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Surviving the perfect storm: Italy after the 2013 elections

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In many respects, the Italian general election of February 2013 can be described as a ‘perfect storm’, which has profoundly challenged the very tenets of the Italian political system leading to a number of important effects. After twenty years of relative electoral stability and continuity, over 40% of the Italian electorate changed their previous voting preferences (D’Alimonte 2013), generating an unprecedented level of political instability. Strikingly, in this way, the country emerged from the election more or less divided into three equal segments among which there appeared to be no viable governing combination—opening the way to a political deadlock. Indeed, it was not until the end of April 2013 that a new government was formed, mainly thanks to the fact that the election’s aftermath coincided with the need to elect a new President of the Republic—a task made particularly difficult by the climate of political impasse.

The coalition *Italia Bene Comune* (Italy Common Good) led by the center-left *Partito Democratico* (PD, Democratic Party) technically won the election with 29.6% of the vote in the Chamber of Deputies—but only by a wafer-thin margin and, crucially, without holding a majority in the Senate. In practice, the PD managed to achieve only a very frail majority, mainly due to the fact that the hemorrhage in its votes, especially in its heartland, was slightly smaller than that of the center-right. Hence, the then leader of the PD, Pierluigi Bersani, found himself unable either to form a government or to provide a strong leadership to his party.

On the other hand, the newly formed *Movimento 5 Stelle* (M5S, Five-Star Movement) emerged as the strongest single party in the Chamber of Deputies, gaining 25.6% of the vote at its first general election outing (a unique case in the history of post-war Western Europe)². In particular, the M5S became the recipient of the vote of an electorate increasingly disenfranchised, and disillusioned towards mainstream party politics. Interestingly, the party attracted the support of voters from across the

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² The PD gains the lead as the most voted party if one takes into account the Italians resident abroad. Figures mentioned in this article, however, refer to the votes cast in Italy.

political spectrum and from all sectors of society—subverting the electoral continuity of the so-called First and Second Republic, by replacing the traditional ideological split between left and right (and their link to specific geographic areas of Italy) with an approach that seemed to have much resonance among *the whole* electorate: that of anti-politics (Diamanti 2013). Strong of such leverage, the M5S refused to enter any negotiation with the center-left to form a coalition government—adding further to the political stalemate.

Meanwhile, Silvio Berlusconi's decision to, once again, lead the electoral campaign for his side, allowed the center-right Popolo della Libertà (PdL, People of Freedom) and its allies (notably, the Lega Nord, LN, Northern League) to gain 29.2% of the vote, contradicting the very gloomy predictions of the pre-electoral polls. As some scholars have argued, in this way Berlusconi managed once again to superimpose his image to that of his party (and of the wider coalition), capitalizing on (the residue of) his popularity and charismatic appeal (Bordignon and Turato 2013, 92). Yet, in comparison to the period of its maximum expansion, the PdL's electorate was now no less than halved, much older in its composition, and concentrated for the most part in the southern regions of Italy (Bordignon and Turato 2013, 93). This showed how the fortunes of the PdL seemed to be still inextricably connected to its leader and to the 'personal parable' of Berlusconi—whilst also shedding light on the image of a political force whose very social foundations are progressively eroding.

Hence, as underlined by many political commentators, the main outcome of the general election was that there was no clear outcome (Fabbrini and Lazar 2013; Diamanti 2013; Pasquino 2013), because no political force managed to win the competition. In this sense, the vote reproduced and multiplied the many cleavages cutting across the Italian political and social landscape—by returning three, disjointed 'big minorities' unable to communicate with each other: the center-left, which *did not win* the election; the center-right, which *did not lose* the election; and the M5S which asserted itself *against* the other contenders (Diamanti 2013, ix).

As a result of such political stalemate, the consensual and majoritarian principles, which had provided the basis of government formation in the First and Second Republic, started to crumble. In other words, the election signaled the end of an era, and yet the new one that seemed to be ushered in pointed in the direction of an uncertain future.

