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GENDER UPDATE

The 2022 Italian general election and the radical right's success

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Italy went to the polls on 25 September 2022 in a general election whose outcome was highly predictable. As expected, the centre-right coalition emerged as the clear winner and obtained the majority of the parliamentary seats required to form a government. The radical right-wing party Fratelli d'Italia (FdI) ('Brothers of Italy') received the most votes (26 per cent) of the centre-right coalition and overall. Thus, on 22 October 2022, the FdI's leader, Giorgia Meloni, became the first woman prime minister in Italian history.

Understanding the election results requires a step back and some background knowledge of the Italian party system. The road towards a general election was opened by the fall of Mario Draghi's government in July 2022 and the president of the republic's subsequent decision to dissolve the Parliament and call for early elections. It is worth noting that the legislative term that ended in 2022 was marked by three different governments (Conte I, Conte II and Draghi) supported by three different parliamentary majorities.

The FdI was the only party that had remained in opposition throughout the 2018–22 legislature, and it was the only party whose electoral appeal had increased over time, making it the most popular party and its leader, Meloni, the favourite as the next Italian prime minister. According to polls, the FdI was identified by the electorate as the only possible choice for a real change in Italian politics. There is nothing new about an opposition or newly established party attracting 'protest' voters to oppose the 'old politics as usual'. It happened in 2013 and, more evidently, in the 2018 general election, when the populist anti-establishment Five Star Movement (M5S) achieved a great electoral consensus (32 per cent) in the name of change ([Mosca and Tronconi, 2019](#); [Baldini and Giglioli, 2020](#)). Since the 2013 general election,

a growing portion of the Italian electorate has expressed dissatisfaction and protest as a reaction to the political instability and the succession of governments based on a variety of political formulas disassociated with the electoral results. Hence, the electorate's dissatisfaction and protest were expressed by abstaining from voting, punishing incumbent parties or voting for new parties against mainstream parties. The 2022 general election confirmed these trends: abstention increased (36.1 per cent), making the 2022 election the record holder of low participation in republican history; the incumbent and mainstream parties declined electorally; and a new party succeeded. Thus, the FdI's victory may be partially understood in terms of a fragmented party system and of a large component of the electorate being driven by anti-political feelings (Rooduijn et al, 2016).

The second part of the explanation rests on the electoral strategies actually pursued by the political parties. During the electoral campaign, the centre-right promptly presented itself as united. Meloni's FdI, Matteo Salvini's Lega and Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia agreed on a shared electoral platform vague enough to cover the political differences and different political choices they had made during the previous legislature. In contrast, the centre-left failed to create a single coalition, and so the opposing camp was split three ways: the centre-left Democratic Party (PD) under Enrico Letta's leadership with minor party lists; the renewed left-wing M5S under Giuseppe Conte's leadership; and the moderate centrist party Action/Italy alive (A/IV), led by Carlo Calenda. Given that electoral rules privileged the larger coalition, it was clear from the outset that the centre-right coalition was going to win. What remained to be decided by the ballots was who was going to win the centre-right leadership. In a nutshell, the real electoral race took place within the centre-right coalition.

Eventually, the FdI party won that internal race, gaining almost 22 percentage points, while Lega and Forza Italia lost 8.6 and 5.9 percentage points, respectively, considering their 2018 totals. During the electoral campaign, the FdI and its leader successfully managed to present themselves as a novelty and promised to govern differently from the past in case of victory. First, they built the image of an uncompromising and resolute political actor – different from the other parties, including their coalition partners. Second, they presented a detailed electoral programme for the defence of the Italian nation under the slogan '*Pronti*' ('We are ready to govern'). Third, Meloni was committed to increasing her European and international credibility, showing moderation, expressing support for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Ukraine, and distancing herself from the ambiguous pro-Russian positions of Salvini and Berlusconi. Domestically, her 2021 best-seller biography, *Io sono Giorgia. Le mie radici, le mie idee* (*My name is Giorgia. My origins, my ideas*), promoted the image of a young and competent woman leader able to emerge in a male-dominated political arena.

When the electoral results were announced and Meloni's victory was clear, the FdI leader maintained a low and moderate profile. She opened an immediate dialogue with former Premier Draghi about managing the National Recovery and Resilience Plan and responding to the ongoing oil, economic and pandemic crises. From a minor party, the FdI became the kingmaker of the coalition, and as coalition leader, Meloni imposed her own political preferences in forming a government on the two partners. As a result, the Meloni government represents the most right-wing government in

Italian republican history, with clear stances of authoritarianism, nationalism and ultra-conservatism.

To conclude, the 2022 general election confirmed some trends of the last decade, namely, the volatility of the Italian electorate and the reconfiguration of the Italian party system. Electoral behaviour is not consistent over time. Voters tend to change their party preferences at each election and to privilege the party of protest and opposition, or to choose not to vote, when confronted with government instability. Hence, the party system has changed since 2013 more quickly than ever, and no single party has been exempted from this electoral volatility. This scenario in itself should raise some worries about party system institutionalisation and the overall quality of Italian democracy. The outcome of the 2022 election might accelerate the process of democratic deterioration. The newly formed government is dominated by the radical-right FdI, and it has enough power to turn the FdI's radical-right agenda into legislation. The opposing parties are uncoordinated and the opposition party that received the most votes (19 per cent), the PD, has decided to open a leadership election following leader Letta's resignation, which might lead the party to disband. All being said, the Italian political transition is not over and what is unclear is the direction in which Italy is headed.

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Conflict of interest

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