

Challenger's delight: the success of M5S and Lega in the 2018 Italian general election

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Abstract

The results of the 2018 general election were shocking. Although the main competitors were the same as in 2013 (the centre-right coalition, the centre-left coalition, and the Movimento 5 Stelle), great uncertainty surrounded the electoral outcome because of the application of a new electoral system, and polls data indicating the competitiveness of the multiple political formations and the high number of undecided voters. For the first time in Western European history, a successful debutant managed not to lose votes in the subsequent election. In 2013 the Movimento 5 Stelle had actually been the most successful debutant in Western Europe since 1945, and it gained over 7 percentage points, coming close to one third of the votes. At the same time, the Lega (Nord) achieved the best result in its history, with 17.3% of the national votes. Thus, these two challenger parties combined received over 50% of votes, while the two mainstream parties, national wings of the major European Parliament party families, both hit their historical lows, together winning less than a third of the votes. The election resulted in a hung Parliament. The centre-right coalition was first, but with far from a majority of seats. The Movimento 5 Stelle was the most voted party, finishing second, but close to the centre-right. The centre-left was outdistanced. In this article we describe and discuss the 2018 electoral results and their strange, largely unexpected outcome. More specifically, we look at voter turnout and the results of the vote, both at the overall national level and with a geographical breakdown, comparing and contrasting them with Italian electoral history and the 2013 results in particular. Finally, we conclude by analysing survey data and vote shifts between 2013 and 2018 to assess the electoral dynamics behind the results.

1. Introduction

In this article we present the results of the 2018 Italian general election and interpret them by placing them in the context of Italian electoral history and analysing socio-demographic survey data and electoral shifts between 2013 and 2018. In short, we will show the unprecedented success of challenger parties, confirming the extraordinary intensity of the turbulence which has shaken the Italian party system in recent years, and provide some preliminary arguments about how this came to be.

A series of historical events occurred in the election, not just as regards Italian electoral history, but in a Western European comparative perspective. First, the two main challenger parties (Movimento 5 Stelle, M5S, and Lega Nord, LN – now running without the 'Nord' in its symbol) received the majority of the votes and, as a consequence, they eventually appointed the first cabinet in Western Europe to include no national wing of the European Parliament (EP) mainstream party families. Secondly, a successful debutant managed not to lose votes in the subsequent election. Actually, the 2013 M5S has been the single most successful debutant in the whole of Western Europe since the end of WW2, and not only did it manage not to lose votes, it gained over 7 percentage points, coming just short of one third of the votes. At the same time,

the LN reached the best result in its history, with 17.3% of the national votes while the two mainstream parties (Partito Democratico, PD, and Forza Italia, FI), national wings of the major EP party families, both hit their historical lows and received, combined, fewer votes than the M5S alone.

The election yielded a hung Parliament. Although the centre-right coalition was first, it had nowhere near a majority of seats in either House. The M5S was the most voted party, finishing second, close to the centre-right. The centre-left coalition was outdistanced. As anticipated above, the M5S and the LN would then form a coalition government, after a three-month gestation period.

The article is structured as follows. In the next section we discuss voter turnout and its variations compared to the 2013 election. We then move to the electoral results: we look at vote and seat distribution, for both the Chamber and the Senate. Finally, we present vote shifts in selected Italian cities and survey data on socio-demographics, to assess the electoral dynamics that generated such results. The conclusions follow.

2. The Italian political system from 2013 to 2018

Before entering into a discussion of the results, let us briefly introduce the political context in which they happened, by summarizing the main political developments characterizing Italian politics since the previous general elections. In 2013, the Italian party system suffered a massive earthquake, which wiped out the fragile transition towards a bipolar pattern of competition (D'Alimonte 2013). The most successful debutant party in post-WW2 Western Europe emerged (M5S), and no pre-electoral coalition secured a majority of seats in either Parliament branch, despite the majority bonuses then granted by the electoral law (Pasquino 2007; Renwick, Hanretty and Hine 2009).

Consequences were just as unprecedented. First, there was the first-ever re-election of a President of the Republic, after Parliament had wrapped itself in a dangerous gridlock. The first post-electoral grand coalition cabinet of the history of the Republic was then formed. The whole legislature was made up of cabinets supported by the PD and (parts of) Berlusconi's PDL (Popolo della Libertà), after the main part of the party left the government following Berlusconi's request in September 2013, to recreate FI.

Electoral results during the XVII legislature followed the typical U-shaped pattern for the PD, parallel to the popularity trend of centre-left-led cabinets. This was extremely evident in the spring of 2014, when the PD achieved historic success in the EP election (Segatti, Poletti and Vezzoni 2015). Then it gradually declined, and electoral outcomes for the centre-left were more and more disappointing in regional and municipal elections up to the crucial 2016 constitutional referendum (Ceccarini and Bordignon 2017). Although their popularity rating was a little better during the Gentiloni cabinet, in the municipal elections held in the spring of 2017, those immediately preceding the 2018 general election, results for the centre-left did not improve, and in fact the centre-right re-established itself as a contender for the national government, especially by re-establishing its unity. It is worth mentioning that the LN, under the leadership of the new leader Salvini, abandoned the pro-north platform to become a classic nationalist radical right-wing party (Tarchi 2018), which proved quite successful in electoral terms, and was important for the re-establishment of the centre-right as a potential winner.

The main achievements of the legislature were the constitutional reform, rejected by Italian voters in December 2016, and the electoral reform, ruled unconstitutional in January 2017. In order to avoid holding the elections under two different systems (none of which was designed by Parliament) in the two branches, a new electoral law was approved in November 2017, featuring a mix of roughly one third of FPTP (first-past-the-post) SMDs (single-member districts) and two thirds of PR (proportional representation) MMDs (multi-member districts) for both the Chamber and the Senate (Chiaramonte and D'Alimonte in this journal).

As a consequence of the new electoral system, both centre-left and centre-right pre-electoral coalitions were formed to support common candidates in SMDs, while the M5S ran on its own. However, while the centre-right presented a unified front, the centre-left failed to do so. The PD and its various left-wing fractions that split during the XVII legislature ran separately. The latter federated with other left parties in a list called *Liberi e Uguali* (LeU) running on its own, while the PD formed a coalition with three minor centrist parties.