What happened afterwards fully confirmed these predictions. As it is well known, the leadership of Pierluigi Bersani, who was associated with the PD's failure to win the election, finally came to an end once it emerged that, not only he had failed to gain the support of the M5S to a PD-led government, which was, after all, predictable, but also that of *his own party* for the election of Romano Prodi (his chosen candidate) as President of the Republic in April 2013.

Indeed, the political deadlock had impacted on the process for the election of a new President, too. After five inconclusive ballots, the incumbent President Napolitano agreed to stand for re-election (an unprecedented event in Italy) in an attempt to safeguard the continuity of Italy's political institutions, and bring the system 'back on track'. It was only at this point that a new 'grand coalition' government could be formed. Napolitano tasked the PD's vice-president, Enrico Letta to lead a cabinet backed also by Berlusconi's PdL—thus bringing together the center-left and the center-right into an 'unnatural' and profoundly unstable coalition. This compound coalition government reflected and amplified the profound fractures of the post-election political system. Its life was short and exposed all the controversy of a 'marriage of convenience' made of unwilling partners.

In November 2013, after Berlusconi realized that he was about to be expelled from the Senate following his conviction for tax evasion, he tried to bring the Letta government down, thus attempting to inflict damage on his ally in government, the PD, who was not willing to shield him from the consequences of this conviction and keep him in Parliament regardless. However, this led to a split into 'pro' and 'anti' Letta camps within his own party, and eventually to the creation of a new party of the right: The Nuovo Centrodestra (NCD, New Centre-Right). It was joined by 60 PdL representatives in Parliament, and the PdL Ministers serving in the Letta Government, fearful that the collapse of the government would bring with it fresh elections. Indeed, given the declining fortunes of the PdL *vis à vis* the PD, such elections would have likely resulted in the end of many a political career within the PdL's ranks. In November 2013, shortly after these events had unfolded, Berlusconi 'shelved' the PdL altogether and re-founded Forza Italia (FI) with those willing to follow him (this being the name of the original political vehicle that had allowed him to win his first election back in 1994).

If the aftermath of the 2013 general election had proved problematic for Berlusconi, neither did it prove easy for Beppe Grillo's M5S. Indeed, the events of the

last one and half years have provided ample proof of how difficult it can be for new parties devoid of experienced leaders and Parliamentarians to truly benefit from their unexpected electoral success (with the M5s' efficacy in the Chamber of Deputies having been much hampered by infighting, personality clashes, and members acrimoniously leaving the party).

Meanwhile, in the PD camp, the experience of government also fuelled divisions and internal struggles for power. Soon after being (s)elected as the new party secretary in a primary election held in December 2013, the young and ambitious former mayor of Florence Matteo Renzi decided that he should concentrate in his hands both the powers of party leader and that of PM, and seized the prime ministership³. In this way, after ten months in government, Letta was eventually ousted by his own party. Taking a calculated gamble, and drawing on his image as an agent of change as well as on the support gained in the primary elections, Renzi accepted to become Italy's new Prime Minister without calling new elections. However, his rapid ascent to power meant that he found himself taking the helm of the same fractious left-right coalition that had supported the Letta government. And yet, Renzi took up this challenge with a bold approach—distancing himself from the tentativeness that had characterized the previous cabinet and its leader. Willing to focus on the most pressing reforms (in particular those concerning state institutions and the electoral system), Renzi started a dialogue with Berlusconi, epitomized by the so-called 'Nazareno Pact' of 18 January 2014 (after the nickname of the PD branch where the meeting between the two men took place). This was a personal deal between the two men aimed at successfully completing those institutional reforms they could agree on.

Throughout his premiership, Renzi also maintained a strong leadership approach in some ways reminiscent of Berlusconi himself when PM—as demonstrated by the selection of Sergio Mattarella as PD's candidate to replace Giorgio Napolitano as new President of the Republic in January 2015, despite the objections of the center-right generally, and Berlusconi in particular.

