Introduction to the Special Issue: 'Who's the winner? An analysis of the 2018 Italian general election'

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An unprecedented election

Five years after the 'electoral earthquake' of 2013 (Chiaramonte and De Sio 2014), when the rise of the largest genuinely new political party that had ever appeared in Western Europe led to the collapse of the bipolar pattern of party competition that had characterized the so-called Second Republic (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013; Maggini 2014; Chiaramonte and Emanuele 2014), Italian politics has been shaken by another turbulent election. Indeed, the election held on 4 March of 2018, while showing a substantial continuity in the tripolar competition pattern that emerged in 2013, has produced a radical shift in the balance of power among the three poles of the Italian party system, thus leading to at least five unprecedented results.

First, the centre-right coalition came first with 37% of the vote share but falling short of an overall majority by 50 seats. Here, Berlusconi's party is no longer the dominant actor of the coalition, as the new populist and nationalist Lega (The League) led by Matteo Salvini (Tarchi 2018) received more than 17% of the vote share, thus managing to overtake Forza Italia (Go Italy, FI) for the first time since 1994.

Second, the incumbent Partito Democratico (Democratic Party, PD) fell to 18.7%, its lowest result ever, and the centre-left coalition came only third with less than 23% of the votes. From a longitudinal perspective, the election was a disaster for the Italian left: if we consider the entire left bloc, including also the two leftist lists of Liberi e Uguali (Free and Equal, LeU) and Potere al Popolo (Power to the People), it received just 27.4% and less than 9 million votes, the lowest result since the foundation of the Republic. Just to make a comparison, in 2006, this bloc was twice as large with 19 million votes. More generally, today the Italian Left is the second weakest in Western Europe, just after France (Emanuele 2018a).

Third, under the new leadership of Luigi Di Maio, the Movimento Cinque Stelle (Five Star Movement, M5S) became the most voted party with 32.7% of the vote share, thus managing to achieve a sort of record. Indeed, all the previous cases of a successful electoral debut – such as Forza Italia in 1994, the Spanish Podemos in 2015, the Portuguese Democratic Renewal Party in 1985 or the Dutch Pim Fortuyn List in 2002 – suffered an electoral setback in the subsequent election (Emanuele and Marino

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2018). In this regard, not only did the Five Star Movement manage not to lose votes, but it also increased its vote share by almost seven percentage points compared to 2013.

Deeply intertwined with the previous points are the fourth and fifth unprecedented events that resulted from the 2018 election. In recent years, scholars working on electoral dynamics in the European context have started to consider the 'Great Recession' that hit Europe after 2008 as a sort of new 'critical juncture for the structuration of national party systems' (Kriesi 2017; Hooghe and Marks 2018). Specifically, the impact of the economic and sovereign debt crisis systematically led to the defeat of incumbent governments led by mainstream parties (Hérnandez and Kriesi 2016); the rise of new anti-establishment challengers (Bosco and Verney 2012; Emanuele and Chiaramonte 2016; Hobolt and Tilley 2016); increasing electoral instability with patterns of party system de-institutionalization (Chiaramonte and Emanuele 2017; 2018) and, especially in Southern Europe, high risks of government instability (Bosco and Verney 2016). Not only does the Italian election of 2018 fit perfectly into this path, but it is also the first time that anti-establishment forces (i.e., M5S and Lega), considered together, have won the overall majority of votes and seats. Moreover, and this brings us to the last point which is an absolute innovation in comparative perspective, after about three months of complex negotiations, the M5S and the Lega have eventually come to an agreement and have formed a new coalition government, thus putting the traditional mainstream parties (i.e., the PD and Forza Italia) out of power. Such an outcome will inevitably produce a deep change in the Italian political system, opening a transition whose final point of arrival is still difficult to predict.

Why this Special Issue

For all the above-mentioned reasons the Italian election of 2018 is a remarkable novelty not only for our national politics but also in comparative perspective. A usual and, in some way, unavoidable problem of the scientific community is that its production (books, journal articles) requires a great deal of time and the findings they deliver scarcely tap into the ongoing political debate. Consequently, the latter is dominated by journalists and non-academic commentators whose analyses generally convey superficial messages, without grasping the underlying dynamics of the political processes. Here is the rationale of this Special Issue. In a nutshell, it aims to provide the scholarly community with a suitable and timely tool to feed the scientific discussion about this election. It delivers cutting-edge analyses with original and, to a certain extent, unexpected findings, and will become an unmissable starting point for scholars aiming at developing further investigations on the same topics.

The Special Issue consists of six research articles, analysing the election and its outcomes from different perspectives and covering different topics: from the new electoral system to the electoral campaign and the use of media; from candidate selection and characteristics to the electoral results and the new parliamentary class. Notwithstanding the different approaches, all the articles share a predominantly empirical focus: they all present original data with the purpose of providing a fresh, descriptive (but theory-grounded) account of what happened on 4 March.