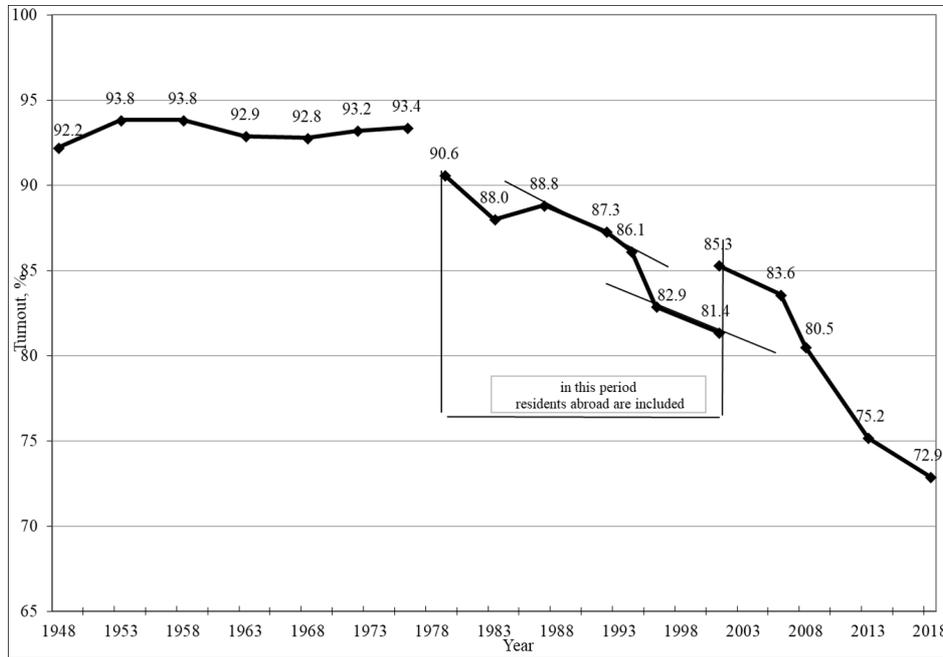
3. Voter turnout

We begin our enquiry by looking at voter turnout. Overall, at the national level, it was 72.9%, the lowest in the history of the Italian Republic, 2.3% down compared to 2013 (Figure 1). However, if we consider the historical turnout trend, the observed drop is absolutely in line with the physiological drop rate of a little less than half a point per year, due to the effect of generational replacement – older cohorts voting more than new ones replacing them in the electorate. Thus, while the 2013 election saw a particularly substantial fall (-5.3% compared to 2008), the 2018 election was, in terms of turnout, back to normal after the shock of 2013 (Chiaramonte and De Sio 2014). We will see shortly that results tell a different story.

Turnout geography is in line with Italian electoral history (Figure 2, left map). A higher turnout is concentrated in the central and northern parts of the country. In particular, all 18 provinces in the first sextile are in the zones in the past characterized by either red or white subcultures (Galli 1968; Diamanti 2009). Turnout remains relatively quite high in the rest of the north, while it decreases gradually moving south, to reach its minimum in the extreme periphery of the peninsula and the island regions. All 16 provinces with the lowest turnout are in Calabria, Sicily, or Sardinia.

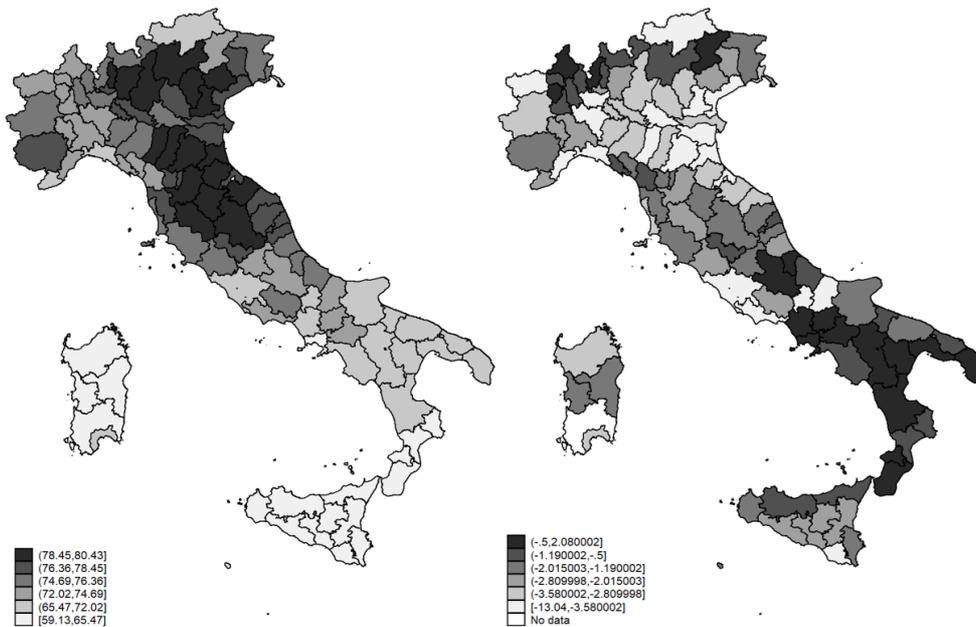
If we turn to turnout variations from 2013 (Figure 2, right-hand map), however, we notice that the 2.3-point drop recorded at the national level was not uniform. Actually, the pattern appears quite symmetrical to the map with turnout level on its left. Smaller drops (and some actual turnout increases) are concentrated in the south, although with the visible exception of Rome. Turnout drops are more visible but still below average up to the Apennines. Further north, we find the areas where turnout shrank most: this was particularly concentrated throughout Emilia-Romagna, Lombardy, Veneto, and Liguria.

Figure 1. Voter turnout in legislative elections for the Chamber of Deputies, 1948–2018



Percentages of voters going to the polls out of overall registered voters. Data are relative to the whole set of registered voters between 1979 and 2001, to only registered voters living in Italy until 1976 and since 2001. For 2001, then, we report both percentages: 85.3 is relative to Italian residents only, 81.4 is relative to the whole set of registered voters (thus both those living in Italy and abroad). This is done to show the negative effect on turnout which the inclusion of the latter constituency had in the previous period.

Figure 2. Voter turnout in the 2018 Italian general election (left map), and variations from 2013 (right map), province-level sextiles



Source: Ministry of the Interior. The South Sardinia province was established in 2016; this is why the Ministry does not provide the 2013 turnout and the province appears blank (missing data) on the right-hand map.

