Northern and Central regions, on one side, and Southern regions, on the other. While declining electoral turnout has typified the whole peninsula in the last forty years, it is in particular Southern Italy that experienced the highest percentages of non-vote, especially since the end of the 1980s (De Luca 1997). On this, the 2018 political elections are characterized by both elements of novelty as well as of continuity.

In general, the decrease in electoral turnout between the 2018 and 2013 political elections mainly characterizes Northern and Central Italy, whereas Southern Italy presents levels of participation that are perfectly comparable to five years before (see table 1). More precisely, it is confirmed that Italy still remains substantially divided in two parts also in 2018: in the North (-West and -East), as well as in the so-called 'red belt' (Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany, Umbria and Marche), citizens continue to go to the polls with percentages close to 80 per cent, while citizens in the South show much greater detachment and discouragement towards the electoral instrument par excellence, with rates of non-vote that touch, and sometimes exceed, 40 per cent of those entitled to vote. However, while it is certainly true that the Southern voters still participate (much) less than their counterparts in the Centre and the North, in 2018 this gap has been decreasing rather than expanding, and this is the great difference with regard to the past.

Perhaps the main reason for these dynamics lies in the ability shown by M.5.S. to re-mobilize many citizens that previously decided not to vote. On this, a crucial role seems to have been played by the electoral campaign conducted by the party of Luigi Di Maio, where the traditional theme of protesting against the party system, as well as the well-known anti-politics rhetoric, have been accompanied by a more moderate turn in the weeks before the election date. It is likely that this 'new moderate face' of the Movement convinced a good share of the electorate, especially in Southern Italy, that M.5.S. might have represented a new potential channel of communication, once the traditional ones are seen no longer usable and/or credible, between large parts of the society in the South and central political institutions.

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Table 1. Regional disaggregation of electoral turnout: comparison between 2018 and 2013 national elections.

	Turnout 2018 (%)	Turnout 2013 (%)	Difference 2013–2018 (percentage points)
Valle d'Aosta	72.3	77.0	-4.7
Piedmont	75.2	77.3	-2.1
Lombardy	76.8	79.6	-2.8
Liguria	72.0	75.1	-3.1
North-West	*75.8*	*78.5*	*-2.7*
Veneto	78.7	81.7	-3.0
Trentino-Alto Adige	74.3	81.0	-6.7
Friuli-Venezia Giulia	75.1	77.2	-2.1
North-East	*77.5*	*80.8*	*-3.3*
Emilia-Romagna	78.3	82.1	-3.8
Toscana	77.3	79.2	-1.9
Umbria	78.2	79.5	-1.3
Marche	77.3	79.8	-2.5
'Red Belt'	*77.8*	*80.5*	*-2.7*
Lazio	72.6	77.5	-4.9
Abruzzo	75.3	75.9	-0.6
Sardinia	65.4	68.3	-2.9
Central Italy	*71.5*	*75.4*	*-3.9*
Molise	71.3	78.1	-6.8
Campania	68.2	67.9	+0.3
Calabria	63.7	63.2	+0.5
Puglia	69.0	69.9	-0.9
Basilicata	71.1	69.5	+1.6
Sicily	62.7	64.6	-1.9
South	*66.5*	*67.1*	*-0.6*
Italy	*72.9*	*75.2*	*-2.3*

Source: Authors' own compilation. Data from: Italian Ministry of Internal Affairs (http://elezioni.interno.gov.it/).

3. Who wins and who loses: electoral results

The picture that emerged from the polls on 4 March did not produce any clear *political* winner (none of the coalitions formed before elections obtained an absolute majority of seats) but rewarded two parties (the League and the M.5.S.) with a clear *electoral* victory. At the same time, the two political forces that with different names had played a central role during the last twenty years came out of the competition greatly reduced in their electoral support. As we can see in table 2, the League has passed from less than 1.5 million votes in 2013 to almost 6 million, which means that it has quadrupled its electoral support. An extraordinary achievement, especially if one thinks that this party, born and developed as a charismatic party, in recent years had to face the end of the historical leadership of its founder Umberto Bossi following scandals related to public financing of parties and embezzlement.

