

The Italian Election of February 2013: A Temporary Shock or a Harbinger of a New Party System?

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Abstract The February 2013 elections were the most volatile in Italian entire democratic history. All post 1994 parties lost millions of votes. Who benefitted were two new actors, Scelta Civica led by Mario Monti and the 5 Stars Movement led by the former comedian Beppe Grillo, which received one out of four valid votes. The earthquake altered the post-94 bipolar pattern of competition, for three poles of almost equal size emerged instead of two. Moreover, the election results were chaotic since the 2005 electoral law made impossible a coherent parliamentary majority in both chambers, provoking a political paralysis and finally paving the way to a new grand coalition between the Pd and Pdl, plus Scelta Civica. Does the February 2013 elections are a harbinger of a political system different from the previous (1994 to 2008) one, or they are a temporary shock? This chapter will analyse the 2013 results in comparison to elections prior to 2013. It will assess the extent to which the Italian voters have changed their political and ideological predispositions along with their electoral behaviour. This chapter concludes that while many voters changed their vote in February 2013, voters did not change their ideological positions. It is too early to tell whether and to what extent Italy's electorate has have changed its ideological outlook after the February 2013 elections. One could expect that if the 2013 earthquake is a harbinger of a new political system, this will depend on the consolidation of the political forces which emerged in February 2013 and on the restructuring of the others.

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1 Introduction

The results of Italy's February 24–25 Parliamentary election were chaotic. Chaos was generated by the Italian electoral law, engineered in 2005 by the centre-right government to prevent the likely victory of a centre-left coalition at the 2006 elections. At that time, it almost delivered the intended effects, but it was only in the 2013 elections that it produced the results it was adopted for. The 2005 electoral law is in essence a proportional system with an inbuilt majority premium that gives 55 % of the seats to the party or coalition with a plurality of votes, regardless of how large the plurality is. (D'Alimonte 2007). The inbuilt mechanism in the electoral system almost inevitably produces chaos, as the rules of the majority premium in the House of Representatives (Camera dei Deputati) are different from those in the Senate (Senato). In the first case, the seats bonus is attributed to the party with the largest share of votes nationwide. At the Senate the premium is instead attributed to vote winners in each region. This means that, at the Senate, a party or a coalition has to win a plurality of votes in almost all regions (especially in those with the largest number of seats) in order to achieve a nationwide majority of seats in the Senate. In the 2013 elections the centre-left coalition won a plurality of the vote for the Camera dei Deputati, whereas in the Senate it was overtaken by the centre-right, in the regions of Lombardy, Veneto, Campania, Apulia and Sicily. The outcome was that no party or pre-electoral coalition had enough seats in both chambers necessary to govern alone. This was a new situation as in all elections from 1996 to 2008 the government was formed by parties belonging to pre-electoral coalitions. After the February 2013 elections, however, the coalition-building game had to be played after the elections.

The elections were chaotic because of an arguably 'crazy' electoral law. However, the outcome of the elections was also unexpected because of the voting choice of many Italians. The Partito Democratico (Pd) was deemed to be the likely winner according to pre-electoral polls. After the elections, its share of votes at the Camera dei Deputati was about 25.4 % (and the centre-left alliance's overall share was 29 %) as the Pd had almost three and half millions votes less than it had after the 2008 elections (see Table 1). Silvio Berlusconi mobilized the centre-right voters with an anti-tax and anti-Europe electoral campaign. Although Berlusconi's Popolo della Libertà (Pdl) obtained 50 % less votes than at the previous elections in 2008 (more than 6 million), his party campaign has turned out to be very effective, since it obtained about 21 % of the vote, that summed up to 29 % with Pdl's allies. The Lega Nord, the centre party Udc (Unione di centro) as well as the radical left lost many voters. Eventually, all parties of the post-1994 political system lost votes in the 2012 elections.