As a consequence, although the turnout rate in the south has remained lower than in the rest of the country, the gap closed somewhat in 2018. In the south turnout dropped 1.6%, from 69.8% to 68.2% (with a variation rate of -2.4%), while elsewhere the drop was 2.8% (-3.5%). As a consequence, the participation gap between south and centre-north moved from 9.8% in 2013 to 8.6% in 2018.

This evidence represents the renewal of a trend observed throughout the whole of the Second Republic, but also a reverse from 2013, when, on the contrary, the abovementioned national 5.3-point drop compared to 2008 was smaller than that in the centre-north and larger in the south. Such gap enlarging was then attributed to the reduction of resources available for patronage, and the disappearance of the 'southern issue' from the national political agenda (Tuorto 2014).

It is reasonable to believe, in particular in light of the electoral results and our analyses of electoral shifts (see below), that in 2018 the M5S had a higher mobilizing appeal for southern voters. This might be due to the presence of Di Maio as political leader, the first southern candidate for leading the cabinet and with a chance of actually doing so, since when, in 1994, elections came close to a direct appointment of the Prime Minister. A second factor which might account for the higher mobilizing role of the M5S in the south is its signature campaign issue – the basic income, which is particularly appealing where unemployment is higher.

All this considered, it appears quite difficult to interpret the gap closing observed in 2018, and consequently predict whether it will continue in the future (thus yielding a further homogenization of the country in terms of participation) or was rather driven by these specific features of this election.

4. The electoral results

The centre-right coalition won a plurality of the votes, with 37% (Table 1),¹ gaining almost 8% (Table 3), and increasing its vote total by over 2 million compared to the 2013 election. The LN achieved the historic overtaking of FI as the most-voted party of the coalition (17.3% and 13.9%, respectively). Fratelli d'Italia (FDI) received 4.4%, thus overcoming the 3% national threshold to gain PR seats, which the 'fourth leg' of the coalition (Noi con l'Italia-Unione di Centro, NCI-UDC) failed to do. The latter was chosen by 1.3% of voters, enough for its votes to be useful to coalitional parties.²

Compared to 2013, the LN gained over 13%, multiplying its votes fourfold. FDI more than doubled its results, both percentagewise and in vote number. By contrast, Berlusconi's party, down by over 7%, lost over a third of its votes. Although since 2013 the party had suffered the split of the Alfano-led wing, given the low results of both parties to emerge after it – NCI and Civica Popolare (CP) who together took less than 2% of the votes – and the significant overall increase of the coalition so far led by Berlusconi, FI's electoral retreat is definitely something worth stressing.

The M5S was the largest party, with 32.7% of the votes, gaining 2 million votes, and advancing 7%. This unprecedented trend for a debutant party indicates both the

¹ In Italy, thus including votes in the Aosta Valley but not those cast in the Italian-Abroad constituency.

² The electoral law states that parties in coalitions receiving between 1% and 3% of the votes do not win any PR seats, but their votes are summed to coalitional partners above the threshold to determine coalitional overall results, which are used in the PR seat allocation.

intensity of the systemic turbulence the Italian political system is undergoing, and the ability of the M5S to strategically adapt to this turbulent environment.

The centre-left coalition scored historically disappointing results. The coalition as a whole received 22.9% of the votes, losing 2.5 million votes (a quarter of the total), and roughly 7%. The PD maintained the position of second-most-voted party, but it stopped at 18.7%. No other party in the coalition managed to overcome the 3% threshold.³ Furthermore, two minor centre-left parties (CP and Insieme) failed to meet the 1% threshold. Thus, their votes were not useful at all for seat allocation. Conversely, votes received by +Europa (between 1 and 3% – 2.6% to be exact) were counted for the purposes of PR seat allocation and they were considered exactly as if they were PD votes.⁴

The other party that won PR seats was LEU. It received 3.4% of national votes, thus significantly improving the result achieved in 2013 by the list then running to the left of the centre-left coalition, namely *Rivoluzione Civile*. However, it failed to meet pre-electoral expectations, and the actual result was considered quite disappointing.⁵ Minor parties outside coalitions received 4.1% of the votes,⁶ with two parties on opposite ends of the ideological spectrum getting the most. The extreme left *Potere Al Popolo* was voted by 1.1% of voters; while 'third-millennium fascist' *CasaPound Italia* was just a little short of 1%.

Table 1 also reports, on the right, the results for the Senate elections. Only citizens who are at least 25 years old can vote for the Senate. As a consequence of the different voting age requirements, almost 4 million citizens who vote for the Chamber are not eligible to vote for the Senate: 8% of the total Chamber voters. Overall, Senate results are extraordinarily similar to those observed in the Chamber. The centre-right moves from 37% to 37.5%, with both FI and LN slightly larger, while the M5S loses half a point in the Senate – from 32.7% to 32.2%. Virtually no difference between the two Houses emerges for the centre-left as a coalition, although the PD is slightly larger among Senate voters.

This generalized homogeneity appears quite surprising if we consider that Italian electoral history has been characterized, especially in recent years, by visible discrepancies between the results for the two Houses. For instance, in 2013 the M5S was about 2 pp. smaller in the Senate than in the Chamber, which clearly indicated its better electoral performance among younger voters (De Sio and Cataldi 2014). The great similarity between Chamber and Senate results in 2018, on the contrary, indicates that this time younger voters have voted very similarly to the rest of the electorate. Moreover, this homogeneity, which is also replicated at the district level, might be considered an indication that the role of candidates in SMDs was very limited in determining electoral choices.

³ The SVP, although not meeting the 3% threshold, was able to participate in PR allocation thanks to a clause in the electoral law guaranteeing parties representing linguistic minorities. As a consequence, it won two PR seats in the Trentino-Alto Adige/South Tyrol region in the Chamber and one in the Senate.

⁴ See footnote 2.

⁵ This was stated by Grasso himself. See <http://www.ilgiornale.it/news/politica/grasso-delusi-risultato-leu-va-avanti-1501320.html>.

⁶ Thus, the overall quota of valid votes not being used in the PR seat distribution amounts to just over 5%. This means a 5% over-representation for parties above the threshold.

