

# Silvio is back: Understanding Berlusconi's latest revival ahead of the Italian general election



*Despite currently being banned from holding office, Silvio Berlusconi is well placed to have a key role in the Italian general election in March. [Fabio Bordinon](#) outlines the factors behind his latest comeback, and how his Forza Italia party could play a central part in the formation of the next Italian government.*

In the past when we Italian scholars of political science met our colleagues at international conferences, it was always the same question: why Berlusconi? How could a media tycoon, facing multiple-trials and allegations, an unlikely politician later known for his 'bunga bunga' parties, have become the leading figure in one of the largest western democracies? The astonishment of the international observer was particularly acute in 2011, when Berlusconi, hit by personal scandals and by the Eurozone debt crisis, resigned as prime minister.

Now the world has changed, and it's full of Berlusconi-style politicians. But at a time when political leaders seem to fade as fast as they rise, Berlusconi is still there. The 'Eternal Leader' has survived the collapse of his last government, a ban from the Italian Parliament, and a seemingly irreversible electoral (and personal) decline. And now the 81-year-old leader is ready for a new comeback. He cannot be a candidate, but he still leads (owns) his personal party, Forza Italia. And he could win with his centre-right coalition at the Italian general election in March.

## Why Berlusconi?

There are at least five different, but related explanations for Berlusconi's return, which at the same time show the extent (and limits) of what he can hope to achieve this time around. First, there are the failures of the governing coalition led by the centre-left Democratic Party (PD). This began as a grand coalition, but it progressively shrank after Berlusconi's party left (in 2013) and then broke his pact with the PD prime minister Matteo Renzi in 2015. Once considered a young, left-wing Berlusconi, Renzi lost his gamble on the [constitutional referendum](#) held in 2016, suffered an internal split involving the PD's left wing, and the party now holds a weak position in the polls (below the disappointing 25% obtained by the PD in 2013).

Second, the PD has (incredibly) backed (together with Forza Italia and Lega) a mixed electoral law, in which one third (36%) of the seats are assigned in single-member plurality districts (and the remaining part with proportional representation). This electoral system clearly favoured the re-unification of a strongly divided centre-right: Berlusconi's Forza Italia has been able to reach an agreement with the radical-right populist Lega led by Matteo Salvini, as well as with Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy, and other minor parties. On the other side of the political spectrum, the PD has a significantly lower coalition potential. In such a situation, the "psychological effect" connected to the expectations of a centre-right success could be even more important than the "technical effect" induced by the electoral law. And Berlusconi is a master at pulling political levers of this kind.



Credit: [European People's Party \(CC BY 2.0\)](#)

Third, Italian politics is no longer a centre-right vs centre-left game. The rise of the Five Star Movement (M5S) has brought the country into a tri-polar era, in which both Berlusconi and Renzi have chosen Luigi Di Maio, the Five Star Movement's candidate for prime minister, as their (main) competitor. Both leaders aim to present themselves as the moderate barrier against the populist wave. Even Bill Emmott, former editor of *The Economist*, who in 2001 described Berlusconi as being 'unfit' to lead Italy, now thinks he could save a country confronted with the (bigger) threat represented by the M5S, which leads the polls with close to 30% of support. Berlusconi has been very active recently in trying to strengthen Forza Italia's position inside the European People's Party, and some say the President of the European Parliament (and member of Forza Italia), Antonio Tajani, could be one of Berlusconi's candidates for the Italian premiership.

Fourth, Berlusconi's current role highlights several contradictions given he has traditionally been considered a prominent populist figure in his own right. Moreover, his main ally, Matteo Salvini, is a clear expression of the European populist radical right. Salvini has transformed a once localist (and even secessionist) party into a nationalist, Eurosceptic, and anti-immigration political force. The League has grown in the polls and even assumed, during this legislature, the position of leading centre-right party. No one has so openly challenged Berlusconi's leadership over the centre-right in the same way as Salvini has managed to do: even the new political symbol of the League states he's running for the premiership.

The early stages of the electoral campaign have shown continuous clashes between (the moderate) Berlusconi and (the radical) Salvini. This is part of an old role-playing between Forza Italia and the (once Northern) League: and it has often worked in the past, at least in terms of their ability to attract support. But pundits stress the two centre-right traditional partners have never been so divided on central issues, and wonder if they will eventually be able to govern together. After the (partial and pragmatic) reconciliation between Berlusconi and Salvini, Forza Italia is faring better in the polls (with about 15-17% of support) and the party is again slightly ahead of the League (which holds around 13-14%): the real balance within the centre-right after the next election will be crucial to what happens next.

Finally, Berlusconi and Salvini are not necessarily destined to govern together. Actually, with the new electoral law, a coalition or a party needs to win at least 40% of the proportional seats and 70% of the single-member plurality seats to reach a majority in Parliament. Hence, it's highly likely that the 2018 election (just like the [2013 election](#)) will not produce a clear winner. Even in this case, the strength of Berlusconi is that he has a plan B: forming a new grand coalition government with the PD. Indeed, many suspect that may have been his intention all along. Both Berlusconi and Renzi have firmly and repeatedly denied this. But the words of the electoral campaign are often written in the sand in Italy, while the necessity of a convergence between left and right appears to be an emerging trend in Europe.

These five points explain why Berlusconi is once again so central to Italian politics. His party model does not envisage succession. The same holds for his idea of the centre-right: a political arena which seems doomed to be (eternally) stuck in *Berlusconism*. This time round he cannot be a candidate, due to his ban from Parliament (even if he has appealed to the European Court of Human Rights). However, he is still there, just like in 1994: with his optimism and his tax-cuts, his amazing promises and his justice problems. The leader who once defined himself as being “anointed by God” seems destined to revive and manifest himself always in the same person for all eternity.

And Berlusconi could yet end up as kingmaker following the next election. As Woody Allen once said: “Eternity is a very long time. Especially towards the end”.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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