The actors who benefitted from this, albeit to different degrees, were the new parties openly challenging the two main electoral actors of the past 20 years. Mario Monti's party (Scelta Civica) got about 8.3 % of the vote. The real winner was, however, the 5 Stars Movement, led by the comedian Beppe Grillo. It performed very well winning almost one out of four valid votes on the basis of an

Table 1 2013 and 2008 elections results

2008 Parties	2013 Parties	Vote	%	Vote	%
Other extreme left lists	Other extreme left lists	375,837	1.0	95,129	0.3
Di Pietro Italia dei valori	Rivoluzione civile	1,593,532	4.4	765,054	2.3
La sinistra l'arcobaleno	Sinistra Ecologia e Libertà	1,124,428	3.1	1,090,802	3.2
Partito democratico	Partito Democratico	12,122,280	33.2	8,642,700	25.4
Partito socialista	Centro Democratico	355,575	1.0	167,201	0.4
Südtiroler Volkspartei	Südtiroler Volkspartei	147,666	0.4	146,804	0.4
Unione di centro	Scelta civica	2,050,309	5.6	2,823,814	8.3
	Unione di centro			609,647	1.8
	Futuro e Libertà			159,454	0.5
Il popolo delle libertà	Il popolo delle Libertà	13,642,946	37.4	7,332,121	21.5
Lega nord	Lega Nord	3,027,080	8.3	1,392,540	4.1
Movimento per l'autonomia all. per il sud	Grande Sud-Map	410,487	1.1	148,570	0.4
Ass. difesa della vita Aborto? no, grazie	Fratelli d'Italia	135,577	0.4	669,052	2.0
	La destra			220,312	0.6
La destra—fiamma tricolore	Mir	885,226	2.4	81,972	0.2
Per il bene comune	Partito Pensionati	119,419	0.3	55,050	0.2
	Intesa popolare			25,680	0.1
	Liberi per un'Italia equa			3,238	0.0
Other centre-right lists	Fare per Fermare il Declino	4,577,789	12.5	381,685	1.1
	Movimento 5 Stelle Beppegrillo_it			8,701,948	25.5
Others	Others	536,849	1.5	562,186	1.6
Valid votes	Valid votes	36,527,211	100	34,074,959	100.00

Source: Electoral archive of the Ministero degli interni. <http://elezionistorico.interno.it/>

anti-establishment platform. In all elections after 1994, several parties attempted to defy the political system of Italy's 'Second Republic'. But none of them succeeded. The 2013 electoral verdict, however, was quite exceptional delivering a multiparty system with three parties with an almost equal share of the vote and a fourth party in a pivotal role. The results made it difficult to form a new government. Under these conditions only three options were possible: (a) a coalition with the centre-left coalition and Grillo's party, (b) a 'Grosse Koalition' between the Pd, Scelta Civica and Pdl or (c) new elections. After more than 2 months, thanks to an effective string-pulling by the just re-elected Italian President of the Republic, Giorgio Napolitano, option (b) was chosen: Pd and Pdl decided to govern together in a German-style 'Grosse Koalition'.¹

The current political scenario resembles the pre-1994 political system when elections were not meant to enable parties to form a government, and the government was the outcome of post-electoral coalitional games of party leaders. After 1994, all governments were the product of pre-electoral coalitions. However, before the 2013 elections, a government based on a post-electoral coalition was very much welcomed by large sections of the countries' public opinion elite. The argument was the following: the 1994–2008 political system, Italy's 'Second Republic', was unable to deliver the structural reforms Italy needed and more than ever still needs today. The argument implied that the electoral system, adopted first in 1993 and then changed in 2005, was largely responsible of this failure. As different as they are—a mixed member system in 1993 and a proportional system with a majority premium in 2005—both systems have a strong majoritarian fundament, forcing parties to build pre-electoral coalitions in order to win the elections. If pre-electoral coalitions were effective in winning the vote, they turned out to be ineffective to govern since member parties had different policy platforms. Following this logic, the most preferred scenario before the 2013 election was a post-electoral coalition government with parties (such as the Ps and Monti's Scelta Civica) whose platforms were deemed close enough to deliver the reforms the country and Europe were waiting for. The February 24–25, 2013 electoral outcome, however, made this scenario unfeasible.