Table 1. Results of 2018 general election (Chamber of Deputies and Senate)

Lists and coalitions	Chamber of Deputies						Senate					
	Votes		Seats				Votes		Seats			
	No.	%	PR	FPTP	Abroad	Total	No.	%	PR	FPTP	Abroad	Total
Lega Nord (LN)	5,705,925	17.3	73	50	2	125	5,334,049	17.6	37	21	-	58
Forza Italia (FI)	4,586,672	13.9	59	43	1	103	4,358,101	14.4	33	22	2	57
Fratelli d'Italia (FDI)	1,440,107	4.4	19	13	-	32	1,286,887	4.3	7	11	-	18
Noi con l'Italia-Unione di Centro (NCI-UDC)	431,042	1.3	0	5	0	5	362,131	1.2	0	4	0	4
FI-Fdi-Mov.Nuova Valle D'Aosta ^a	5,533	0.0	-	0	-	0	5,223	0.0	-	0	-	0
Total Centre-Right	12,169,279	37.0	151	111	3	265	11,346,391	37.5	77	58	2	137
Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S)	10,748,372	32.7	133	93	1	227	9,747,701	32.2	68	44	0	112
Partito Democratico (PD)	6,153,081	18.7	86	21	5	112	5,788,103	19.1	43	8	2	53
+Europa	845,406	2.6	0	2	1	3	716,136	2.4	0	1	0	1
Insieme	191,489	0.6	0	1	-	1	163,903	0.5	0	1	-	1
Civica Popolare (CP)	180,539	0.5	0	2	0	2	152,505	0.5	0	1	0	1
SVP-PATT	134,613	0.4	2	2	-	4	128,336	0.4	1	2	-	3
PD-UV-UVP-EPAV ^b	14,429	0.0	-	0	-	0	15,958	0.1	-	1	-	1
Total Centre-Left	7,519,557	22.9	88	28	6	122	6,964,941	23.0	44	14	2	60
Liberi e Uguali (LEU)	1,114,298	3.4	14	0	0	14	990,715	3.3	4	0	0	4
Others	1,354,919	4.1	0	0	2	2	1,226,064	4.0	0	0	2	2
TOTAL	32,906,425	100	386	232	12	630	30,275,812	100	193	116	6	315

Source: Supreme Court for results in the domestic arena (except Aosta Valley), Ministry of the Interior for results in Aosta Valley and seats abroad.

^a Electoral coalition among FI, FDI and a local movement in Aosta Valley.

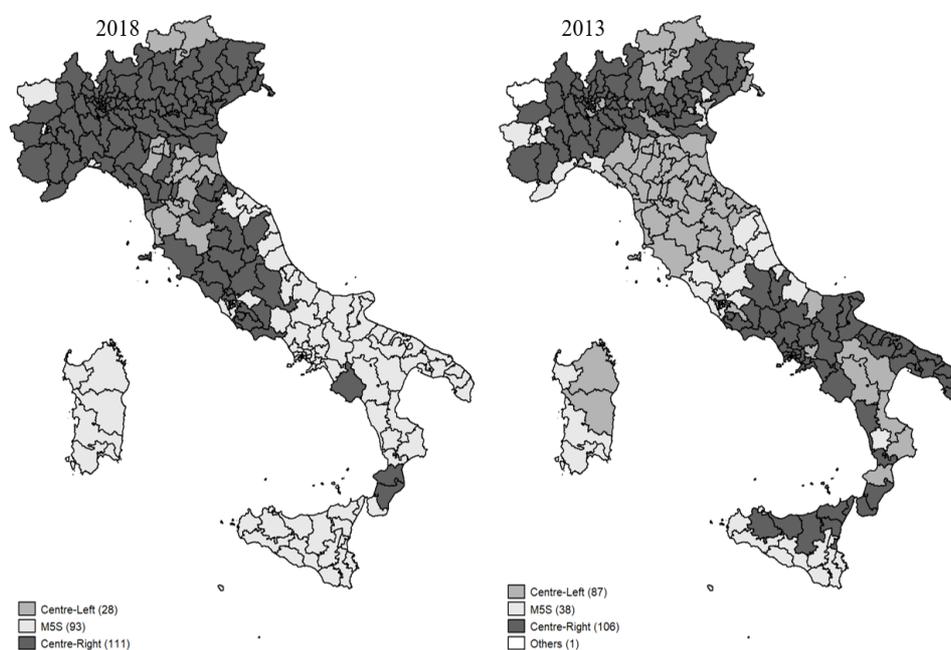
^b Electoral coalition among PD and ethno-regionalist parties in Aosta Valley.

In the SMD-FPTP arena (Figure 3), again, the centre-right coalition won, with the M5S second, and the centre-left third, a long way behind. Out of 232 Chamber SMDs, centre-right candidates won 111 times (48%), while in the Senate they won exactly 50% of the SMDs. Looking at the internal distribution, LN candidates won 50 Chamber SMDs, and FI candidates 44. By contrast, in the Senate, FI had more winning candidates in SMDs than LN (22 v. 21). The centre-right won virtually all SMDs in the north and expanded in the Red Zone, while they had very few victories in the south.⁷

M5S candidates won 40% of the Chamber SMDs (93), and 38% of Senate districts (44). This result is particularly surprising as it was widely expected that the new electoral system would damage their performance in the plurality arena, given the party's choice not to form a coalition. On the contrary, the M5S won a higher fraction of FPTP seats compared to PR seats – 34% and 35% in the two Parliament branches. This happened thanks to the geographical concentration of M5S votes in the south, where it got more than 40% of the votes (Tab. 3), thus recording a landslide victory.

The centre-left performed poorly in the SMDs. Overall, its candidates won 12% in both Houses: 28 in the Chamber, 14 in the Senate. Their victories are concentrated in the core of the Red Zone, and in the central SMDs of metropolitan areas, especially in the north with not a single victory in either House south of Rome.

Figure 3. Map of winners in Chamber SMDs in 2018 (left), and 2013 most-voted coalition in the territories forming 2018 SMDs (right)



Overall, in the south (the largest of the three zones), centre-left candidates were either first or second in only five Chamber SMDs out of a total of 101 (Table 2). Moreover, the centre-left lost its advantage in the Red Zone: in both Houses centre-right candidates

⁷ The Red Zone is composed of Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany, Marches, and Umbria. The north is made up of the 7 regions further north than this 'Red Belt', while the south is made of the 9 regions south of it.

won a plurality of the SMDs, three more than the once hegemonic coalition. Furthermore, considering the M5S hegemony in the south (over 80% of the SMDs in both Houses, with the centre-right a distant second – 15% on average), and the even stronger centre-right dominion in the north (over 85% of SMDs, with M5S and centre-left alternating as further distant second – 20% on average), the Red Zone is now the most competitive part of the country. No coalition won a majority of SMDs in either House, all three contenders have significant portions of both first and second places, and on average victory margins are much smaller (7%).