Content and findings of the Special Issue

To begin with, the article by Alessandro Chiaramonte and Roberto D'Alimonte focuses on the features of the new mixed-member electoral system introduced at the end of the past legislature, the so-called Rosatellum. This contribution is, to the best of my knowledge, the first scientific analysis of the new Italian electoral law and its effects after its first application. The article first highlights the political reasons behind the approval of the law – the fourth electoral reform in Italy in the last 25 years – then reviews the characteristics of the new system and the incentives and constraints it provides to voters and parties. Specifically, it focuses on the effects of the new rules on the election outcome, by testing whether the Rosatellum acted more as a proportional or a majoritarian system. In this regard, Chiaramonte and D'Alimonte find mixed results. Indeed, the building of pre-electoral coalitions witnesses the clear effect on parties' strategic coordination with the purpose of winning seats in single-member districts. However, this majoritarian logic had only a limited impact on voters' behaviour, as the impossibility of a split-ticket vote, the lack of information about candidates and their competitiveness and the large size of the districts led voters to vote for their preferred party instead of casting a strategic vote. Finally, the article assesses the level of disproportionality of the new electoral system. Overall, the distortion in the translation of votes into seats has been limited, making the Rosatellum closer to proportional systems than to majoritarian ones. Interestingly though, the authors find that this limited disproportionality is the result of the sharp geographical pattern of voting: the electoral system has produced relevant disproportionality both in the North (in favour of the centre-right) and in the South (in favour of the M5S). Therefore, the system has produced a remarkable majoritarian effect, but such disproportionality at the national level has been cancelled out by these contrasting geographical patterns.

The features of the new electoral system have influenced the coalition building process and all the choices related to the electoral supply, from the number of party lists to the use of multiple candidacies, up to the traits of candidates, with particular regard to their gender (given the gender-quota rules provided by the electoral law). In this respect, the article by Andrea Pedrazzani, Luca Pinto and Paolo Segatti investigates the characteristics of the Italian candidates running for a seat in the Chamber of Deputies in 2018 and compares them with those who have stood for office from 1976 onwards. The results show that the electoral system has played a role in balancing the population of the Italian would-be deputies in terms of gender and, thanks to the re-introduction of a plurality quota, has reduced the overall number of lists and candidates. Nevertheless, the number of those who run for office without any reasonable possibility of obtaining a parliamentary seat is still very high in comparative perspective. According to the authors, this finding is interesting as it testifies to the fact that there are still many who aspire to become part of the political elite in spite of the negative climate towards politics and politicians' privileges well rooted in Italian society and widely exploited by the media. Moreover, this finding suggests also that simplistic rationalistic accounts based on the analysis of institutionally-determined benefits and costs cannot fully account for the propensity of Italian citizens to enter the electoral arena. Furthermore, other features of the candidates display some novelties compared to the past, albeit not necessarily related to the electoral system change. First, due to a mix of factors, among which the decision

of the M5S to limit the renovation of their ruling class and rely on a cohort of experienced parliamentarians, the turnover rate of candidates was lower than in 2013, with 20% of candidates having participated in at least one election in the past. Second, the number of multiple candidacies was more limited than in the elections held under the Calderoli law and was used as a 'parachute' to secure the election of some prominent (but not so popular) politicians.

Beyond the role played by the electoral system and the characteristics of the candidates, the electoral campaign was decisive in boosting the political messages of parties and leaders. It was a short campaign, characterized by the scarcity of resources available for parties, due to the abolition of the electoral refunds approved in 2013. For such reasons, as Cristopher Cepernich and Roberta Bracciale argue in their article, social media have acquired greater importance compared to the past. Thus, they refer to it as a 'hybrid campaign', characterised by the intersection between traditional media (TV, radio, press) and new digital media (Internet). Their article analyses and measures the communication strategy of the main Italian leaders and political parties on Twitter (conceivable as the platform of intra-élite relationships) and Facebook (the platform of extra-élite relationships) through the use of a large amount of data and indicators concerning the social media activity of parties and leaders. The shift from a more traditional media system to a hybrid one seems to have favoured some parties more than others. In particular, the League and its leader Matteo Salvini seem to have benefitted from their massive use of social media: according to the data shown by Cepernich and Bracciale, the Lega has been the most productive and skilled political actor, namely the best in the broadcasting of its (top-down) messages and the most competent in using different features of the social media platform.