The electoral results did not simply led to an expected scenario. They also seem to suggest that the post-1994 political system has changed. The main characteristic of that political system was a bipolar pattern of political competition, characterized by an increasing concentration of votes in two major coalitions, albeit internally fragmented. The 2013 results show a dramatic change as Italy now has a political system based on at least three poles of equal electoral size. Therefore, the 2013 electoral results raise two central questions: (a) Is this change the outcome of an election with exceptional characteristics (a deep economic crisis and an anti-establishment climate nurtured by political scandals), in a word the consequence of

¹ The Grosse Koalition ended in November 2013 when Berlusconi decided to stop the parliamentary support for the Letta government, provoking a split within his party. Given the fluidity of Italian politics, this chapter considers only events related to the February 2013 elections and their immediate aftermath.

a temporary shock? Or (b) does it reflect also a change of the underlying structures of the ideological orientations of Italian voters, similar to those after the collapse of the ‘First Republic’ at the beginning of the 1990s—are the 2013 elections a harbinger of a ‘Third Republic’?

This chapter—divided into three sections—will address these questions. First, it will compare some aspects of the 2013 elections with the previous elections. This is followed by an analysis of the electoral changes, which occurred after the 1994 elections. Finally, the 2013 party choices will be compared with the voters’ underlying ideological outlook.

2 The 2013 Elections from a Long-Term Perspective

The 2013 electoral results appear to mark a radical change from the previous ones in several regards. The first, as Fig. 1 shows, is about the abrupt decline of turnout: it is five per cent lower than in 2008. It is the greatest drop in Italy’s electoral history. Media commentators insisted that the drop should be attributed to the deep discontent and disaffection of many Italians towards politics, implying that the drop in turnout is across age cohorts, education and income. While this interpretation is not necessarily wrong, it tends to conceal that the drop in turnout might also be related to other additional factors. Among them, demographic change seems to be a central factor.

Over a period of 5 years (2008–2013) the number of first-time voters is significant. Evidence collected in Italy as elsewhere (Franklin 2004) shows that first-time voters’ turnout habits are less stable and predictable than those of older voters (Scervini and Segatti 2012). This means that the turnout rate is likely to decrease in the next elections, albeit not as significantly as it happened in elections from 2008 to 2013. Moreover, the propensity not to vote is not equally distributed in all regions and across all levels of education. As Scervini and Segatti (*ibidem*) show, in elections from 1994 to 2006, regional income inequality strongly moderated the effect of education on turnout. This means that in regions with a high rate of income inequality, low educated voters’ turnout tends to be lower than that of highly educated voters. In a sense this phenomena suggests that parties became less effective as mobilization agencies.

A second major change regards the support for all the major parties of the ‘Second Republic’. A rough estimation suggests that the Pd and Pdl, Udc and Lega Nord together, lost almost 13 million votes. Summing up the losses of the extreme left, the debacle of the ‘Second Republic’ political actors amount to 14 million votes. Moreover, considering also that these parties could also have benefitted from some limited vote inflows, the volatility of the last elections was very high—maybe the highest in Italian history (D’Alimonte et al. 2013).

The collapse of the major parties in the 2013 elections has arguably altered the basic features of Italy’s political system. The effective number of parties moved from 3.8 in 2008 to 5.34 in the last elections. Figure 2 shows another interesting

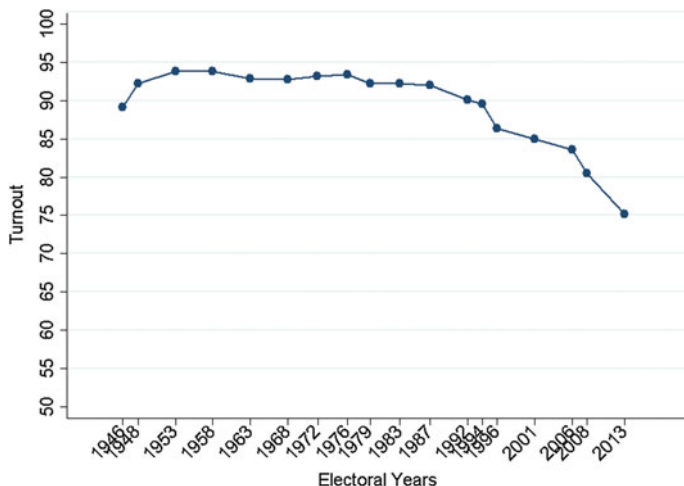


Fig. 1 Voter turnout from 1946 to 2013. *Source* Electoral data available at <http://elezionistorico.interno.it/>