As is well known (Panebianco 1982), the fall of a 'charismatic' leader is a particularly delicate moment in the life of a party, which risks not having the organizational strength to ride the bump since its structure is intimately linked to the personality of its leader. Matteo Salvini, a young (but with long-time experience in the party) leader,[2] was able to make the transition. He

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Table 2. Comparison between the results of Italian general elections (Chamber of deputies) 2013 and 2018.

	2018	2013	Differences 2018-2013	% 2018	% 2013	Differences % 2018–2013
Radical left	521,564	860,028	-338,464	1.6	2.5	-0.9
Sel/Leu	1,114,298	1,089,231	25,067	3.4	3.2	0.2
PD	6,153,081	8,646,034	-2,492,953	18.7	25.4	-6.7
Other Centre-Left	1,380,905	332,319	1,034,157	4.2	1.0	3.2
FI/~~PDL~~	4,957,738	7,332,134	2,739,929	13.9	21.5	-7.6
League	5,717,513	1,411,510	4,294,415	17.3	4.1	13.2
FdI+La Destra	1,440,107	889,401	550,706	4.4	2.6	1.8
Ncl-Udc	431,042	476,020	-44,978	1.3	1.4	-0.1
M5S	10,764,371	8,704,809	2,043,563	32.6	25.5	7.1
Scelta civica and allies	-	3,591,541	-3,591,541	-	11.3	-11.3
Radical right	441,921	184,575	256,141	1.3	0.5	0.8
Others	410,255	286,499	107,840	1.2	0.8	0.4
Valid votes	32,972,803	34,078,191	-1,171,762	100.0	100.0	

Source: Authors' own compilation. Data from: Italian Ministry of Internal Affairs (http://elezioni.interno.gov.it/).

has also succeeded in transforming a party that in the past had an exclusively Northern rooting (previous attempts to expand its electoral consensus in Central and Southern regions had always failed: party's original secessionist and anti-Southern features had so far prevented reaching out to the Southern electorate) into a political force with a significant presence also in the Centre and in the South.

The emphasis on the issue of immigration (after labour, the second major concern of citizens in the whole country: see Comodo and Forni 2018, 226), with a narrative focused on the need to set up barriers against the 'invasion of immigrants' through a determined policy of repatriation and radical actions to combat new landings, have allowed the League to turn relatively rapidly into a party which (although not uniformly) has gained a national character and presence. The growth of M.5.S. (in the Chamber of Deputies from almost 9 million votes to almost 11 million) has been less striking in numerical terms, but equally surprising. Indeed, it is a party devoid of any organizational roots in the territory.[3] The fact that it confirmed and increased the already surprising result of 2013 is unprecedented in the context of Western European democracies. The M.5.S's campaign left in the background the impetuous founder Beppe Grillo and focused instead on the new '*capo politico*' Luigi Di Maio, who decided to advocate what many journalistic described as a 'moderate turn' for its party. His more 'reassuring' tones succeeded among the voters. Indeed, surveys (Comodo and Forni 2018) show that compared to five years before the profile of the average voter of M.5.S. nowadays is much more similar to the average Italian voter (for example, party's electoral support has grown among pensioners and housewives and as a consequence the age profile of the mean voters is today less weighed towards young people).

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From the geographical point of view, moreover, the increasing 'southernization' of the M.5.S. should be pointed out. Five years ago, Beppe Grillo's party was the party with the most homogeneous profile from a geographical point of view. At the moment, the distance between the electoral support received in the Northern regions and that received in the Southern regions appears to be significantly weighted in favour of the latter (the coefficient of variation of M.5.S. votes in the twenty Italian regions was 0.17 in 2013 and 0.29 in 2018[4]). Seemingly, the policy proposal of a 'citizenship income' has hit the ground particularly in areas where unemployment, especially youth unemployment, is more problematic.

