

REVIEW ARTICLE

A disaffected, right-wing, conflicted Italy: the general elections of 25 September 2022

Svolta a destra? Cosa ci dice il voto del 2022

by ITANES, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2023, 280 pp., €20 (paperback), ISBN 9788815386250

Il bipolarismo asimmetrico. L'Italia al voto dopo il decennio populista


edited by Salvatore Vassallo and Luca Verzichelli, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2023, 216 pp., €20 (paperback), ISBN 9788815383181

Italy at the Polls 2022: The Right Strikes Back

edited by Fabio Bordignon, Luigi Ceccarini and James L. Newell, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2023, 162 pp., £39.99 (hardback), ISBN 9783031292972

Un polo solo. Le elezioni politiche del 2022

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You can never really get tired of Italian politics. Over the last 30 years, we have seen many turning points, the most memorable of which was undoubtedly Silvio Berlusconi's unexpected 'descent into the field' in 1994. Nor have we been deprived of colourful characters, such as Matteo Renzi or Matteo Salvini, who, as their careers took off, ended up burning their wings. And after many unsuccessful attempts, imagination has finally come to power (as they used to say in the 1960s), although the 1968 generation has nothing to do with it.

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Indeed, all the credit goes to the Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S), whose activists were seen carrying their leader Beppe Grillo – sitting in a dinghy – through the streets of Bologna during a procession of sorts. The general elections of 25 September 2022 added an important chapter to recent Italian political history, which has sometimes taken on a dramatic tone but more often that of a comedy or even a farce. All in all, nothing out of the ordinary; in the society of the spectacle, this is how the Darwinian struggle for political survival can also be played out.

So what happened in the last general election? Where did party choices and voting behaviour take Italian politics? The simplest interpretation is that in 2022 a cold, unprecedented right-wing wind blew across the peninsula – a wind so fierce that it shattered the glass ceiling and propelled a woman into the prime minister's chair for the first time. Rhetoric aside, this was a historic moment, even if we cannot deny that a prime minister who comes from the neofascist Movimento Sociale Italiano is no less a novelty than the fact that she is a woman. The story behind the arrival in parliament of the most right-wing majority ever is very simple; following the confusion in the attribution of roles and responsibilities caused by the technocratic and broad coalition governments of the last decade, and after the twists and turns of the previous legislature, the winners and losers are now clearly defined. Just as one does in the aisles of a supermarket, in September 2022, Italian voters took a close look at the political 'products' to choose from, and Giorgia Meloni and her party were the most convincing. Put like this, the plot of the story is straightforward and understandable. It is not surprising, then, that this 'truth' – thanks in part to the generous contribution of popular TV shows – quickly took root in the collective imagination.

However, political and social scientists love to debunk simplistic and trivialised representations. Thus, continuing a well-established tradition, scholars of Italian elections have looked at the latest political elections through different and less distorting lenses. They have done so by using sophisticated analytical techniques and linking their reflections to the established theoretical findings of political sociology and political science. A year and a half after the 2022 elections (the time needed for research and publication), the main research groups working on Italian elections have published four studies: *Un polo solo* by the Italian Centre for Electoral Studies; *Svolta a destra?* by the association ITANES (Italian National Election Studies); *Il bipolarismo asimmetrico*, the collective effort of a group of researchers associated with the Istituto Cattaneo in Bologna; and *Italy at the Polls 2022*, published by researchers from the University of Urbino. In keeping with tradition, these are wide-ranging and well-argued studies made possible by the collaboration of various scholars (43 in the ITANES volume; 21 in the one edited by Chiamonte and De Sio; 16 in the book edited by Vassallo and Verzichelli; and 10 in the one edited by Bordignon, Ceccarini and Newell). The reflections developed in the four books are based on the analysis of official data and survey data, especially the pre- and post-election surveys conducted by the ITANES research group.

The relevance and complexity of a theme such as political elections mean that the many contributions contained in the four volumes cover a broad array of topics. Given the limited space available here, we can focus on only a few aspects, which we believe are the most relevant and interesting for an international audience wishing to gain an insight into the 2022 general elections.

Let us begin with the context in which the elections were held. The main novelty was that, for the first time in republican history, the parliamentary elections were held in September and not during the spring, as had previously usually happened. The formation of alliances, the fine-tuning of the electoral offer and the first part of the election campaign developed during the weeks when many Italians were at the seaside, in the mountains or abroad. In other words, it was a bizarre campaign that followed the unexpected

fall of the Draghi government and, consequently, the early end of the previous legislature. This sudden acceleration led to widespread disinterest among voters, as various pre-election polls had shown (Gasperoni 2023, 115). Ilvo Diamanti, a careful and longstanding observer of Italian politics, claimed that this feeling of hostility and detachment led Italians to cast an ‘against’ vote, or a non-vote, rather than a vote for someone or something (Diamanti 2023, ix). Since the governing coalition that collapsed in the summer of 2022 consisted of practically all the political forces except Giorgia Meloni’s Fratelli d’Italia (FdI), it is not hard to understand why this general dissatisfaction did not benefit these parties.