³ Renzi was much criticized in Italy for forcing Letta to step down, especially since, after his election as party leader, he had argued for a while (somewhat unconvincingly) that he did not want the top job of PM after all. While this is true, it should also be mentioned in Renzi's defense that the leader of the largest party of a governing coalition holding the prime ministership is usually seen as the rule in many Western democracies.

At the time of writing, about a year after the ascent of Renzi as PM, the political climate is still far from being settled, and the Italian political system is still facing a number of pressing challenges connected to the outcomes of the 2013 election. Hence, whilst much academic analysis has already been developed on the *immediate* effects of the 2013 vote, the aim of this special issue is to reflect critically on the *new developments* that have emerged from such momentous elections, and the way in which they have impacted so far on the Italian political system and its main political actors. In particular, there are a number of issues that require in-depth analysis, and will be tackled in this volume.

In the first place, the 2013 election has opened a new (if still uncertain) phase in Italian politics—signaling the end of the Second Republic, by causing a crumbling of its very values and precepts. Crucially, such shock to the system has invested both the mechanisms and the actors of electoral competition, opening up a profound fracture in the representative system, which has not yet been bridged. In short, the principle of ‘majoritarian bipolarism’ and bipolar competition that characterized the Second Republic now seems to have come to an end—begging the question of what the long-term implications of such profound change could be for the Italian political system.

Furthermore, and related to this, since the results of the election have transformed the very nature of the electoral competition, the profile, organization and strategies of the main actors in the game are also changing, with the notable exception of Berlusconi’s FI (see below). In particular, after the electoral fiasco of February 2013, the PD is undergoing a new phase of profound renovation. Arguably, this is mainly connected to the fact that, for the first time since its creation, the party has found a strong and charismatic leader in Matteo Renzi (Bordignon 2013). Renzi’s rise appears to have already had a positive effect on the electoral performance of the Democratic Party—as reflected in the excellent results of the 2014 European Parliament elections, in which it gained over 40% of the vote. And yet, there are a number of questions that need to be addressed in this respect, especially for what concerns the effects that such change is having on the party (i.e. its structures, organization, and style of communication).

Similarly, further analysis is needed on the case of the M5S, especially with regard to its transition from an overtly anti-politics force to its role *in public office* in the post-2013 election scenario. Unlike other radical parties which chose to take part

in governments in the 1990s and 2000s – such as Rifondazione Comunista (RC, Communist Refoundation) and the LN (see Albertazzi, McDonnell and Newell 2011) – the M5S refused to enter any government coalitions post-2013, demanding instead that the gridlock should come to an end by means of fresh elections. In this way, it was able to maintain its role as ‘the other’ of the party system which has arguably been its *raison d’être* so far. However, inevitably this decision has also brought with it accusations of irrelevance, especially by the many who had voted M5S hoping to see a process of change being set into motion. Therefore, the accusation that the party punches well below its weight as far as shaping legislation and contributing to the selection of key institutional figures are concerned (witness the recent elections of two Presidents of the Republic in short succession, none of whom the M5S had supported), has been repeated again and again in the last two years⁴.

The articles in this special issue tackle these topics head on. To start with, Gianfranco Pasquino and Marco Valbruzzi consider the features of bipolarism ‘Italian-style’ and how it has been shattered by the 2013 election. Furthermore, they discuss what developments may be expected in the near future and whether it is realistic to assume that bipolarism will manage to stage a come-back. The issue then moves on to cover how the largest parties (i.e. the M5S and the PD) have adapted to the new political landscape created by the 2013 election, with pieces by Fabio Bordignon and Luigi Ceccarini on the M5S, and Antonella Seddone and Fulvio Venturino on the PD. It is worth briefly summarizing here some of the findings of these analyses.