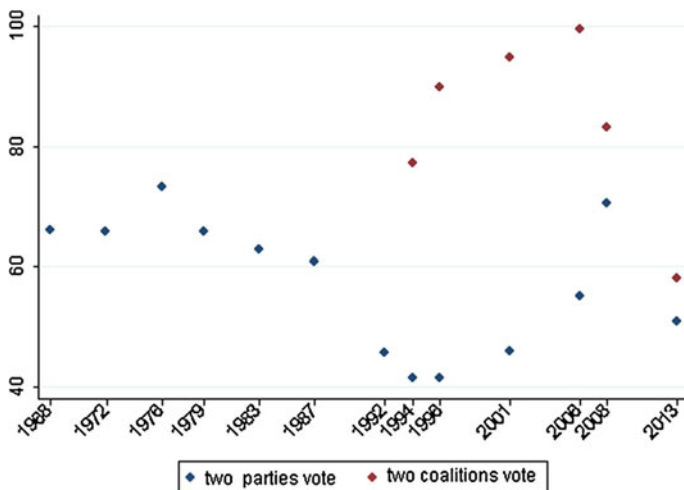


Fig. 2 Index of party and coalitions bipolarism from 1968 to 2013 elections. *Source* Based on electoral data available at <http://elezionistorico.interno.it/>

detail. In 2008 the sum of two major parties votes constituted about 70.5 % of the overall vote. In 2013 it has declined to 50 %, a level similar to some elections prior to 1994. However, the changes appear to be even more significant if one considers the votes for pre-election coalitions. In all elections from 1994 to 2008 the competition was not between parties, but also, and indeed above all, between party coalitions. The red points in Fig. 2 indicate the sum of votes for the two main

coalitions. In 2006 it reached the eye-catching level of 90.7 % of the overall vote. In 2013 the two main coalitions, centred on Pd and Pdl, obtained less than 60 % of the vote, almost the same share of the vote for Democrazia Cristiana (Dc) and Partito Comunista Italiano (Pci) obtained in the 1987 elections. Back then, those results were considered to be a signal of the incoming crisis of the ‘First Republic’ parties (Corbetta et al. 1988). In sum, the magnitude of the 2013 political earthquake suggests that a radical re-structuring of the political system could be on the way. Is the voting pattern of many Italians in the 2013 elections really a harbinger of such a re-structuring? To answer this question, we need to analyse the electoral changes, which occurred over the previous decades.

3 Italian Electoral Changes over the Past Decades

The post World War II party system mirrored deep social and ideological divisions. Among them, religion was clearly the most important one. Catholics who attended church tended to vote for the Dc. Most workers were inclined to vote for the left parties and in particular for Pci, but some of them voted for the Dc as Catholics. Ideology was also crucial. The second largest party, the Pci, was aligned with Moscow during the Cold War era, which made it de facto impossible for the Pci to replace the DC as governing party in Italy. Beyond religion, class, and ideology, other cleavages fragmented the party system and distributed electoral support unevenly across the country. In that context, the voting behaviour was aptly described as fragmented and isolated in territorial subcultures (Galli 1968). Sartori (1976) defined the patterns of party competition in the decades after the war as “polarised pluralism”. Indeed, the number of parties was big because the number of social cleavages was high, and voters were ideologically distant as well as isolated along the rift lines. Moreover, ideological distance among the parties triggered centrifugal competition, since the largest party (Dc) occupied the centre of the ideological continuum while the second largest party (Pci) was—initially in terms of policies and only later on in popular perception too—an anti-system party.