The territorial dimension has assumed decisive importance in these elections. The maps of the vote showed Italy clearly divided into two different halves, with the Centre-Right dominant in the North and M.5.S. dominant in the South (the Centre-Left has been competitive only in the regions of the former 'red belt). The way in which this cultural and economic rift will be recomposed at the political level is one of the main questions in the current political situation.

The P.D. has 'burned' almost two and a half million votes, falling from over 25 per cent of the votes to less than 19 per cent (the gap appears even more striking if the percentage of 2018 is compared with the quota gained in the European elections in 2014: 40.8 per cent). The losses were particularly significant in the Centre and in the South where, as we will see when analysing electoral flows of vote, competition from the M.5.S. has been particularly incisive.

The other defeated party of these elections is undoubtedly Berlusconi's F.I. When compared to the results of P.D.L. in 2013, the party founded by Silvio Berlusconi loses a number of votes very close to that of P.D. (2,700,000 votes). However, unlike those of P.D., a great deal of the lost votes has moved into a political force, the League, which was part of the same coalition (at least, on the ballots, whereas later on their political strategies have started to differ). The flow of votes between F.I. and the League produced a change of leadership within the coalition. At the moment, when the votes of the League have exceeded those of F.I., Matteo Salvini has been able to put himself at the centre of the scene as the new Centre-Right leader, relegating Silvio Berlusconi to a secondary position. The results of the vote also prevented the founder of F.I. from playing the part of the leader as the Italian representative of the European People's Party, able to put a brake on the advance of the 'populist' forces. He tried to play this role during the electoral campaign, but the results put him in a position of rear-guard when compared to his cumbersome ally, forced to undergo his moves and, for the moment, with modest tools of blackmail against him.[5]

Where the relationship between territories, candidates, parties and results is concerned, a further aspect deserving particular attention deals with the role of the new electoral law – the so-called *Rosatellum* – on electoral results.

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As is well-known (Pinto et al. 2018), the Rosato Law (law no. 165/2017) is the fourth electoral law that has been approved in Italy since 1993.[6] More precisely, it calls for a mixed electoral system: 61 per cent of seats (386 in the Chamber of Deputies and 193 in the Senate) is allocated on a proportional basis among parties that take more than 3 per cent of valid votes, whereas 37 per cent of seats (231 in the Chamber of Deputies and 115 in the Senate) is attributed following a plurality rule in single-member districts (SMDs).[7] Before elections, politicians and analysts were particularly curious to compare proportional results with majoritarian ones: indeed, it was broadly accepted the expectation – repeatedly argued (and empirically demonstrated) in the literature (Carey and Hix 2011; Cox 1997) – that majoritarian competition – where 'winner takes all' and individual qualities of the candidates are crucial – should have favoured pre-electoral coalitions (more the Centre-Right than the Centre-Left) at the expenses of M.5.S. (Pinto et al. 2018, 100). But did it really happen? Actually, it did *not* happen. On the contrary, majoritarian results are quite similar to proportional results for M.5.S., and the real 'loser' of the plurality battle has been the Centre-Left coalition, as table 3 clearly shows.

The main reason for this is that, while the Centre-Right coalition won almost all S.M.Ds in the North and M.5.S. did the same in the South, Centre-Left candidates suffered great competition in many districts of the so-called 'red belt'. In other terms, if we differentiate all S.M.Ds between those that did not see a great competition among candidates, on the one hand, and those in which candidates were particularly close together, on the other, we can see that the competitive districts are especially gathered in the four regions that traditionally experienced a predominant role by Centre-Left parties: Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany, Marche and Umbria (Valbruzzi 2018).[8] To give a clear picture of this, table 4 distinguishes competitive and non-competitive districts depending on the territorial area in which they are placed:

As we can see in table 4, more than 90 per cent of S.M.Ds in the Northern and Southern Italy are non-competitive ones, whereas this percentage dramatically drops close to 50 per cent in the Italian 'red belt', as well as in Lazio, Sardinia and Abruzzo (central regions). This means that the majoritarian part of the electoral system paralleled the proportional part in

Table 3. Seats in the Chamber and in the Senate (2018): comparison between proportional and majoritarian competition.