In their contribution, Pasquino and Valbruzzi point out that, in Italy, bipolarism never managed to reduce party fragmentation within the opposing coalitions. What it did do, however, was fulfilling what is arguably its key function, at least to those who believe in its alleged virtues: to allow the alternation in power of different parties or coalitions, thereby increasing accountability. If one considers the twenty years during which the Italian system has been bipolar —i.e. between 1994 and 2013 — not once was the same coalition returned to power following a general election. As Pasquino and Valbruzzi argue, however, the unexpected success of the M5S in 2013 has now led to the demise of bipolarism altogether. The key question

⁴ A clear proof of the M5S’s difficulties is the speed at which its Parliamentary contingent appears to be shrinking, as 17 senators and 9 MPs have left the party, or have been expelled, since the 2013 election.

now is whether the restoration of some form of bipolarism in the near future has been made ‘nigh impossible’, as these authors claim in this special issue, by the strength and behavior of the M5S. In truth, this negative (from the perspective of those who believe in bipolarism’s virtues) assessment is based on the assumption that the M5S will not ‘normalize’ in the future, even after accessing the corridors of legislative power. In other words, it is based on the belief that the Five-Star Movement cannot turn into a viable governing party, possibly taking the place of the center-right coalition as the center-left main contender.

And yet the analysis on the M5S offered by Bordignon and Ceccarini in this issue shows that the situation within this party is very much in flux. Therefore, while its ‘anti-systemness’ nature (to use Pasquino’s and Valbruzzi’s expression in this issue) is presently out of question (whether one considers the party’s ideology, its constant attacks against the other parties and the country’s institutions, or the behavior of its representatives in Parliament), Bordignon and Ceccarini point out that ‘the process of gradual normalization and institutionalization of the M5S is becoming increasingly evident’ (XXX). Hence, they argue, the M5S can now be defined as a ‘hybrid creature’ (Diamanti 2014) which is adapting (if tentatively) to the new environment it finds itself in (i.e. the Italian and EU Parliaments) while also trying to protect its identity as an outsider. Moreover, as they note, it is ‘with regard to the theme of possible alliances that the most evident tensions have developed inside the M5S between the leadership and the party “in public office”, in turn internally divided’ (XXX). This, it seems to us, is *the* crucial question that will need answering in Italy in the near future—i.e. the extent to which the M5S will accept to ‘play the game’ by striking some compromises, swallowing some bitter pills and engaging in bartering and dialogue with other parties, as many radical parties that have wished to exercise influence have done before them (McDonnell and Newell 2011). First and foremost, this will mean ascertaining what will the party’s approach be towards an increasingly successful and confident PD. Indeed, in their article, Pasquino and Valbruzzi go as far as wondering whether ‘the third phase of the Italian Republic may not be characterized by a new type of bipolarism after all, but rather by “a predominant party system”, dominated by the PD (at least in the foreseeable future)’ (XXX). This outcome would be made more likely by the approval of a new electoral law characterized by a sizable majority bonus going to the most voted party in the

election⁵. Indeed, it cannot be denied that the bursting of the new PD leader (and now PM) Matteo Renzi onto the political scene has been a game changer for all parties in the system, including the M5S. Renzi has been the latest leader to give voice to the anti-political spirit that was (and still is) widespread in Italy and had fuelled the success of Berlusconi first, and then Grillo more recently. However, the PD leader has also embodied the ‘can do’ attitude that was once regarded as one of Berlusconi’s winning features as an entrepreneur ‘lent to politics’ (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2015, Chapters 2 and 6). Indeed, as Bordignon and Ceccarini remind us in their piece for this issue, the leader of the M5S Beppe Grillo has finally been forced to acknowledge the inevitability of entering a dialogue with the PD on some key issues. In the aftermath of the PD’s stunning victory in the European elections of 2014, Grillo conceded that the vote had boosted Renzi’s legitimization to govern and went as far as proposing to hold meetings between the two parties to discuss electoral reform.⁶