Over the decades, the roots of the post war parties’ electoral consensus slowly weakened. Nevertheless, if one wants to find evidence of the impending shake-up of the post war party system at the beginning of the 1990s, one has to consider factors other than social change. The state of the economy certainly played an important role, as it is shown by the public debt increase which in 1994 reached 121.8 % of the GDP. Other events were equally or even more crucial. These included: the fall of the Berlin Wall, the investigation by the judiciary into a wide web of political corruption primarily involving the governing political class (the so-called ‘Mani Pulite’ (‘Clean Hands’) investigation leading to the so-called ‘Tangentopoli’ (‘Bribesville’) scandal and crisis, initiatives by a reform-minded elites, new electoral laws with a majoritarian bias and, finally, a changed political scenario with a new key player, Forza Italia (Fi), a party set up a few months before the 1994 elections by media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi (Segatti 2013).

Events like these clearly altered the electoral behaviour of many Italians in the very noteworthy 1994 elections. However, they also had long-term consequences on the determinants of the voting choices of many Italians. First, the perception of the political space shared by Italian voters changed instantly and quickly. From 1992 to 1994, the number of Italian voters who refused to place themselves within the left-right continuum increased greatly. At the same time, the distribution of self-placements by Italians changed as well. Before the Dc collapsed, most voters placed themselves within the spectre of centre positions. After the demise of Dc, the centre became partially empty in favour of right of the centre positions (Baldassari 2007). Second, most of the social anchors of the vote choice lost their grips. As it happened in other European countries too, societal changes were eroding the subcultures in Italy (Sani and Mannheim 1987) (Franklin et al. 1992). The new electoral law and the emergence of new political groups and actors were, however, the key factors of the social dis-anchoring of the vote. The church and state cleavage was the most important electoral divide throughout the era of the 'First Republic'. In fact, still in 1992, although less than it was the case in the past, a weekly church attendant was highly likely to vote for the Dc, while voters who do not go to church were typically voting for the Pci. After the 1996 elections, church attendant voters became more likely to vote also for different parties, although the centre-right coalition benefitted more from church attendants' votes than other coalitions. The difference, however, was not comparable with what occurred when the voters had to choose between Dc and other parties, in particular the Pci.

Class cleavage, as compared to religious cleavage, was already weak before the 1990s. It remained weak after the 1990s and its effects on party choice were fluctuating across elections (Ballarino et al. 2009). Only territorial political divides have remained partially in place, although the traditional territorial subcultures were probably more internally fragmented after the 1990s than they were in the past (Vezzoni 2008).

Third, over the past 20 years voters less and less perceived elections as a sort of beauty contest in which socially ascribed political identities were competing against each other. On the contrary, party choice has become influenced by political factors such as leadership and the performance of governing parties and coalitions. Because of that, elections have become more and more instruments of evaluation of whether parties are accountable and responsive (Bellucci and Segatti 2010).

Fourth, voters began to identify themselves with coalitions more than with parties. As Baldassari and Schadee (2004) point out, this made more salient among voters the perception that the fundamental electoral competition took place between two poles rather than between parties.

I am aware that this assessment contradicts the common wisdom typically suggested by Italian mass media, which tends to portray the 'Second Republic' elections as a sort of simulated civil war. This media narrative, however, reflects too much the overall tone of the political debate in the public sphere, which, in fact, resembles a permanent state of war between the protagonists of Italian

politics. According to this description, the Italian political system still seems to be in a state of polarized pluralism, similar to how it was during the post war period. If one looks at the pattern of voting behaviour, however, the picture is quite different. One could be tempted to say that Italians simply became more similar in their voting habits to European voters, for the better and for the worse.

However, there is also another side of the story of the past 20 years. Contrary to the expectation that the majoritarian electoral law should have had an impact on the number of parties, party fragmentation did instead not decrease. To the contrary, it increased, especially at the parliament level, thanks to the generous availability of financial funds and a lack of institutional constraints (Segatti 2013). Although from 1994 to 2013, governments, on average, stayed in power for a longer period than prior to 1994, they were unable to deliver the solutions to the nation's problems. In a sense, the decision by the two main parties in November 2011 to support a government led by a technocrat, and in April 2013 to form a 'Grosse Koalition' is evidence that the political system of the 'Second Republic' has failed. The country's main parties were unable to respond to the country's economic problems, existing well before the 2008 global economic and financial and the 2011 Euro crisis.