This general result is indirectly confirmed by the analysis performed by Giuliano Bobba and Franca Roncarolo, who focus on the comparison between populist and non-populist communication on Facebook. By relying on the bulk of literature on populism and starting from the theory-grounded expectation that populist actors have been favoured through proliferation on social media, the authors test whether populist messages and, more generally, populist leaders, tend to have more success than non-populist ones on Facebook. They find not only that posts containing populist claims get more likes than non-populist ones, but that this is particularly true for those messages including references to immigrants, namely what Bobba and Roncarolo define as 'complete and excluding populism'. Moreover, this polarization between parties and leaders employing populist messages (Lega, but also the M5S and Fratelli d'Italia) and actors employing non-populist messages (PD, LeU and, to a lesser extent, Forza Italia) has affected the entire political-media system. Populist parties and leaders have used their messages for mobilizing the electorate and allowing simplification of the political debate to We (the people) vs. Them (the outgoing, corrupt, PD-led political class). Non-populist parties were not ready to implement the effective countermeasures.

This innovative and polarizing campaign, of course, is likely to have affected the outcome of the election and the success of the two populist anti-establishment parties (i.e., the M5S and the Lega). In this regard, the article by Aldo Paparo, besides the indispensable analysis and interpretation of the electoral results – including the study of the geographical patterns of competition in single-member districts – provides an investigation into the

underlying dynamics of the vote. In particular, Paparo focuses on survey data to detect the socio-demographic characteristics of the four major parties' electorate. The M5S is confirmed as the most socially cross-cutting party, having become very strong even among public-sector employees, a former stronghold of the PD, which is instead significantly over-represented only among the elderly and retired people. Consistent with expectations, the League is particularly strong among the self-employed and blue-collars while, quite surprisingly, Forza Italia is the second most-voted party among the unemployed, after the M5S. Through the use of original ecological analyses of the transition matrices in 11 Italian cities, Paparo then looks at the electoral shifts between 2013 and 2018. In a context of relevant voters' electoral mobility (confirmed in the aggregate by the very high level of electoral volatility, see Emanuele 2018b), two main phenomena emerge. Between 2013 and 2018 there were substantial movements of voters from the centre-left to the M5S, who, in turn, lost relevant portions of its voters to the League.

Finally, besides the electoral results and voting patterns, another important outcome of the election took place at parliamentary level, with the election of a renewed parliamentary class. In this respect, Eugenio Salvati and Michelangelo Vercesi analyse the legislative turnover – conceived as the percentage of new MPs out of total membership, compared to the previous legislature – in the Italian Parliament and its determinants. They adopt a longitudinal perspective, by focusing on the general elections held since 1994 and disentangle their analysis across the main Italian parties. Empirical evidence shows that legislative turnover has been very high in 2018, with roughly two-thirds of new MPs compared to the previous legislature. Moreover, the turnover has involved all parties, irrespective of their electoral performance. As far as the determinants of legislative turnover are concerned, they find that the prominent legislative turnover recorded in 2018 – comparable to that in other two turbulent elections, namely in 1994 and 2013 – is not fully accounted for by those factors that are traditionally highlighted by the literature on the topic (i.e., systemic factors), such as high electoral volatility, the emergence of new parties, or the presence of new electoral rules. Conversely, the main explanatory factors of the 2018 election have to be sought at intra-party level. Salvati and Vercesi find that how parties work and organize, selection criteria, and leadership styles seem to influence the degree of renewal in the party's parliamentary class. Between 2013 and 2018 all the main parties excepting Forza Italia changed their party leader and allowed for a strengthening of leaders' control over nominations: therefore, the high turnover could be explained by the leaders' will to form reliable parliamentary groups in the Chamber of Deputies.

What are the prospects for the Italian political system?

To sum up, the articles of this Special Issue highlight many interesting results regarding the evolution of the Italian political system after the general election of 2018. These pieces of research will stimulate further investigation along a number of different lines, from political communication to voting behaviour up to the study of the institutional framework. However, we are aware that the main findings included in the articles of this Special Issue are unable to provide the final word on the ultimate direction the Italian political system will take in the near future. This is because, given the persistent state of electoral fluidity and 'party system de-institutionalization' (Chiaramonte and

Emanuele 2017; 2018), Italian politics and, more specifically, parties, leaders and the interactions between them, can change or evolve in unexpected directions in a relatively short period. At the time of writing, it appears that this process of change may lead in one of two alternative directions: either a consolidation of the tripolar party system that has emerged since 2013 or the start of a new bipolar phase in Italian politics.

Even though the final result of this process of change is still very unclear, it is likely that it will be affected by two different, albeit interrelated factors. The first change is a possible new electoral reform, which may soon be placed on the political agenda. While a more proportional new electoral system might favour the consolidation of the existing tripolar configuration, a shift towards a majoritarian system may lead to a new bipolar setting.

The second driver of change is linked to the consequences of the new government formed by the M5S and the Lega. Such a coalition agreement has brought to power the two main anti-establishment parties and has put the two mainstream parties, the PD and Forza Italia, together in opposition for the first time since 1994. If this new schema lasts beyond the time of this government, expanding to the local level or becoming a structural pattern of competition also in subsequent elections, it is clear that it will reshape the Italian party system in a completely new direction, creating a novel bipolar phase based on the 'globalization cleavage' (Kriesi et al. 2012; Hooghe and Marks 2018).

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