	Chamber of Deputies		Senate	
Party/coalition	Proportional	Majoritarian	Proportional	Majoritarian
M5S	133 (34.5%)	92 (39.8%)	68 (35.2%)	44 (38.3%)
Centre-right	151 (39.1%)	111 (48.1%)	77 (39.9%)	58 (50.4%)
Centre-left	88 (22.8%)	28 (12.1%)	44 (22.8%)	13 (11.3%)
Others	14 (3.6%)	0 (0.0%)	4 (2.1%)	0 (0.0%)
Total	*386 (100.0%)*	*231 (100.0%)*	*193 (100.0%)*	*115 (100.0%)*

Source: Authors' own compilation. Data from: Italian Ministry of Internal Affairs (http://elezioni.interno.gov.it/).

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Table 4. Competitive and non-competitive districts in the Chamber of deputies (2018).

	Non-competitive districts		Competitive districts		Total	
Territorial area	N	%	N	%	N	%
North-West	57	95.0	3	5.0	60	100
North-East	29	96.7	1	3.3	30	100
Red Belt	21	52.5	19	47.5	40	100
Centre	14	53.8	12	46.2	26	100
South	70	93.3	5	6.7	75	100
Total	191	82.7	40	17.3	231	100

Source: Authors' own compilation. Data from: Italian Ministry of Internal Affairs (http://elezioni.interno.gov.it/).

rewarding the two main forces, M.5.S. and the Centre-Right coalition, at the expenses of the third one: the Centre-Left coalition. Yet, the potentially higher level of disproportionality that could have been reached in the case that electoral preferences were homogeneously distributed across Italy, has been kept under control precisely by the fact that the Centre-Right coalition proved to be the predominant actor in the North and M.5.S. in the South. If this was not the case – namely, if the Centre-Right coalition had the same numbers in Southern Italy as in the North – the number of S.M.Ds that this coalition would have won would have been sufficient to reach the majority of seats in both chambers. In the end, the decision, taken primarily by P.D., to hybridize the electoral system with S.M.Ds, instead of producing a strengthening of the Centre-Left (at least, in its traditional areas of electoral support), had the opposite impact, rewarding M.5.S. and above all the Centre-Right coalition, while punishing precisely those who invented it.

4. The flows of votes

We have estimated the flows of votes in some Italian cities using the statistical technique known as the 'Goodman model' (Goodman 1953, 1959; Schadee and Corbetta 1984), a system of regression equations that estimates the flows of votes using the results of the seats in a single city (or constituency). We put under examination thirty-eight cities (or constituencies) and we have obtained a clear picture of the electoral dynamics between 2013 and 2018 (the comparison with survey analyses[9] furtherly confirms the same picture).

The greatest curiosity regards the origin of the votes for M.5.S. This party is at the centre of two opposing votes movements. Although its votes have increased compared to 2013, this party has also suffered important losses. In particular, in the Central and Northern regions of Italy, while M.5.S. benefited from a strong flow of votes from P.D., it has also lost a significant portion of votes to the benefit of the League. Generally speaking, the inflow of votes was greater than the outflow, but in some cities the latter was of the same size (e.g. Brescia) or even greater (e.g. Padua). As a result of these

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movements, in some part of the Centre-North M.5.S. did not progress from the percentages of votes obtained in 2013.

