

# Factions and fissions in the aftermath of the 2013 elections: why Italian politics never gets boring

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09/07/2013

*The aftermath of the 2013 Italian elections produced a lengthy political stalemate between Italy's main political parties before the formation of Enrico Letta's coalition government. As [Andrea Ceron](#) writes, however, there are also intense rivalries within Italy's political parties. Outlining a game-theoretic model of party factions, he assesses the effect of the elections and current developments on the stability of Italy's main political parties, including the potential for a possible split to take place within the centre-left Partito Democratico (PD).*



A few years ago the Italian Head of State, Giorgio Napolitano, said that Italian politics never gets boring. With sixty-one governments in sixty-seven years this claim comes as no surprise. However, this is just part of the story. What really makes Italian politics so interesting is the high level of factionalism and intra-party struggles that make the party system fluid and unstable. Large as well as small parties are often destabilised by factional strife which can manifest itself in party splits.

Just to recall an example, in July 2010 the conflict between the faction loyal to Silvio Berlusconi and the minority faction led by Gianfranco Fini wielded a split in the People of Freedom (PDL) party when the minority group broke away in response to sanctions imposed by the leadership. This fission contributed to the dissolution of Berlusconi's cabinet in 2011. Even in the aftermath of [the 2013 elections](#), Italian journalists have been wondering whether a new party fission is in the air. Nowadays, all the Italian parties are dealing with rivalry and dissent between the leadership and the backbenchers. Although Italian parties try to hide this conflict, they often wash their dirty linen in public, sometimes even in streaming.

The [Five Stars Movement](#) (M5S) is a typical example. This party is organised according to strict internal rules that only allow for the expression of dissent in private, while inhibiting any public disagreement. Although they pretend to enact a fluid or deliberative form of web-democracy, with activists entitled to vote on-line on the party's policies and strategy, the leader Beppe Grillo has the last word. Those who publicly criticise him are 'free' to decide whether to leave the party on their own or be sent off. Nevertheless, the decision to expel dissenting members is discussed by M5S representatives through live streaming that displays the existence of heterogeneous viewpoints.



Matteo Renzi, Credit: Maryb60 (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

Intra-party divisions are strong even inside the other two 'personal' parties that have long been considered homogenous and 'allergic' to dissenters: the [Northern League](#) (LN) and the PDL. The PDL always bears the risk of losing pieces, like before the elections when two right-wing groups broke away. The division inside the LN has

grown after the corruption scandal that involved the founding father, Umberto Bossi, in April 2012. Bossi was dismissed but the new leader, Roberto Maroni, is continuously challenged by party members loyal to the old leader and from time to time the media has bet on the risk of a split between these two groups.

In turn, the Democratic Party (PD) is highly factionalised. We can enumerate no less than [12 \(organised or disorganised\) factions](#). The party, however, is proud of its heterogeneity, which is taken as a signal of a dynamic and democratic internal life. On any given day PD factions show their disagreements and quarrel over the current topic on the political agenda, directly, through social network sites, or indirectly, on television and newspapers.

The most striking fight took place during the [election of the Head of State](#), when factional vetoes produced a stalemate as dozens of PD rebels voted against the party candidates, Franco Marini and Romano Prodi. The rebels justified their defection by blaming the grassroots for e-mail-bombing, but the pressure received via social media [was only a pretext to cover factional bitterness](#).

All the Italian parties seem to walk on the edge of a fission. Which of them will split? Which not? In a recently [published article](#) I provide the tools to answer this question. I consider the party as a coalition of factions that compete against each other to take control of the party and maximise their share of payoffs while cooperating to produce the public good, i.e. party unity, which the leader is responsible for preserving. In light of this, I present a simple game-theoretic model that describes intra-party bargaining dynamics as an interplay between the party leader and the minority faction, in the shadow of party fission. Two elements affect the likelihood of a party split: the minority's threat to break away and the leader's attitude toward a compromise. These elements, in turn, are affected by the distribution of policy, office, and electoral payoffs, as well as party loyalty, intra-party rules, the electoral system, and the degree of party system competitiveness.

When exit costs are too high and the minority faction is too weak there is no incentive to leave the party. However, when the minority faction retains a strong and credible threat a split could happen. In this case, the party leader's interest either in preserving unity or in enhancing ideological cohesion (affected by intra-party democracy and party system competitiveness) is crucial to keeping the party together or inducing a fission. When party unity is an issue at stake party leaders will cater to the minority faction and reward potential splinter groups to preserve unity. Conversely, when the need for unity is lower and leaders are more focused on rewarding their followers and promoting cohesion even at the expense of unity, the party will break up. Therefore, parties can be considered as minimum winning coalitions of factions, in which all unnecessary subgroups are disregarded by the party leader and must face the choice between compliance or exit.

What are the implications? How do these results help to answer our questions? First of all, they show that parties with intransigent rules do not tolerate dissent because internal disagreement could weaken the party. The struggle within the Five Stars Movement provides a confirmation: Grillo is unwilling to bargain with dissenters, and the M5S leadership claim that those who disagree with the party line are free to leave. So far, a few MPs have already switched from the party. Despite strict internal rules, however, the Northern League has not split yet. Here party loyalty is making the difference. Since the LN is the oldest Italian party, leaving after 30 years of militancy is not an easy choice for its politicians.

The future of the PD is less well defined. While the closed-list system promotes breakaways, the adoption of primary elections is a [unifying factor](#) for the party. Although strategic portfolio allocation can help in preserving unity ([see this paper](#)), the coalition government with the PDL is loosening the ties between the rank-and-file and their leaders. The duration and the action of the Letta cabinet, as well as the outcome of the PD congress that will take place in autumn will probably influence the likelihood of a breakaway. Despite its untenable policy heterogeneity, consensual and conciliatory intra-party dynamics that take the stakes of all party factions in consideration seem the only way to keep the party together and avoid a harmful split. On the contrary, a party leader inclined to make clear-cut choices must take into account the risk of a fission. Matteo Renzi and the other hopefuls have been warned.

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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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