The last contribution of this special issue focuses precisely on the Partito Democratico, and particularly on the extent to which it has changed after the 2013 election. Here Antonella Seddone and Fulvio Venturino assess the extent to which Renzi’s leadership has determined real changes within the PD in the period between the parliamentary election of February 2013 and the European elections of May 2014. By analyzing the party ‘on the ground’, in ‘public office’ and in ‘central office’ (Katz and Mair 1994), they shed light on a process of renewal that has invested it at all levels. Starting with the party ‘on the ground’, the authors provide data showing how the PD has been able to increase its membership in recent months, reflecting the increasing consensus and electoral basis of the party. Of course, this is all the more impressive given what is happening to the majority of parties across Western Europe, for which even hanging on to the members they have has become a challenge (van Biezen, Mair and Poguntke 2012). Our authors also show that the changes that have invested the PD ‘in public office’ have not been any less profound, with the adoption of primaries for the selection of (at least part of) its would-be MPs having contributed

⁵ As we write in February 2015, the Parliamentary procedure leading to the approval of the new electoral law known as ‘Italicum’ has not been completed as yet. However, it now seems very likely that the majority bonus mentioned above will in fact be one of its defining features.

⁶ In practice, however, none of the reforms introduced by Renzi so far, notably to electoral and employment legislation, have been influenced by the M5S, let alone approved by it. In other words, if the strategy of isolation does not appear to have paid off (and has certainly caused much tension and clashes within the M5S), trying to engage with the PD—a strategy only pursued half-heartedly so far—has not born fruit either. Whether it *could* bear fruit if embraced with conviction is a question that cannot be answered as yet.

to renewing its ranks in Parliament. Importantly, this process of renewal has also invested Renzi's cabinet, which is made up of relatively young ministers and is well balanced in gender terms. Much the same conclusion is reached when looking at the party 'in central office', characterized by a greater presence of under-30s and a large contingent of representatives who are fulfilling their roles for the first time. Seddone and Venturino also stress that, far from investing only the organization of the party, this process of renewal has very much affected the way it communicates, too. Renzi's easy-to-understand and media-friendly language, combined with his skilled use of the new media to establish a direct link with sympathizers *well beyond* the PD, mean that the process of personalization of politics that had already been widespread in the country has received a further boost in recent months. However, a note of caution is needed on this point. While there might well be similarities between Renzi's PD and the many 'personal' parties that have sprung up in Italy in the last two decades (Bordignon 2013) (at least as far as these parties' reliance on their leaders' alleged charisma is concerned), any comparisons between the PD and, say, Berlusconi's parties—as the epitome of the personal parties—can only be stretched so far. Given the history of the Partito Democratico, the existence of different active factions within it, not to mention its internal rules (especially the party's widespread reliance on primary elections), whoever its leaders are and whatever their communicative and electoral skills may be, they will never be able to enjoy the total control over the party that Berlusconi has demanded, and has usually been able to gain, over his own political organizations (see McDonnell 2013; Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015, Chapter 2).

It is fitting to end our introduction by at least mentioning Berlusconi's parties, and particularly his recently 're-founded' FI, given that we have decided not to include this in our special issue. This is not due to a belief that the FI's leader (or, perhaps, 'owner') will necessarily be departing politics any time soon, nor that he is in any way 'finished'. On the contrary, and despite the fact that it has now become unrealistic to think that Berlusconi will ever be able to fulfill the role of fulcrum of the Italian political system that was his in the past (Albertazzi and Newell 2015), he has, of course, been Renzi's interlocutor on institutional reform post-2013 and his party remains the largest one on the right. However, since our issue focuses on *change* (i.e. the extent to which the Italian political system and its major parties have adapted to a changing environment after the 2013 elections), little if anything can be