According to the polls, FdI had indeed already started its final sprint as early as mid-2019 (Verzichelli and Vassallo 2023, 10). In a climate of persistent antipolitics (Mete 2022), where all the other parties manage to govern as part of variable coalitions, it becomes easy and profitable for a political entrepreneur to make the theme of ‘coherence’ their main argument. In view of this, the victory of the right seems to have been predestined (Gasperoni 2023, 121) and soon became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Giorgia Meloni thus became the first female ‘candidate’ for the presidency of the council in the history of the republic. Quite a novelty indeed.

In addition to the lowering of the voting age for the Senate from 25 to 18 years, an anachronistic element unparalleled in Europe (Tuorto 2023, 26), the last major change in the September 2022 elections concerns the number of MPs to be elected. The 2020 constitutional reform – promoted by the M5S but eventually accepted by the Partito Democratico (PD), for the sake of political realism – reduced the number of deputies from 630 to 400 and the number of senators from 350 to 200. It is no surprise that this change had a huge impact on both electoral dynamics and the composition of the new parliamentary class. In practice, the elections were held with the same electoral system as in 2018 (the so-called Rosatellum), but with constituencies distributed differently over the territory and much larger on average: for the Chamber of Deputies, the average number of voters per constituency went from around 200,000 to some 313,000, while in the Senate the number grew from 370,000 to 623,000 (Chiaromonte, D’Alimonte and Paparo 2024, 260). As a result of the reduced availability of seats, political professionals have made a comeback; this is well documented by some of the essays in the books considered here (Ponzo and Verzichelli 2023; Marino, Tronconi and Verzichelli 2024). Among other things, they point out how parliamentary groups have become more homogeneous than in the past and that even the political class of populist parties has become institutionalised.

If these were the premises of the vote, no continuity with the elections of 2013 and 2018 was expected to emerge from the ballot box. And, indeed, there was no continuity. Beyond the resounding success of FdI, which rose the vote from 4.4 per cent in 2018 to 26 per cent in 2022, exceeding all expectations (Angelucci, Baldini and Soare 2024, 217), what characterised these elections was the dramatic decline in voter turnout. It is well known that Italy has always had very high turnout rates but that these have been declining slowly since the 1970s. A decline was therefore expected, but not to this extent. In fact, almost 16 million voters (36.1 per cent of the electorate) did not vote. What is also striking is the difference with 2018, when 72.9 per cent voted. Roberto D’Alimonte and Vincenzo Emanuele note that the sharp decline in participation of nine percentage points was one of the ten largest drops in the history of Western Europe since 1945 (D’Alimonte and Emanuele 2023, 28). The more precise and in-depth analyses contained in the books under consideration, which provide a detailed insight into abstentionism, show that the decline was more pronounced in the southern regions. Here, only 57.4 per cent of those eligible voted, against 69.2 per cent in the rest of the country. The opinion polls reveal that those who swelled the ranks of the abstainers were mainly those voters

who had voted for the M5S in 2018 and who were clearly dissatisfied with how the movement's leaders and its parliamentary class had behaved during the past legislature (Benetti and Vignati 2023, 62; Tronconi and Tuorto 2023, 46).

The general dissatisfaction of the electorate becomes very clear when we look at electoral flows. The most significant electoral movements between 2018 and 2022 concerned the M5S and the centre-right. While in the latter case it was simply an internal transfer of votes from the Lega to FdI, in the former the process was more articulated. The M5S's new positioning to the left led those who did not accept this shift to leave, but only a part of the old voters (about one-sixth) poured into the centre-right, while the majority (one-third) abstained (Angelucci, De Sio and Paparo 2024, 160). This confirms that the M5S electorate is the group that politicians try least to win over, as it is particularly reluctant to consider other voting options (Maggini and Vezzoni 2023, 76; Ceccarini, Newell and Turato 2023, 58).

More generally, looking at the full range of parties, the overall electoral volatility in the 2022 elections was very high, surpassed only by the critical elections of 1994 – when Forza Italia made its debut – and 2013, when the M5S entered the scene (D'Alimonte and Emanuele 2023, 30). The average volatility of the last three elections is 32.7 per cent (proportion of floating voters) and represents the record for this indicator in the history of Western Europe between 1945 and 2022 (Chiaromonte, Emanuele and Volpi 2024, 327). In absolute terms, FdI made the biggest gain, going from 1.4 million votes in the previous election to 7.3 million in 2022. Forza Italia halved its vote from 4.6 million to 2.3 million. The Lega did even worse, with 2.5 million voters compared to 5.7 million in 2018, making its 34 per cent in the 2019 European elections a pale and distant memory. In the centre-left line-up, the PD saw a slight decline (from 6.2 million to 5.4 million votes), while the M5S collapsed from its record 10.7 million votes in 2018 to 4.3 million – a much more modest figure, but still higher than the expectations generated in the months leading up to the elections.