Table 2. Competition patterns in SMDs

	First- and second-most-voted coalitions/parties in SMDs	Geo-political area			Italy
		North	Red Zone	South	
Chamber of Deputies	M5S first, Centre-right second	3	5	83	91
	Centre-right first, M5S second	47	9	13	69
	Centre-right first, Centre-left second	32	10	0	42
	Centre-left first, Centre-right second	8	14	4	26
	Centre-left first, M5S second	0	2	0	2
	M5S first, Centre-left second	1	0	1	2
	Total	91	40	101	232
Senate	M5S first, Centre-right second	1	3	40	44
	Centre-right first, M5S second	22	4	8	34
	Centre-right first, Centre-left second	18	6	0	24
	Centre-left first, Centre-right second	5	7	1	13
	Centre-left first, M5S second	1	0	0	1
	Total	47	20	49	116

The geographical analysis of SMD competition patterns leads us to the more general discussion of the electoral results in geographical terms (Table 3). Compared to 2013, the M5S is basically stable in the centre-north, while it grows substantially in the south, gaining 16%, from 27.3% to 42.3%. Conversely, the centre-right is basically stable in the south, and it increases by over 10% in the rest of the country. This is mostly due to the LN. FI went down quite evenly in the different areas (7/8%), maintaining its 2013 geography, characterized by relative strength in the south. The LN gained just enough to keep the coalition stable in the south, and 10 points more than that in the rest of the country. Salvini's party is now the largest party in the north (with 27.3%), quite strong in the Red Zone (18.7%, which, curiously, is exactly the national result for the PD), and definitely relevant in the south as well (8%). These results indicate the (remarkable though partial) success of Salvini's strategy to transform the LN from an ethno-regionalist party of the north into a national radical right-wing party.

The PD and its coalition have proven to be more resilient in the north, where they lost about 5%, compared to the Red Zone and the south where their losses have been twice as high. In Table 3 we can observe the end of the left hegemony in Red Zone. We have seen above that centre-right candidates won a plurality of SMDs there. Now we can see that, in terms of votes received, the PD comes behind the M5S in both Houses for most-voted party, and the centre-left coalition is behind the centre-right as well.

Table 3. Electoral results in 2018, 2013 for major coalitions and parties by geopolitical area

	Party/ Coalition	Geopolitical area									Italy		
		North			Red Zone			South			2018 %	2013 %	Δ %
		2018 %	2013 %	Δ %	2018 %	2013 %	Δ %	2018 %	2013 %	Δ %			
Chamber of Deputies	LN	27.3	9.4	17.9	18.7	1.5	17.2	8.0	0.2	7.8	17.3	4.1	13.3
	FI (PDL)	12.7	19.4	-6.7	10.2	17.1	-6.9	17.5	25.6	-8.1	13.9	21.6	-7.6
	Centre-right	44.1	31.2	12.9	33.0	21.1	11.9	31.8	30.8	1.0	37.0	29.2	7.8
	M5S	23.5	23.7	-0.2	27.7	25.7	2.0	43.4	27.3	16.1	32.7	25.6	7.1
	PD	19.5	24.3	-4.8	26.7	35.4	-8.7	14.2	22.0	-7.8	18.7	25.4	-6.7
	Centre-left	25.4	28.1	-2.7	30.6	38.9	-8.3	17.6	26.8	-9.2	22.9	29.6	-6.7
Senate	LN	27.3	9.9	17.4	18.8	1.6	17.2	8.5	0.2	8.3	17.6	4.3	13.3
	FI (PDL)	13.0	19.8	-6.8	10.4	17.7	-7.3	18.3	26.4	-8.1	14.3	22.1	-7.8
	Centre-right	45.2	32.9	12.3	33.9	22.1	11.8	33.2	33.3	-0.1	37.5	31.0	6.5
	M5S	23.9	21.8	2.1	27.7	24.2	3.5	42.8	25.2	17.6	32.2	23.6	8.6
	PD	19.8	26.1	-6.3	27.3	37.6	-10.3	14.8	23.7	-8.9	19.1	27.3	-8.2
	Centre-left	25.2	29.6	-4.4	31.3	40.6	-9.3	18.1	28.9	-10.8	23.0	31.4	-8.4

The combination of the seat distribution for the two arenas (SMD-FPTP and MMD-PR) generated a hung Parliament in both the Chamber and the Senate. In both arenas, the centre-right turned out to win a plurality of seats, with a little over 40% of the total. The M5S won 36%, and the centre-left a little less than 20%.

5. Beyond the results: vote shifts and socio-demographics

In this final section we move beyond the electoral results, to investigate the dynamics generating them. Looking merely at the electoral results in 2018 and 2013, the minimum portion of voters who have changed their vote is slightly larger than a quarter, which is quite high even for the recent turbulent times in Italy (Chiaramonte et al. forthcoming). However, this does not give us the whole picture of vote transitions. In order to have a more complete understanding of such phenomena, we have estimated the transition matrices in 11 large Italian cities using the Goodman (1953) model.⁸ In short, our

⁸ The methodological challenge to estimate these transition matrices lies in the ecological fallacy – the error of trying to infer individual-level behaviour from population-level data (Robinson 1950). The classic method to overcome this fallacy was proposed by Goodman (1953, 1959). Goodman's model formalizes the logic of ecological inference in a simple regression model where the relationship to be studied is a linear one. More recently, alternative techniques have been developed to overcome the ecological fallacy issue when studying non-linear relationships as well. In this article, we employ the classic Goodman model in order to maintain comparability of our findings with the Italian vote shift

estimates show that overall volatility is actually quite a bit larger than the one measured by the Pedersen (1979) index: close to 33%.

In addition to providing a more complete picture of volatility, the analysis of the electoral shifts between the 2013 and the 2018 Italian general election allows us to answer several crucial research questions, such as: what are the most relevant paths for the third of voters who changed their vote? Or, where do new voters of the M5S and the LN come from?

In this regard, from our analyses two main phenomena emerge. There were relevant transitions of voters from the 2013 centre-left to the 2018 M5S, while in turn the 2013 M5S lost relevant portions of its 2013 voters to the 2018 LN.

With reference to the ability of the M5S to increase votes from the 2013 centre-left coalition, we can see that between 20% and 30% come from voters who preferred the centre-left in 2013, especially in the central and northern cities, while the further south you go, fewer left voters in 2013 chose the M5S in 2018 (Tab. 4). In the north between 15% and 20% of 2013 centre-left voters preferred the M5S in 2018 (Tab. 5). Conversely, in the south, the M5S was able to remobilize voters who did not participate in the 2013 elections, and to attract some votes also from the centre-right.