However, if the post-2013 political system turned out to be a failure, it was not because Italy's main parties were unable to decide because they were paralyzed by voters pitting against each other within a structure of static social and cultural cleavages. Italian voting behaviour changed and adjusted itself to an institutional and political context that has been developing towards a bipolar competition as in most of Europe's democracies. The post-1994 political system was a failure because of uncompleted institutional reforms that made the parliament-government linkage incoherent with the pattern of bipolar competition. In sum, voters have changed their voting habits much more than elites have changed their behaviour.

As I underlined previously, the February 2013 elections appear to mark a turning point of the post-1994 electoral cycle. The crucial question concerns the determinants of the electoral volatility that occurred in these elections and negatively affected the support for the post-1994 parties. The 2013 elections took place in a context, which was exceptional in many ways: a severe economic crisis, an incumbent government supported for more than one year by all major parties, increasing anti-party sentiments triggered by a wave of scandals and abuses of political funds. Was the electoral volatility simply a contingent reaction to the above-mentioned context in which the elections took place or was it instead the harbinger of a more profound change in voters' behaviour, similar to the one that occurred at the beginning of the 1990s?

As it turns out, it may well be that it was both: a contingent reaction and also an indication of more profound changes of Italian voting behaviour. However, interpreting the elections' outcome as a result of contingent reaction implicitly refers to the voters' actual party choices, which might be deviant from previous choices without necessarily representing changes in ideology. The outcome as an expression of fundamental changes in voting behaviour on the other hand pre-supposes an underlying ideological structure of mass opinion that might persist even if the party

choice in a particular election is deviant from the previous vote. The next section will analyse if determinants of voting behaviours in the February 2013 elections had a different impact as compared to previous elections.

4 The February 2013 Election: Still Old Wine... Albeit in New Bottles?

We will consider three determinants, which determined the choice for parties in the February 2013 elections: religion, class, and ideology. As we have established above, religiosity had a strong impact on party choice prior to 1994. While after 1996 up until the 2008 elections this impact has become weaker, over the last few years several Catholic organisations' leaders expressed concern about the deterioration of the political and economic life and activities in Italy. In this context, they also thought that Catholics should increase their contributions to the common good, including contributions through new modes of involvement. Consequently, some of them decided to candidate themselves in Monti's 'Scelta Civica'. At the same time, the Italian bishop conference, while reaffirming the principle of pluralism of the party choice, expressed an implicit endorsement of Monti's attempt to challenge Italy's political bipolarism. Eventually, the 2013 elections were the first after 20 years in which Catholic voters received explicit cues by Catholic leaders and religious authorities on their political preferences and the parties they explicitly endorse. Consequently, the 2013 elections were also a test to see if the impact religiosity has on party choice had become stronger.

According to the Italian Election Study (Itanes) data,² roughly 40 % of the voters correctly perceived which party was endorsed by religious associations and institutions. However, only 10 % declared that they would follow the cues of those institutions and associations. Among Catholics weekly church attendants 22 % declared that they would do so. Finally, Table 2 shows the composition of the electorate of some parties and coalitions taking into account the level of church attendance. While there are some differences, they are not larger than in the recent past.

With regard to social class and social groupings, some data suggest that some of the traditional parties (Pd and Pdl) have lost some of its support from some social groups in comparison to the past while new parties such as M5s have increased their vote quota (Itanes (eds) Bellucci and Segatti 2008). If that is accurate, the overall impact of class on voting behaviour has decreased in comparison to previous elections. If the impact of social factors on voting behaviour has not changed in 2013, is that also the case for ideological orientations? As already mentioned

² Data in the text were taken from the second waves online panel, based on 3,000 respondents interviewed after the elections, and selected more than 8,000 respondents interviewed daily from early January to February 23 applying the Rolling Cross Section design.