said about FI at this stage. Indeed, Berlusconi's reaction to the loss of half of his votes in 2013 has been to (very unsuccessfully) try to avoid talking about the topic altogether. As a consequence of his refusal to face reality and open up a process of renewal within his party, FI is now shedding representatives by the day, remains mired in constant infighting, and has so far been unable to re-establish that alliance with the LN that has been essential to it in order to win elections in the past. In other words, if the disappointing electoral performance of 2013 has forced Berlusconi to shut down the PdL and bring Forza Italia back into existence, this appears to have been purely the matter of replacing a toxic 'brand' (that of the PdL) with a new(ish) one (i.e. that of the 're-founded' Forza Italia). However, the recent electoral defeat, as well as Berlusconi's failure in bringing Letta down, do not appear to have persuaded him of the need to rethink the organization and strategy of his party, let alone allow a new generation of leaders to take over from him. Like the original FI (1994-2008) and the PdL (2008-2013), the 'new' FI remains a personal party, not only in the sense that its strategy of communication is still centered on, and decided by, Berlusconi, as even a passing glance at the party website will reveal, but also because it 'belongs' to him —to do as he pleases. In short, Berlusconi seems to favor only one party model (the one that has worked for him for over two decades and gives him complete control of his party) and has sent no signals so far that he may be willing to revisit it.

This inability to question what Forza Italia is about, and how it should be organized and led —and start a process of institutionalization that may turn it into a more democratic organization, a broad, enduring conservative party able to fight elections without having to rely on Berlusconi's communicative skills (and personal wealth) means that, when Berlusconi finally steps down from the political stage, he will have failed to fulfill yet another of his promises: that of creating an enduring 'party of the moderates' (see Berlusconi 2006). Deprived of credible leadership and a recognizable strategy, and unwilling to come to terms with the lessons of the 2013 election, it is no wonder if the recent history of FI is one of division, and of once loyal friends turned into foes.

One can grasp this very clearly by looking at the criticism directed at Berlusconi by Raffaele Fitto (a former Governor of the Puglia region and former Minister in the fourth Berlusconi government). On 21 February 2015, Fitto hosted the first 'convention' of his faction — called 'I Ricostruttori' (the rebuilders) — thus

positioning himself early on as a would-be successor of Berlusconi.⁷ Time will tell whether Fitto will manage to force the party to reform (and, perhaps more importantly, also seize the leadership), or whether, like many before him, he will in fact be expelled. Whatever happens, it is hard to imagine FI regaining its previous strength and role in Italian politics in the near future, while all eyes remain on Renzi's PD.

The picture emerging from these reflections (and the analyses developed in the articles presented in this special issue) is a compound one. Overall, the Italian political system is still in flux—confirming the idea that the 2013 election opened the way to a phase of both transition *and* change (Diamanti 2013). Issues of leadership and personalization of politics, together with the role of new and old media have been reframed in the light of the new political climate—and yet, they continue to play an important role in the political arena (witness the success of a very 'personalized' PD). However, the findings of the studies on bipolarism, the M5S and the PD presented here clearly show that, in many respects, in the aftermath of the 2013 vote the basis of the relationship between the electorate and the political system that characterized the First and Second Republic have been subverted, and are increasingly wearing off. The 'rules of the political game' are undergoing profound change, and the main political actors, each in their own respect but with the notable exception of FI, are responding to this, by coming to terms with issues of renewal and/or adaptation, and transforming their organizational and strategic approaches. If, on the one hand, this would seem to suggest that, indeed, the Second Republic has come to an end, on the other, it is not yet clear what the future of the Italian political system will look like. What remains to be seen, in the light of the new developments emerged from the 2013 election analyzed in this volume, is whether the ongoing realignment of Italian party politics will be a catalyst for the birth of a Third Republic, characterized by a profoundly new style of politics, and a 'new' political system. To assess this latter question, however, we will have to wait (at least) until the next electoral round.

⁷ A recent post in Raffaele Fitto's blog is particularly illuminating concerning where he wants Fi to go. See: <http://raffaelefitto.it/2015/02/05/abbiamo-sbagliato-tutto-non-dovevamo-cedere-a-renzi/>, accessed on 21 February 2016.

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