Figure 2 shows the main flows of votes that involved M.5.S. in three constituencies (one of the North, Brescia, one of the 'red belt', Bologna 6, and one of the South, Naples 6). In this picture, the percentages are calculated on the whole electorate, including those citizens who did not vote. As we can see, in the Northern city, M.5.S. gained a great number of votes from P.D. but lost an almost equal number in favour of the League. In the constituency of Bologna, as in other 'red belt' constituencies, the losses in favour of the League were smaller. In the Southern constituencies (as, for instance, Naples 6), M.5.S. lost only a very small number of votes in favour of the League and it gained votes from the whole political spectrum (including from former P.D.L., now F.I., and the abstention).

In several cities, more than a quarter of the M.5.S. votes come from the P.D's former sympathizers (the only exception to this trend is represented by the cities of Sicily, where the flow from P.D. is rather limited). If we look at the flows from the opposite side, that is from the side of the outputs from P.D., we see that the Renzi's party has lost percentages often higher than 20 per cent (up to 40.6 per cent in the constituency of Naples 6) towards M.5.S. (Vignati 2018).

These flows of votes from P.D. have aroused considerable debate after the vote. Many observers supported and encouraged a government alliance between M.5.S. and P.D. thinking that there was an underlying proximity between the two (especially some newspapers such as *Il Fatto quotidiano*, an informal supporter of M.5.S., and *la Repubblica*, whose orientation appears to be guided by the desire for a definitive overcoming of the Berlusconi era through this alliance, supported this hypothesis).

Indeed, if we look back, we can see that the shift of votes from P.D. to M.5.S. occurred in 2018 is the last piece of a consensus shift that has involved these two forces since the first appearance of M.5.S. on the political scene. Previous analyses have clearly shown that before the Sicilian regional

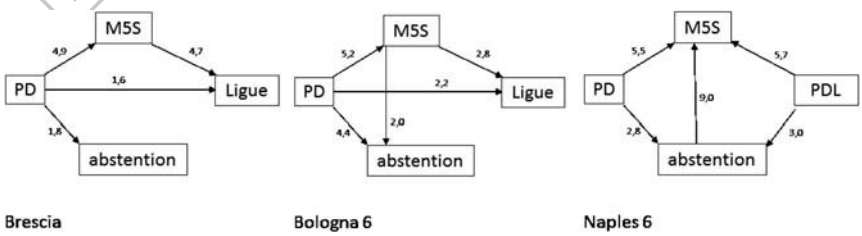

Figure 2. Main flows of votes (2013–2018) involving the M5S in three Italian constituencies (Brescia, Bologna 6, Naples 6).

Source: Authors' own elaboration on data provided by the municipalities of Brescia, Bologna and Naples.

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elections of October 2012 the M.5.S. had built its electoral fortunes by fishing mainly in the Centre-Left basis (P.D., 'Italy of Values', etc.), with a contribution of some importance (but limited to the Northern areas of the country) by the Northern League (Colloca and Marangoni 2013). Until 2012, the contribution given to the M.5.S. electorate by the main Centre-Right party led by Berlusconi (P.D.L.), had been of little importance. Only since the 2013 general elections has the M.5.S. been able to penetrate into the Berlusconi electorate.

For a long time, many observers, however, have underestimated the ability of M.5.S. to take votes from the Centre-Right. This underestimation derives from two reasons. First of all, it was a sort of optical illusion. Since the first political phase of growth of the M.5.S. (from 2010 to 2012), P.D.L. was in apparent decline and politically defeated in second-order electoral competitions: this caused some observers to believe that it was the P.D.L. that was paying the greatest tribute of consensus to the growth of M.5.S. Actually, the electoral dynamics were more complex: the P.D.L. lost most of its votes to abstention, while it yielded very little to M.5.S.; at the same time, the Centre-Left yielded many votes to the M.5.S. but managed to limit the damage to the abstention and, in this way, it won electoral competitions.

