



# Italy's 'Incoherent' Coalition Survived Local Elections. Now Can It Govern?

Mark Gilbert | Friday, Oct. 9, 2020

Italy's largest opposition party, the populist and far-right League, turned in a poor showing in regional and local elections last month. While its center-right coalition prevailed in three of the seven regional governorships that were up for grabs, the League's candidate lost in traditionally leftist Tuscany (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/21/world/europe/italy-salvini-league-regional-elections.html>), despite predictions of victory by its leader, Matteo Salvini.

Overall, there was no clear winner in last month's elections, but the center-left Democratic Party, or PD, performed well, as did the neo-fascist Brothers of Italy, which took control of the central Marche region. Salvini, a former deputy prime minister and interior minister who was the bugbear of Europe just a year ago (</articles/28742/how-covid-19-scrambled-italy-s-politics-and-dented-salvini-s-appeal>), now risks being eclipsed by two other right-wing figures: Georgia Meloni, the leader of the Brothers of Italy, and Luca Zaia, the League governor of the Venice region, who was reelected by a landslide as a reward for his competent handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In a referendum held concurrently with the elections, Italians ratified a constitutional amendment to reduce the size of Parliament, with 70 percent voting in favor. When the next general elections are held, the Chamber of Deputies will shrink from 630 seats to 400, and the Senate from 315 to 200. This measure was championed by the Five Star Movement, or M5S, the largest party in the coalition government headed by Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte. Leaders of the PD, the junior coalition partner, loyally voted "yes" in the referendum despite having opposed the measure initially.

The PD and M5S have a history of enmity, but after weathering the elections without too many broken bones, some commentators predict the current majority will hold until the next presidential election, in 2022, or even until the end of the current legislative term in 2023. As a result of the referendum, many existing parliamentarians will lose their seats if a snap election is held before then, and turkeys don't vote for an early Christmas.

A period of government stability would be helpful, as Italy has had a dreadful year. It has been hit hard by the coronavirus (</articles/28774/in-italy-lockdown-ends-but-a-coronavirus-recovery-must-bridge-north-south-divides>), with over 330,000 cases and 36,000 deaths. The economy is expected to contract by 8 percent this year (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-italy-economy-gualtieri/italy-gdp-may-shrink-slightly-more-than-8-in-2020-says-economy-minister-idUSKBN23J1Z9>), while the budget deficit is ballooning and debt is expected to surpass 150 percent of GDP. Italy urgently needs a government that will present a credible plan for how to spend the roughly 200 billion euros in grants and cheap loans it has been allocated as part of the European Union's economic recovery fund (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/italy-seeks-economic-rebirth-with-eu-coronavirus-recovery-money-1159998880>), while trimming its budget of waste, reducing tax evasion and winning the confidence of its European neighbors.



*Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte at a press conference at Chigi Palace, in Rome, Sept. 29, 2020 (AP photo by Gregorio Borgia).*

It is not clear that Conte's government is up to the task. The M5S has declined in opinion polls (<https://tg.la7.it/listing/sondaggi>), from 34 percent in the 2018 elections to 15 percent today. Its alliance with the PD was a necessary step last year to prevent an attempt by Salvini (</trend-lines/28173/as-doubts-persist-about-italy-s-new-government-salvini-plots-his-comeback>), then in coalition with the M5S, to force snap elections that would have delivered large gains for the League. But the M5S is still bitterly divided over the move, as well as by factional and personal rivalries. It was founded to bring a breath of fresh air to Italian politics as an anti-establishment force, but when it comes to internal intrigue and poisonous bickering, it has the traditional parties beat at their own games.

## ***Sooner or later, somebody has got to deal with the big issues facing Italy.***

In a scathing television interview on Oct. 1, the self-styled conscience of the M5S, the veteran activist Alessandro Di Battista (<https://www.iltempo.it/politica/2020/10/01/news/alessandro-di-battista-m5s-udeur-poltrone-piazza-pulita-24734278/>), described his party's alliance with the PD as the "black death" and warned that the movement could become "like the UDEUR, fit only to get its share of the spoils." He was referring to the Union of Democrats for Europe, a short-lived minor political party that served as the personal vehicle of Clemente Mastella, a southern Italian notable, or local boss, who made no secret of the fact that he was in politics to get as much pork as possible.