All in all, the electoral movements were significant and – as in the past – occurred mainly within rather than between poles. The main difference concerned the M5S: while in 2013 and 2018 the movement's inputs drove electoral change, in 2022 the outflow of votes prevailed. Together with the ability of a united centre-right to win in a large number of constituencies (an ability that the centre-left completely lacked), this fact underpins the victory of the so-called *polo solo* (Angelucci, De Sio and Paparo 2024, 174).

In an election devoid of competition, electoral geography inevitably persisted. Some parties (especially FdI) have continued the trend of nationalisation while only the M5S has maintained – and even accentuated – a clear territorial connotation, leading it to become increasingly rooted in the South. However, what divides political areas is mainly the size of the municipality, with the centre-left strong in large cities and the centre-right dominant in isolated areas and small municipalities, where it is more successful in relaunching its message of the demarcation and defence of tradition (Cataldi, Emanuele and Maggini 2024, 206).

Beyond the obvious observation of FdI's success, what can we conclude from these electoral accounts? That the 'wall of Arcore' – to use the effective image introduced by Diamanti to emphasise the small number of voters who, between one election and the next, vote for parties belonging to different coalitions – is still standing. In other words, coalitions remain essentially impermeable and the exchange of votes, even in very substantial numbers, takes place essentially within those coalitions; this confirms the essentially bipolar structure of Italian voting preferences (Angelucci, De Sio and Paparo 2024, 173–174). FdI's success, then, can be explained not so much by Meloni's ability to seduce an indistinct electorate, fishing here and there in the political spectrum, but by her ability to snatch voters from Salvini, her ideologically like-minded ally, given that, in 2022, more than a third of FdI's electorate had voted for the Lega in 2018. To some

extent, Meloni's party acts as a centre of gravity for populist voters, if we also consider its attractiveness to the M5S electorate. At the same time, the social and territorial composition of the vote in favour of FdI reveals a heterogeneity that makes it a new party compared to its past: no longer concentrated in the South, now voted for by the upper middle classes (the most dynamic and integrated components, who previously looked to the Lega), and with different sensitivities, which is another consequence of the incorporation of other electoral constituencies (Angelucci, Baldini and Soare 2024, 237, 251).

In sum, the victory of the coalition led by Meloni cannot simply be attributed to a sharp rightward turn among Italian voters. In fact, the right-wing pole gained 43.8 per cent of the valid votes; this equates to 28 per cent of eligible voters if we consider the fact that only 63.9 per cent of the electorate voted. Yet, these percentages allow Meloni to obtain a solid parliamentary majority, with 237 out of 400 deputies and 115 out of 200 senators (Angelucci, De Sio and Paparo 2024, 145–148). This disproportion between votes and seats is easily explained; as the title of the book edited by Chiaramonte and De Sio says, a 'single pole' presented itself at the 2022 elections. The logic of the electoral law, according to which 37 per cent of the seats must be allocated using the first-past-the-post system, did the rest. The centre-left, the M5S and the so-called 'Terzo polo', despite having collected 49.3 per cent of the votes, paid the price of having run alone, winning only 22 out of 147 challenges in the first-past-the-post constituencies in the Chamber of Deputies and 12 out of 74 in the Senate (Verzichelli and Vassallo 2023, 10). This imbalance did not emerge in 2018 because the strength of the M5S in the South offset the success of the centre-right in the North. In 2022, expectations of a negative result for the M5S were not a sufficient reason to build an alliance with the centre-left, which would have limited the distorting effects of the electoral law. Instead, the rational choice of forming at least an advantageous coalition was set aside in favour of preserving the movement's identity, which led the M5S to remain separate and to lose votes (Biancalana 2023, 35).

To conclude, the 2022 elections tell the story of a challenge played out mainly within coalitions, as the outcome of the vote was already known in advance (which probably explains, at least in part, the particularly low turnout). Faced with a scenario that was not surprising in terms of numbers, the political debate remained at a very general level. Shared, transversal issues prevailed over divisive topics, and the political discourse was influenced more by the sensitivity of the news than by previous positioning, never able to capture the electorate in an election campaign that enjoyed little attention. We remain convinced that the battle will be fiercer in the future and that the vote will be more important if there is a real confrontation between two sides with an equal ability to form a coalition. A battle whose outcome is by no means obvious.

Translated by Andrea Hajek

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