

A Legitimization of the Italian Government More Than a Vote for Europe

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Eurocrisis in the
Press

By [Monica Poletti](#)

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The overwhelming victory of the Democratic Party

Elections in Italy rarely fail to surprise. The victory at the 2014 EP elections of the Prime Minister Matteo Renzi and his centre-left, pro-European *Democratic Party* (PD) came as a shock due to the size of the victory. Two weeks before the elections polls average ([Electio2014](#)) indicated that preferences for the centre-left party were at 33.6%, a large percentage that suggested the PD had become the first party of the country. Yet, the PD was closely followed by the *Five Star Movement* (M5S), the anti-establishment and anti-Euro party (self-labelled as *movement*) led by former comedian Beppe Grillo with a 24.1% share. Given the margin of uncertainty in polls predictions and the fact that at previous national elections M5S preferences were profoundly underestimated, a close battle between Renzi and Grillo was envisaged for Election Day. Go Italy (FI) party, led by Silvio Berlusconi, was instead expected to follow as the third party with an unprecedentedly low 18.3% share, following the decline of their leader. Yet, the surprise arrived with a sound [victory](#) for Renzi's party with 40.8% of votes, almost double the votes achieved by M5S who "only" obtained a 21.1% share. Furthermore, Berlusconi's FI lost even more share than expected, gaining just 16.8% of votes, their worst result ever. Whereas the New Centre-Right (NCD), a detached part of Berlusconi's former People of Freedom party (PDL), currently in government with the PD, obtained only 4.4% of the votes.



A victory for the PD with more than 40% of the votes not only is a victory of the PD over the M5S, it is a victory with a percentage that was not even conceivable for a party coming from the left tradition. Parties of the left tradition could not aspire at winning more than 33% of the electorate (1 voter over 3), if very successful, because they were intentionally not trying to attract voters coming from other traditions. After great changes within the PD following the "earthquake" national elections of 2013, however, the young leader Renzi, so-called "rozzamatore" (demolition man), has decided to change strategy. First, he relegated the old PD establishment as minority within his party, and then, during the electoral campaign, he successfully addressed former voters of M5S, PDL and, above all, centrist smaller parties (e.g. SC – [Civic Choice](#)). The result of this strategy is that the M5S stopped attracting new voters and gained just 21% of the electorate. Not only this is less than what has been forecasted by polls, but it is also less than the share of votes they obtained at the [2013](#) national election (25.5%), when they lost by a very small margin only because the PD was in coalition with other smaller leftist parties.

What does this mean for Europe?

What does this mean for Europe? The issue with EP elections in Italy is that, as in other EU countries, they have always been considered as second-order national elections and Europe has traditionally not been the focus of electoral campaigns. Following the EU trend, this time European issues have entered the electoral campaign more than the past because Italy has been one of the worst hit country by the Eurozone crisis. During this electoral campaign, three parties clearly self-identified as more sceptic, if not towards the EU as a whole, at least towards its

common currency. The North League (6.2%) proposed getting out of the Euro and imposing rigid barriers to the circulation of goods and people within the EU, *Fratelli d'Italia* (Brothers of Italy – 3.7%) proposed an agreed dissolution of the Euro zone by all country members, whereas the M5S proposed to do a (unconstitutional) referendum on the Euro and to abolish the *fiscal compact*. FI did not go that far, claiming to be for the Euro but only under certain well-specified conditions. On the other hand, strongly pro-Euro views, but with critical stands towards specific aspects of the EU, did not solely come from the centre-left PD but also from a new born radical left party called *Lista Tsipras* (The Other Europe with Tsipras – 4%), which supports the Greek candidate Alexis Tsipras in the European Commission.