Turning to the LN, our analyses indicate that between 40% and 50% of its votes come from 2013 centre-right voters. In the central and northern cases between 30% and 40% of LN votes come from voters who chose the M5S in 2013: there, between 18% and 30% of 2013 M5S voters chose the LN in 2018. In the south this source is much less relevant, though always significant: between 15% and 20% of the (though smaller) southern LN electorate comes from 2013 M5S voters. In the north-west there are also significant shifts from 2013 centre-left voters to the LN, and these are even greater in Emilia-Romagna.

PD votes show quite a stable pattern: around 70% voted for parties in the coalition led by Bersani in 2013, 20% for Monti, a little less than 10% for Berlusconi. The plurality of Monti's voters voted for the PD almost everywhere, sometimes even a majority (Messina), or more than 2013 centre-left voters themselves (Naples). Furthermore,

literature (Micheli 1976; Schadee and Corbetta 1984; Corbetta, Parisi and Schadee 1988; Mannheim 1993, De Sio and Paparo 2014). It is important to stress that among the assumptions for the model to generate reliable estimates, coefficients have to be constant among the units. This means that, in all the different polling stations, transition rates are the same (Corbetta and Parisi 1990). This is realistic only in very homogenous areas, such as within a single municipality. This is why the analyses are conducted city by city. Furthermore, with specific reference to the 2018 Italian general election, we should also consider the electoral supply varied by SMD. As a consequence, we performed separate analyses in each of the SMDs of the Chamber in Naples, Turin, and Genoa, then re-aggregated into the city the estimates reported here. Cities were selected according to availability of data at the polling station level, and in order to provide a balanced mix of cities in the different geographical parts of the country. Furthermore, we only present those analyses for which the VR values were overall acceptable. Row and column-variables were selected according to their electoral size. Estimates for too small groups are not reliable, so we unified the coalitions in 2013, as each of them only had one large party. In 2018, however, the four selected parties all had sufficient electoral size, and we could estimate separate transition towards each of them, which is particularly interesting. Following Schadee and Corbetta (1984), in each city we eliminated electoral polls with fewer than 100 voters (in the 2013 or the 2018 general election), and those whose variation rate in the number of registered voters was above 15% (both increasing and decreasing). Average VR values are 12.6, 14.4, and 13.3 in Naples, Turin, and Genoa respectively. Municipal territory for each of the remaining cities is part of a single SMD, so a single matrix was estimated. Values of the VR index are 12.9 in Cagliari, 15.3 in Venice, 14.1 in Messina, 15.3 in Prato, 8.8 in Reggio Calabria, 17.6 in Padua, 16.5 in Rimini, 16.4 in Reggio Emilia.

coefficients from 2013 centre-right to 2018 centre-left are, with few exceptions, significant. This indicates that the strategy aimed at gaining moderate votes in the centre of the ideological spectrum has somewhat succeeded. However, in a system which has lost its bipolar configuration, this is definitely not a sufficient condition to win elections. And our data, showing the much larger losses to the M5S all over the country, and those to the LN in the historical left strongholds of the Red Belt and northern industrial cities, contain the answer to why this was not the case.

FI received around 70% of its votes from past centre-right voters. Our analyses also show FI's ability to remobilize voters who did not turn out in 2013, and to attract some voters from the 2013 centrist coalition – although not in the south, and generally less so than the PD.

Table 4. Electoral shifts between 2013 and 2018 general elections for the Chamber of Deputies in selected Italian cities (sources)

City	Party	Results, % on voters	2013 Electorates				
			Centre-Left	Centre	Centre-Right	M5S	Non-voters
Turin	PD	17.9%	67%	23%	9%	0%	0%
	FI	8.3%	2%	15%	66%	1%	13%
	LN	11.5%	9%	1%	47%	39%	4%
	M5S	17.2%	22%	0%	2%	69%	7%
Genoa	PD	14.6%	72%	20%	7%	1%	0%
	FI	7.1%	2%	14%	62%	1%	15%
	LN	11.4%	11%	5%	39%	38%	7%
	M5S	21.8%	20%	0%	0%	77%	3%
Venice	PD	15.0%	71%	20%	5%	0%	0%
	FI	6.0%	0%	29%	62%	0%	0%
	LN	15.8%	0%	0%	53%	37%	6%
	M5S	20.2%	26%	0%	3%	71%	0%
Padua	PD	17.6%	68%	28%	3%	0%	0%
	FI	7.4%	0%	17%	63%	0%	2%
	LN	16.5%	0%	0%	68%	32%	0%
	M5S	15.7%	30%	0%	4%	66%	0%
Reggio Emilia	PD	21.3%	84%	11%	1%	3%	0%
	FI	6.5%	0%	5%	66%	7%	13%
	LN	10.6%	28%	4%	36%	30%	0%
	M5S	20.9%	28%	0%	9%	60%	4%
Rimini	PD	16.6%	69%	18%	13%	0%	0%
	FI	8.4%	7%	8%	72%	0%	13%
	LN	13.5%	22%	0%	37%	36%	5%
	M5S	23.0%	14%	0%	4%	80%	2%
Prato	PD	22.0%	83%	8%	5%	3%	0%
	FI	8.2%	0%	12%	77%	0%	6%
	LN	12.5%	5%	0%	53%	38%	5%
	M5S	18.1%	32%	0%	0%	51%	15%

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Cagliari	PD	11.0%	70%	11%	19%	0%	0%
	FI	9.5%	0%	0%	84%	1%	10%
	LN	6.9%	0%	4%	47%	20%	18%
	M5S	22.3%	21%	0%	0%	63%	16%
Naples	PD	8.4%	68%	22%	7%	1%	0%
	FI	9.4%	1%	13%	77%	4%	4%
	LN	1.5%	33%	16%	30%	15%	0%
	M5S	31.2%	13%	0%	11%	39%	29%
Reggio Calabria	PD	7.7%	78%	11%	7%	4%	0%
	FI	10.9%	0%	0%	61%	0%	28%
	LN	3.8%	2%	12%	48%	21%	17%
	M5S	23.3%	0%	0%	2%	60%	31%
Messina	PD	9.6%	45%	41%	4%	0%	0%
	FI	12.1%	0%	0%	70%	1%	26%
	LN	3.1%	26%	0%	40%	14%	0%
	M5S	27.4%	0%	0%	4%	55%	42%

Percentages indicate the portion of row-party votes in 2018 coming from the column 2013 coalition/party electorate.