Di Battista is not currently in Parliament, but still has a significant following among the M5S' grassroots members. If M5S lawmakers who agree with him cease to follow the whip, then Conte's government could have trouble commanding a majority, particularly in the Senate, where its margin is narrower than in the lower house.

Conte's problems are compounded by the fact that his coalition also includes a new party formed by former Prime Minister Matteo Renzi (<https://www.politico.eu/article/matteo-renzi-to-leave-italys-democratic-party/>), who broke away from the PD last year. With his new, centrist Italia Viva party, Renzi wants to push ahead with a number of policies that are anathema to the M5S, including accessing funds from the European Stability Mechanism, created in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, to help address the fallout from COVID-19. The M5S used to be one of the most anti-EU parties in Europe and has consistently opposed, on national sovereignty grounds, accepting conditional loans from Brussels.

The crux of Italy's problems is quite simple: Its current government is an incoherent coalition. The M5S used to stand for intransigent opposition to mainstream politicians like Renzi and to the PD, but now it has governed with them for a year. There are only two imaginable alternatives to the current government, however. The first is a snap election, which at this point would probably lead to a narrow victory for Salvini and Meloni's far-right coalition. The second is some sort of government of national unity headed by a technocrat—Mario Draghi, the former head of the European Central Bank, is often mentioned as a candidate—or by Conte.

Yet neither of those alternatives would yield a decisive government. Salvini is currently standing trial (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/3/hold-for-anealla-salvini-trial-to-begin>) on charges of unlawful detention, related to his decision last year to deny access to Italian soil for 131 refugees and migrants when he was interior minister. The case against him will probably fail, but prosecutors are also probing the League's finances, which are, to use a euphemism, somewhat murky. As for Meloni, too many of her supporters still have a nostalgia for Mussolini. A Salvini-Meloni government would be treated as a pariah by the EU, and probably by financial markets as well. Yet a technocratic government would command a shaky majority, at best, and would merely kick the can down the road until 2023.

Sooner or later, however, somebody has got to deal with the big issues facing Italy. Public finances are a major problem, and will require some painful choices to shore them up. Salvini's anti-immigrant rants aside, figuring out how to handle the influx of migrants (</articles/29108/italy-is-using-the-pandemic-to-keep-more-migrants-from-its-shores>), many of them crossing the Mediterranean, is a genuine challenge. Zaia's landslide in Venice was a sign that his region's long-suppressed desire for greater autonomy from Rome is about to bubble up to the surface. Perhaps most immediately, if Italy cannot come up with a plausible plan to spend its recovery funds from the EU, its credibility in northern Europe—hardly healthy right now—will plummet further.

During the COVID-19 crisis, Italy has proven itself to be a much stronger society and state than many observers supposed. Its reputation as the weak link in the EU chain is often exaggerated. Its main problem is its politics. In his 1977 treatise, political scientist Giuseppe di Palma described the functioning of the main political parties in Italy at the time as “surviving without governing.” (<https://books.google.com/books?id=5Vx94YjeM1oC&printsec=copyright#v=onepage&q&f=false>) There are growing indications that today's Rome is plagued by the same malaise.

*Mark Gilbert is a resident professor of international history at Johns Hopkins University-SAIS Europe, based in Bologna.*

## MORE WORLD POLITICS REVIEW

**Is the Fragile Tshisekedi-Kabila Coalition About to Collapse in Congo?**

(<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/29030/is-the-fragile-tshisekedi-kabila-coalition-about-to-collapse-in-congo>)

**Why Italy's South Holds the Key to Its Coronavirus Recovery**

(<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/28774/in-italy-lockdown-ends-but-a-coronavirus-recovery-must-bridge-north-south-divides>)

**Why Countries Like Spain Should Welcome Their Fragmented Party Politics**

**Internal Divisions Sank Italy's Last Government. Will Its New One Fare Any Better?**

(<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/28344/why-countries-like-spain-should-welcome-their-fragmented-party-politics>)

(<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/podcast/28164/interr-divisions-sank-italy-s-last-government-will-its-new-one-fare-any-better>)

**Is Malaysia's Democratic Experiment Imploding?**

(<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/28598/in-malaysia-democracy-is-threatened-by-a-new-backdoor-government>)

**A Global Pandemic Is No Time to Maintain Punishing Economic Sanctions**

(<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/28642/a-global-pandemic-is-no-time-to-maintain-punishing-economic-sanctions>)

---

© 2020, World Politics Review LLC. All rights reserved.