After so many eurosceptic parties gained high share of votes across Europe in these EP elections, the overwhelming PD's victory seems to be one of the few good news for Europe and particularly for its common currency. Only in [Germany](#) the governing pro-European party (CDU/CSU) have had a comparable victory to the Italian PD. The difference between the two countries, however, is perhaps that in the German case there has been a retrospective vote on the government action, while in the Italian case there has been a prospective vote, given the fact the incumbent has been in place only since a few months. But this is exactly why electoral results in Italy should not be misread as being solely or mainly representative of a vote for or against Europe. Although the PD is a strongly pro-EU and pro-Euro party, the electoral battle has been predominantly fought on national rather than European ground. Despite the increased focus on Europe, the central focus of the Italian campaign has clearly been framed by parties and newspapers alike as a vote to legitimize (or not) the new non-elected government led by the former mayor of Florence, Matteo Renzi. Renzi became Prime Minister at the end of February 2014, substituting Enrico Letta (PD) as a result of the PD's internal quarrels. However, he was appointed Prime Minister by the President of the Republic and thus had no electoral legitimization, because no election had been called. This was a particularly problematic issue since it was the third cabinet in a row to lack voters' electoral approval. If legitimization of the national government's mandate was the issue at stake, the massive endorsement of the PD clearly gives Renzi the electoral legitimization to go on with the reforms he announced for the Italian state, while at the same time reassuring Europe just before the Italian semester of Presidency of the EU.



A different perspective on the results

Renzi's cabinet is now legitimated. Yet, we should not lose sight of the wider picture. Looked at from a different perspective, the PD's victory is not as significant as it may seem. Electoral turnout is following a downward trend and abstention is increasing in the whole country. Although it dropped much less than expected, the [turnout for 2014](#) (57.22%) was about 7.8 percentage points lower compared to the [2009 EP elections](#) (65.05%). This means that 2 Italians out of 5 decided not to vote. Abstention is something that concerns all political parties, not only one party, but a 40% victory contextualized within a 59% turnout acquires a slightly different meaning. Moreover, Beppe Grillo's M5S might not have become the first party of the country, as its campaign slogan explicitly claimed it would ("vinciamo noi" – we'll win!), but an anti-establishment party with critical stands on the Euro that obtains 21% of the votes cannot really be considered a "loser". Especially as it was the first time that the M5S presented itself at European Elections, and as it is very favoured among youngsters. Looking at the electoral results of parties outside the traditional mainstream across Europe, only UKIP in the [UK](#) (26.77), Syriza in [Greece](#) (26.60%), the Front National in [France](#) (24.95%), and the Danish People's Party in [Denmark](#) (26.60%), although all very different, have done better than the M5S. Thus, although the eurosceptic M5S might have lost in Italy, it is still sending 17 [new MEPs](#) to Brussels.

Finally, driven by the Eurozone crisis, in the last few years euroscepticism has increased among the Italian public. Although disaffection towards national parties and institutions have increased even faster than critical attitudes

towards the EU, the main political force who have benefited from this disaffection is the M5S, which also happens to be a critical party towards Europe. This was first exemplified by the manner in which they were able to take advantage of the deteriorated political situation surrounding the national election of 2013. It is possible that these increasing disaffection trends might have been partially and temporarily stopped for the 2014 EP elections by a sort of “honey moon” effect with the new PD’s Prime Minister. Most of all due to his energetic (some say ‘populist’) style of leadership and his electoral campaign based on hope, optimism and a (to the point still symbolic) “new way” of doing politics. Great expectations from voters, however, could soon turn into great disappointments if Renzi’s cabinet is not able to enact fast the changes that many voters expect. Economic conditions are still very critical and unemployment keeps growing, most of all for younger generations. Recent political events, such as the discovery of a vast corruption web connected with the Expo 2015 in Milan, continue to give voters reason to increase their negative sentiments against politics, politicians and parties. Thus, the PD’s victory might best be read as a “last hope” vote for many voters to reform the country and decide the EU future within the national (i.e. current national party system) and European (i.e. within the single European currency) status quo. But their expectations of better economic perspectives and more efficient, corruption-free politics need to be satisfied soon, as otherwise the growing sense of disenchantment with national and EU institutions will continue to escalate with detrimental consequences for everybody.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Euro Crisis in the Press blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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