Table 5. Electoral shifts between 2013 and 2018 general elections for the Chamber of Deputies in selected Italian cities, (destinations)

City	Party	2013 Electorates				
		Centre-Left	Centre	Centre-Right	M5S	Non-voters
Turin	PD	47%	45%	9%	0%	0%
	FI	1%	13%	32%	0%	4%
	LN	4%	1%	32%	23%	2%
	M5S	15%	0%	2%	61%	5%
Genoa	PD	41%	39%	8%	1%	0%
	FI	0%	14%	32%	0%	4%
	LN	5%	7%	33%	18%	3%
	M5S	17%	0%	0%	72%	2%
Venice	PD	41%	36%	4%	0%	0%
	FI	0%	20%	22%	0%	0%
	LN	0%	0%	50%	28%	4%
	M5S	20%	0%	4%	68%	0%
Padua	PD	46%	43%	2%	0%	0%
	FI	0%	11%	23%	0%	1%
	LN	0%	0%	56%	30%	0%
	M5S	18%	0%	3%	59%	0%
Reggio Emilia	PD	49%	29%	2%	3%	0%
	FI	0%	4%	31%	3%	5%
	LN	8%	5%	27%	18%	0%
	M5S	15%	0%	12%	68%	4%

Rimini	PD	45%	40%	12%	0%	0%
	FI	2%	9%	33%	0%	5%
	LN	12%	0%	26%	21%	3%
	M5S	13%	0%	4%	79%	2%
Prato	PD	59%	27%	6%	4%	0%
	FI	0%	14%	38%	0%	2%
	LN	2%	0%	39%	26%	3%
	M5S	18%	0%	0%	51%	12%
Cagliari	PD	35%	17%	12%	0%	0%
	FI	0%	0%	45%	0%	3%
	LN	0%	4%	18%	7%	4%
	M5S	21%	0%	0%	74%	12%
Naples	PD	33%	35%	3%	1%	0%
	FI	0%	23%	41%	2%	1%
	LN	3%	5%	3%	2%	0%
	M5S	22%	3%	20%	86%	22%
Reggio Calabria	PD	38%	18%	3%	2%	0%
	FI	0%	0%	38%	0%	7%
	LN	1%	9%	10%	5%	2%
	M5S	0%	0%	2%	82%	18%
Messina	PD	27%	64%	2%	0%	0%
	FI	0%	0%	46%	1%	8%
	LN	5%	0%	7%	3%	0%
	M5S	0%	0%	6%	90%	28%

Percentages indicate the portion of column 2013 coalition/party electorate voting for row-party in 2018.

To try to understand the social dynamics behind the observed electoral transitions, we report survey data concerning vote choice by socio-demographic characteristics (Tab. 6), which can tell us which social groups changed their vote. In general, the M5S has become more socially cross-cutting, by growing more in those groups where it was weaker in 2013. For instance, it is still below average among older, or low-education, or retired, or highly-religious voters, but much less than it was in 2013, having gained more than 10% in each of these groups. These are the groups providing the M5S with most of its new votes, along with women. Thus, the M5S now shows very stable results, between 30% and 37% across all groups, with only public-sector employees above 40%, and older voters and retired below 30%. The gap between M5S's results among public- and private-sector employees is the only one opening up in 2018, as in 2013 the two groups showed no difference in their favour towards the M5S. Students are the only group voting in fewer numbers in 2018 for the M5S than in 2013 (-5%), while also among college graduates no increase is found. The LN has grown at least 9% among each group. Particularly high increases are visible for blue-collar and self-employed workers (roughly 20%), so that it is now larger than FI among the latter, and twice as large as the PD among the former. The LN has also increased substantially among voters holding a lower-secondary diploma, and those between 50 and 64 years old. For the latter, the

strong campaign emphasis by the LN on the abolition of the pension reform gradually increasing pension age according to life expectancy might provide an explanation.

The PD has lost everywhere, but particularly so among its traditional sociodemographic strongholds, both those already unsteady in recent elections (such as blue collars or unemployed), and those still standing in 2013 (such as retired, or older, or public-sector, or less religious voters). On the contrary it was basically stable among managers, entrepreneurs, and lost little among the self-employed and highly religious voters. As a consequence, the PD is now the most-voted party only among the oldest class of voters, and those who are retired; it no longer shows any increase among public-sector employees compared to private-sector ones, and it is significantly stronger among the most religious voters. This data seems to indicate that the adversarial stance adopted by Renzi in pushing certain reforms (for the job market or public education) might have had a significant electoral cost for the party among the social groups traditionally closest to it.

FI has definitively lost its prevalence among housewives, by losing more than 13%, almost half of its votes. It is now basically voted by housewives to the same extent as the PD, and much less than the LN. FI has halved its votes from private-sector employees, blue-collar workers, and the least-educated voters. It is the most-voted party of the centre-right only among managers, or particularly religious voters, as well as among inactive sectors, such as retired (and oldest), and the unemployed.

6. Conclusion: The success of challengers in a dealigning political landscape

The results of the 2018 Italian general election we have discussed in this article saw the unprecedented success of challenger parties. The M5S and the LN combined received the majority of the votes, while the two principal mainstream parties, the cores of the two coalitions dominating the bipolar politics of Italy since 2013, amounted to less than a third of the votes, actually less than the M5S alone.

To recap, the M5S was the first successful debutant in Western Europe to gain in its second election (+7%). The electoral growth of the M5S was concentrated in the south (+16%), where it won virtually all SMDs in both Houses (over 80%), thus overcoming the potential underrepresentation issue posed by the new electoral law. The centre-right coalition was the most-voted one, with 37% of the votes, and an even larger increase from 2013 than the M5S (+8%). Their candidates won more than 85% of SMDs in the north, and a plurality of those in the Red Zone. Overall, the four centre-right parties won over 40% of the parliamentary seats, but not enough to form a government. FI lost between 7 and 8% with no relevant geographical variations, while the LN gained 13% nationwide (thus becoming the largest centre-right party). The LN has grown much less in the south (+8%) than in the rest of the country (+18%). As a consequence, the centre-right was stable in the south and gained more than 10% elsewhere. The centre-left coalition was the clear loser of the election. It lost almost 7% compared to 2013, won only a tiny minority of SMDs (in the Red Zone and non-southern metropolitan areas), and was outdistanced by the other two poles.