There was also another reason that led some observers to this underestimation. The identification of the categories of 'populism' and 'right' has often oriented the perception of many analysts and pundits (especially in Italy). And a political message such as that launched by Grillo with his blog, and thereafter by M.5.S., had indisputable populist features (the identification of the people as a unitary entity whose suffering are caused by an 'an enemy of the people', e.g. the *casta* of politicians; the fundamental distrust in liberal democracy, etc.). For this reason, many analysts were led to see its growth more in line with the phenomena of Berlusconi and the League, which in their time had already been labelled as 'populist'. The Centre-Left in its strenuous opposition to Berlusconi and its governments had always portrayed itself as 'anti-populist'. For this reason, many observers could hardly see the connection between the votes won by M.5.S. and the Centre-Left.

Actually, Grillo's propaganda has always focused mainly on leftist issues (the issue of precariousness, the guiding theme of Grillo's blog, pacifism, consumerism, environmentalism). In recent times, a significant part of the Centre-Left voters have seen Grillo and the M.5.S. as the champion of a 'true' left, while the mainstream Centre-Left parties appeared to distance themselves from their original identity because their worries about financial constraints and their compromise with the 'enemy' Berlusconi.

The party founded by Grillo has thus been able to present itself simultaneously as a bearer of a radical change (in which the right and left categories

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would have lost any meaning) and as a defender of the leftist culture threatened by Renzi's decisionism.[10] However, the cultural and ideological profile of M.5.S. is very diverse and it contains some elements that are also in sharp contrast with the cultural tradition of the Italian left. Just remember, in institutional matters, its declared will to affirm the imperative mandate on M.Ps that poses a threat to the integrity of the constitutional structure far greater than any reform discussed or voted on in the referendum. Also, the proximity to the anti-Europe positions (attenuated, or even cancelled, in the electoral campaign, but resurfaced soon after with a declaration by Beppe Grillo) are detached from the traditionally Europeanist positions of the Italian Centre-Left but find support in those components of the leftist electorate that are dissatisfied with the austerity policies promoted by the European Union. Finally, immigration, often portrayed in terms of an 'invasion', is another issue on which the positions of the head of M.5.S. find greater affinity with the Centre-Right, as well as the issue of compulsory vaccinations which in recent years has assumed considerable importance in the Italian public debate.[11]

In the Southern regions, M.5.S. did not suffer competition from the League. Therefore, as we have already seen in figure 2, it was able to gain votes from across the whole political spectrum (from P.D. to P.D.L. and also from the area of abstention) with no significant losses. Let us take, for instance, the constituency of Naples 6: here the flow analysis shows that 33 per cent of M.5.S. supporters voted for the same party five years ago, 16 per cent voted the P.D., 16 per cent voted the P.D.L. and 24 per cent abstained.

The League is, together with the M.5.S., the other winner of these elections and the flows show us as a party capable of winning votes at 360 degrees, with no significant loss. Compared to five years ago, it has significantly increased its consensus by stealing votes both from his partner(s) in the Centre-Right electoral coalition, and from the competitor (and later government partner) M.5.S., and also (in some cities) from the P.D. and from the pool of the abstentions.

The electorate of the P.D. and Berlusconi's party (in 2013 the P.D.L.) has shown many signs of disillusion and disaffection and our estimates show strong outgoing flows from these two parties. The P.D. lost votes in favour of (ranked in order of substantive dimension) M.5.S., L.E.U. and abstention (in some cities even towards the League). The only flow that slightly attenuates the losses of the P.D. comes from Mario Monti's former coalition. Indeed, almost all the voters of *Scelta civica* and its allied parties chose the P.D. in 2018. It can therefore be concluded that the composition of the P.D. electorate, because of the losses in favour of the M.5.S. and L.E.U. and of the inputs coming from the Monti's coalition, is significantly changed compared to five years ago, becoming more 'centrist'.

Finally, on the other side of the political spectrum, within the Centre-Right coalition there was a large exchange of votes (from the former P.D.L.

