

Mass abstention in Italian regional elections

Marianne Arens
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Support for Italy's governing Democratic Party (PD) is declining significantly. This was shown in elections last Sunday in seven Italian regions: Veneto, Liguria, Umbria, Campania, Marche, Tuscany and Apulia.

The elections were an important test for Prime Minister Matteo Renzi (PD). In the coming months, his government intends to intervene decisively in Libya, step up its austerity measures, and introduce electoral and constitutional reforms and a new employment law (Jobs Act).

The most evident sign of the popular disaffection with the government was the high level of abstention, with almost every second voter staying home. Overall voter participation stood at just 52.2 percent, 10 percentage points lower than in 2010.

The decline is even more dramatic when compared against last year's European elections, when voter participation was up to 30 percent higher in these regions. The PD obtained the support of 40 percent of the electorate, which Renzi declared was a mandate for his so-called reform programme.

Little remains of this electoral success. Although the PD emerged from the election as the largest party in five of the seven regions, it lost more than half a million votes compared to the previous regional election.

In Liguria, the PD lost the state presidency to a candidate of Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia. This region, which includes the port of Genoa, was formerly considered a stronghold for the Communist Party and today is marked by devastating social decay. Youth unemployment and pensioner poverty are dominant features, along with the highest unemployment rate in northern Italy.

A wing of the PD around Pippo Sivati established the Left Network with former members of the Refounded Communism (Rifondazione Comunista) and the CGIL trade union to cover themselves with a pseudo-left

figleaf and try to avoid sharing the fate of the PD. Its candidate, Luka Pastorino, postured as an alternative to the PD, even though he is a former PD member.

The Left Network received 9.6 percent of the vote, and the PD obtained 27.8 percent. Forza Italia benefited from this, becoming the largest party with 34.4 percent and securing the position of state president for its candidate, Giovanni Toti, after 10 years of PD rule.

Although the opposite occurred in Campania, ruled to date by Forza Italia, the PD did not benefit from the change. The PD obtained more votes than the right-wing camp, but their candidate for regional president in Naples, Vincenzo de Luca, cannot take up the post because he was recently convicted on corruption charges in relation to the construction of an incinerator.

Apulia will be governed by a PD president. This was formerly a stronghold of SEL (Left, Ecology, Freedom), whose leader, Nichi Vendola, governed the region for 10 years.

Vendola was a poster boy of the European ex-left, being invited to Paris and Berlin. He began his career as a member of the Communist Party (PCI) and joined Rifondazione following the split in 1991. He made it to head of government in Apulia in 2005, serving as Rifondazione's first regional president. He then founded SEL in 2009 when he lost out to Paolo Ferrero in the race to be Rifondazione leader.

At the beginning of 2015, Vendola lost the primary election for the candidate of the centre-left camp to the PD's Michele Emiliano, an anti-mafia state prosecutor. Vendola then withdrew from the election in Apulia and backed the ex-PD member Luca Pastorino in Liguria.

Vendola is preparing for the fact that the bourgeoisie will require a new left prop due to the decline of the PD. He has repeatedly promoted the construction of an Italian Syriza, and created an Italian Tsipras List for the European elections. But he is equally responsible for the right-wing policies of the PD as Renzi. Vendola

complained on election day that Renzi was implementing nothing “from the programme that we—we and the PD—presented in 2013.”

Last Sunday’s election once again demonstrated the danger posed by the lack of a genuine socialist party of the working class. In the absence of an internationalist and socialist perspective, extreme right-wing parties like the Lega Nord and Beppe Grillo’s protest movement benefit from the growing political vacuum.

Grillo’s Five Star Movement (M5S), which advocates far-right positions on many issues, was able to pick up some votes. In Liguria, Apulia and Campania, it secured the largest increase in votes for a single party.

But the main winner of the elections was Matteo Salvini’s Lega Nord (Northern League), which is increasingly taking over the position of Berlusconi’s Forza Italia. Salvini is attempting to transform the party, traditionally based in Padua in northern Italy, into a right-wing national movement along the lines of the French National Front. He led an aggressive campaign against the euro, the European Union, and above all against so-called uncontrolled immigration in order to win right-wing voters over in the south.

The Lega Nord was not only able to hold on to its stronghold of Veneto, where its candidate Luca Zaia surpassed all polls by securing around 50 percent of the vote. It also did well in other regions. Although in 2012 the party obtained just 4 percent of the vote, it secured 20 percent in Liguria, more than 13 percent in Marche and more than 16 percent in Tuscany.



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