Table 6. Electoral results by socio-demographic characteristics, 2018 and 2013

	PD			FI			LN			M5S		
	2018	2013	Δ%	2018	2013	Δ%	2018	2013	Δ%	2018	2013	Δ%
Whole sample	18.8	25.5	-6.7	14.0	21.6	-7.6	17.4	4.1	13.3	32.9	25.5	7.4
Gender												
Male	18.9	25	-6,1	13.8	20	-6,2	17.1	4	13,1	32.8	29	3,8
Female	18.7	26	-7,3	14.1	24	-9,9	17.6	5	12,6	32.9	22	10,9
Age class												
18-34	15.3	19.7	-4.4	12.4	20.9	-8.5	17.8	4.6	13.2	35.3	31.4	3.9
35-49	15.9	20.4	-4.5	13.9	19.4	-5.5	17.6	4	13.6	35.4	33.2	2.2
50-64	16.5	27.8	-11.3	13.0	21.2	-8.2	19.7	3.4	16.3	34.0	24.6	9.4
65 or more	27.3	37	-9.7	16.1	27	-10.9	14.6	4	10.6	27.1	10	17.1
Education level												
Elementary-school diploma	25.2	29	-3.8	12.9	27	-14.1	17.6	8	9.6	30.0	14	16.0
Lower-secondary diploma	15.9	23	-7.1	15.2	23	-7.8	22.4	4	18.4	33.3	18	15.3
High-school diploma	16.1	25	-8.9	14.3	18	-3.7	14.3	2	12.3	36.1	31	5.1
University degree	21.8	27	-5.2	12.1	15	-2.9	11.3	2	9.3	29.3	29	0.3
Profession												
Entrepreneurs, managers	22.5	23	-0.5	13.4	17	-3.6	12.9	3	9.9	31.2	25	6.2
Self-employed	11.7	15	-3.3	17.6	20	-2.4	23.6	3	20.6	31.8	29	2.8
Teachers, clerks	18.9	25	-6.1	8.6	15	-6.4	14.5	5	9.5	36.1	31	5.1
Blue-collar workers	11.3	20	-8.7	12.5	24	-11.5	23.8	5	18.8	37.0	29	8.0
Unemployed	10.3	18	-7.7	20.4	25	-4.6	18.2	4	14.2	37.2	33	4.2
Students	17.1	23	-5.9	11.7	11	0.7	15.0	1	14.0	32.3	37	-4.7
Housewives	15.4	22	-6.6	15.7	29	-13.3	19.8	5	14.8	36.1	21	15.1
Retired	27.6	37	-9.4	16.1	25	-8.9	14.6	4	10.6	26.4	11	15.4
Employment sector												
Public-sector employees	17	29	-12.0	8.7	14	-5.3	12.8	4	8.8	41.6	31	10.6
Private-sector employees	17.6	21	-3.4	10.5	20	-9.5	18.7	5	13.7	34	30	4.0
Church attendance												
Never	19.8	28	-8.2	10.8	17	-6.2	15.9	2	13.9	33.7	32	1.7
Seldom	16.4	27	-10.6	13.3	22	-8.7	19.3	4	15.3	34.9	26	8.9
Monthly	13.9	21	-7.1	17.9	25	-7.1	19.5	4	15.5	31.4	26	5.4
Weekly	22.4	25	-2.6	16.2	23	-6.8	15.7	6	9.7	30.9	19	11.9

Source: IPSOS Public Affairs. Digits indicate the percentages of the socio-demographic row category intending to vote for the party in the column. Data were collected from 29 January to 2 March on 16,626 respondents (out of 75,609 contacts) for 2018, and 11,026 respondents (out of 107,229 contacts) in 2013. Samples are representative of the Italian voting-age population for gender, age, education, occupational status, region and demographic class of municipality. Respondents were interviewed using a mixed methodology including computer-assisted web interviewing (CAWI), computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI), and computer-assisted mobile interviewing (CAMI). The margin of error for a same-N probabilistic sample with reference to a population as large as the Italian voting-age population would be between +/- 0.2% e +/- 2.8%. Samples were weighted according to the actual electoral results.

These are just the highlights of the electoral results. In this article, however, we have also discussed additional features of what happened. For instance, we have underlined some elements potentially indicating a stabilization of the Italian party system, such as the homogenization of turnout among different geographical areas (participation is still lower in the south, but less so than in 2013), and of electoral results between Chamber and Senate (indicating that, contrary to what happened in 2013, 18-24-year-old voters voted like the rest of the electorate).

Nevertheless, we have also observed quite numerous elements indicating that a new stable pattern does not appear to have been achieved yet. For instance, volatility has remained quite high, marking, for the first time, two consecutive elections in Italian history. The minimum portion of voters who changed their vote is 26.7%, but it is in fact quite a bit larger than that. In particular, our analyses of vote shift have repeatedly shown relevant transitions across various Italian cities from the 2013 centre-left to the 2018 M5S, and from the 2013 M5S to the 2018 LN. Furthermore, looking at the social characteristics of the electorate of the main parties, we have witnessed the erosion of traditional alignments between social groups and political parties. The PD lost blue-collars a long time ago (Corbetta and Ceccarini 2010) but is now not even the favourite of public-sector employees (42% of which voted for the M5S). FI was defeated by the LN (in addition to the M5S) among housewives, and it was below average and only the fourth party among uneducated voters.

The political landscape emerging after the 2018 elections is completely unprecedented. Bipolarism, at least the one we had known for the past 25 years, is definitely over. The consolidation of the M5S in the south has brought the end of competitiveness in an area that has been pivotal until now for winning elections, and at the same time we observe the rise in competitiveness of the Red Zone, where the centre-left is not only no longer hegemonic but is actually not winning. This is now the only competitive part of the country.

Overall, these pieces of evidence seem to indicate that the Italian party system might be experiencing a dealignment process (Dalton et al. 1984). In this volatile, unstable context, it is very hard to determine what the future might hold. In particular, the formation of the Conte cabinet, supported by M5S and LN, and its political activity will have a crucial role in shaping future developments. For instance, we have seen that most of the new M5S voters come from a previous centre-left political background. It would not be surprising if they were to abandon the M5S in consequence of this national alliance. For the LN there are risks as well. Although many of its voters voted for the M5S in 2013, most come from the Berlusconi centre-right. Thus, governing with the M5S might be costly unless policies desired by centre-right voters are enacted.

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