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to the League and *Fratelli d'Italia*). The mainstream political party on the Centre-Right (the former P.D.L.) lost votes also in favour of the abstention and in favour of the M.5.S.

One last thing to report concerns the electoral transfers between the P.D. and the party of Berlusconi. If the electoral volatility involves an ever-growing portion of Italian voters, the transfers between P.D. and F.I. involve, as they had been in the past (Itanes 2001, 2013), a very small flow. The distinction between Berlusconi and 'anti-Berlusconists' (which partially overlaps with that between right and left, but without exactly coinciding with it) was the main axis of the Italian political confrontation in the last two decades and it continues to exert an effect. If the opposition to Berlusconi has certainly determined a part of the steps from the P.D. to the M.5.S. (perceived by some leftist voters as the toughest and most rigorous opponent of the F.I. leader), support (or the opposition) to Berlusconi is a dimension that, today as yesterday, hinders the direct steps between the Centre-Right and the Centre-Left. In short, it continues to act as a 'freezing' factor of the Italian electorate.

5. Conclusion

It is plausible to look at the 2018 general elections as the starting point of a new phase in Italian politics. The magnitude of the volatility, the electoral defeat of the mainstream parties and the rise of outsider/challenger parties, the deep change in the political and electoral geography of the country, as well as in the patterns of competition among the main parties, are all phenomena that give these elections a watershed character. Furthermore, the unprecedented government alliance formed by the League and M.5.S. after long negotiations is another important novelty.

All these new features raise questions about the characteristics of the new political system that is developing and pose new challenges to the parties. Some scholars have forecast the development of a radically new kind of bi-polarism based on the contrast between the so-called 'sovranist' parties, advocating a sort of 'Italy first' program (e.g. the League and M.5.S.) and pro-Europe forces (P.D. and F.I.), advocating a new phase of European integration. In other European political systems (such as in France) we can glimpse the emergence of this new bi-polarism. Yet, it cannot be the simple re-aggregation of the existing forces that will give birth, if it will ever see the light, to this new bi-polarism. The analysis of voting flows has shown that within the electorate the 'freezing' power of the axis that divides 'Berlusconians' and 'anti-Berlusconians' continues to exert considerable influence, keeping the Centre-Left electorate quite distant from that of Berlusconi's party and, on the other hand, making the border between P.D. and M.5.S. fluid and somewhat overlapping.

Combining these electorates will therefore not be a simple operation for any leader who proposes to aggregate the pro-Europe bloc. Moreover, in

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the early stages of government action, on the issues that more closely touch national sovereignty and national borders, such as the rejection of migrant ships, F.I. (although not part of the government nor of the parliamentary majority) has shown complete subordination to the positions taken by Matteo Salvini. It is true that the current President of the European Parliament, Antonio Tajani, whose European faith is well-known, belongs to F.I., but the political action of his party is largely oriented towards the direction indicated by the leader of the League, Matteo Salvini.

At the moment, the two forces that have come out clearly defeated by the 2018 elections suffer a great difficulty that endangers their survival. This applies first of all to F.I. that in the wake of the apparent decline of Berlusconi is basically without a guide and incapable of political initiative, forced to follow the political action of Salvini and, as was shown by the post-election polls and by the administrative elections of 10 June, increasingly at risk of being swallowed by its voracious ally. As to the P.D., it finds itself at a very difficult point in its history and it is not clear whether it will prove able to re-organize itself. Matteo Renzi's electoral defeat and resignation have only reduced his power, but thanks to the electoral law that allowed him to select most P.D. parliamentarians he is still in control of the party and no alternative leadership has appeared. Relatively minor figures do not seem capable of undertaking the complex task of radically renewing the party that is bound to remain in a sterile opposition for an unknown period of time.

On the 'sovranist' side the questions and the unknowns are also numerous. As we write these concluding notes, the new League–M.5.S. government led by Giuseppe Conte has just started its activities. Salvini seems to be the strong man while the M.5.S. follows. The ideal affinities between these two forces could therefore be greater than what some observers thought (we are referring to those who, looking at the provenance of its voters, considered M.5.S. as a leftist party). Some studies have shown that the programmatic distances between the League and the M.5.S. exist but are not unbridgeable (see the article in this special issue by Valbruzzi). However, the survival and evolution of this alliance is subject to numerous unknown factors. Above all, it depends on the peculiar nature of the organization of M.5.S., its lack of territorial rooting and the heterogeneity of its electoral following. The situation, as Ventura (2018) suggests in a brief essay in which she reflected about the evolution of the Italian political system, remains profoundly magmatic and still devoid of elements that can lead to a relatively stable configuration.

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Notes

1. Although this article is the result of a joint research effort of the two authors, Andrea Pritoni wrote Sections 1, 2 and the second part of Section 3, while Rinaldo Vignati wrote the first part of Section 3 and Sections 4 and 5.
2. He started very young as a city councilor in Milan, covering the various stages of the cursus honorum inside the party structure, refining his communication skills during the period in which he had served as director of Radio Padania, the radio station of the party.
3. During the 2013–2018 period, the municipal elections showed the difficulty in confirming its electoral consensus in the cities, with the significant exceptions of Livorno, Turin and, above all, Rome.
4. The coefficient of variation of M.5.S. is still lower than the coefficient of variation of the League (1.45 in 2013 and 0.52 in 2018), but now it reached the same level as F.I. coefficient (0.29 in 2018). It is also higher than the coefficient characterizing P.D. (0.26 in 2018).
5. The potential breaking of the local alliances in several cities and regions where the League and F.I. govern together does not appear as a credible threat, given that the post-election polls indicates that the League is in further rapid growth at the expense of F.I.
6. Yet, if we do not take into account the so-called '*Italicum*', which has been declared unconstitutional even before its very first application, the 'Rosato Law' is the third – rather than the fourth – Italian electoral law in the last twenty-five years.
7. Finally, 2 per cent of seats is attributed thanks to the votes of Italians abroad and there is the constituency of Val d'Aosta attributing one seat in the Chamber of deputies and one seat in the Senate.
8. In order to differentiate between 'competitive districts' and 'non-competitive districts', we can take a difference of 5 per cent of votes between the first and the second candidate as a threshold: all districts where the first candidate took more than 5 per cent of votes more than the second candidate are considered as 'non-competitive', whereas the opposite holds true for districts in which the candidate who won the seat took less than 5 per cent of votes more than the second candidate.
9. See for instance the survey by Ipsos (*Elezioni politiche 2018. Analisi post*-voto) and Swg (*I flussi di voto alle elezioni politiche 2018*).
10. During the XVII legislature, both on labour issues (article 18, 'Jobs act'), and on institutional issues (*Italicum*, constitutional reform), Renzi and his government have taken positions which were in sharp contrast with the rhetoric prevailing in the Centre-Left culture. Also, the 'non-demonizing' position toward the 'enemy' Berlusconi could not be easily digested by many leftist voters. Faced with these positions, the M.5.S. propaganda has often played the role of defender of values and social achievements of the traditional left jeopardized by Renzi's action. The debate on the constitutional referendum is, from this point of view, a particularly significant moment (Vampa and Vignati 2016): the harsh opposition of the M.5.S. towards the reform projects born from the 'pact of the Nazareno' has led many leftist supporters and intellectuals to see the party founded by Grillo as one of the main defenders of the values of the left.

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11. The representatives of the M.5.S., such as those of the League, have often taken a position, clearly inspired by 'populist' and 'anti-elitist' attitudes, in favour of 'freedom of choice' for families, criticizing the introduction of the mandatory vaccination decided by Beatrice Lorenzin, the Minister of health of the Centre-Left government.

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