Table 2 Composition of the 2013 electorate—preferences for selected coalitions and parties in relation to frequency of church attendance

Coalitions and parties	Every week	Once or twice at month	Once a year	Never	N
Partito Democratico and Sinistra e Libertà	27.62	15.27	26.07	31.05	583
Scelta civica	44.03	19.4	17.16	19.4	134
Popolo delle Libertà	36.74	19.7	26.14	17.42	264
Movimento 5 Stelle	25.39	18.91	30.57	25.13	386
Total	30.04	17.3	26.19	26.48	1,405

Source Itanes 2013 post electoral survey available at www.itanes.org

above, in the February 2013 elections, parties, which opposed bipolar competition between Pdl and Pd were successful for the first time after 1994. To what extent does this outcome reflect an underlying change of the ideological outlook as expressed by the voters' position within the left-right continuum? Figure 3 indicates the rate of respondents who do not place themselves within the left-right continuum from March 2011 to March 2013. The percentage is fairly stable, amounting to between 17 and 22 %. That is in no way similar to what happened at the beginning of the 1990s.³

More striking is the direct comparison between the self-placement of voters after the 2008 and 2013 elections.⁴ As Fig. 4 shows, some changes become evident. After the 2008 elections, respondents tend to position themselves close to centre-right positions while in the 2013 elections voters seem to identify themselves more with centre-left positions. However, the overall distribution of Italian voters continues to remain bipolar.

It is evident that M5s benefitted from vote inflows from all ideological quarters, i.e. from parties from the extreme left, the centre-left (Pd) and the right (Pdl and Lega Nord) (Fondazione Istituto Cattaneo 2013).⁵ The irony is that even M5s voters placed themselves within the left-right paradigm. According to the Ipsos Data Archive based on post-electoral survey of the first week after the elections, it emerged that out of 100 of M5s voters, 38 % placed themselves on the left of the political spectrum, 14 % on the centre, 22 % on the right and 22 % do not place themselves within the left-right paradigm at all. Data like these suggests that even mobile voters still positioned themselves politically within the left-right continuum. One should note that this positioning took place against the background of claims

³ Figures 3 and 4 and Table 2 are based on data from the Ipsos Data Archive. They were made available for the secondary analysis thanks to a grant of the Cariplo Foundation to the University of Milan in March 2012. Data coming from Itanes post electoral surveys confirm what the Ipsos data show (Baldassari 2013).

⁴ See also Baldassari (2013).

⁵ See also De Sio and Schadee (2013).

Fig. 3 Percent of respondents who do not place themselves from March 2011 to March 2013. *Source* Archivio dati Ipsos-Unimi

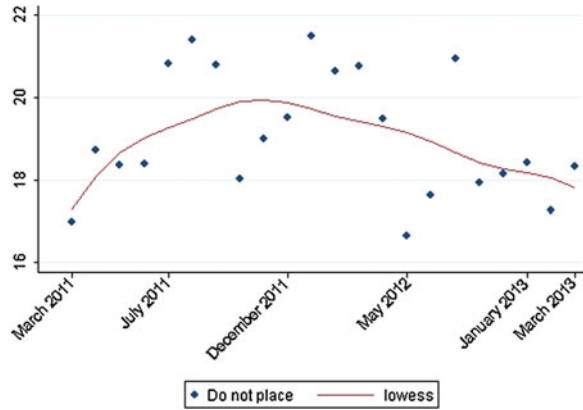
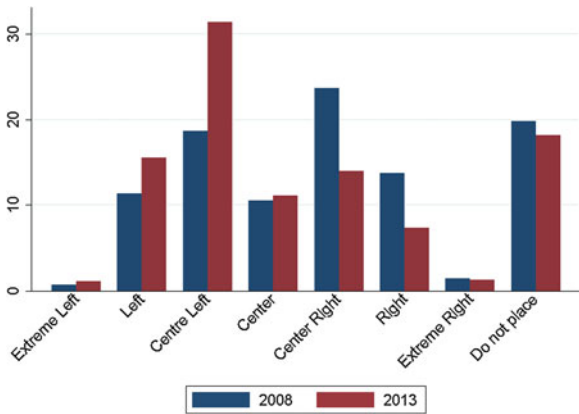


Fig. 4 Ideological positions on the left-right continuum in 2008 and 2013. *Source* Archivio dati Ipsos-Unimi. Data regarding 2008 election are also part of the Ipsos archive, but they were kindly made available by Prof. Paolo Natale



made by some parties that the traditional left-right divide was meaningless in terms of policies, but was instead a rhetorical device to conceal the behind-the-screen agreements within the political class, typically referred to as the ‘casta’ in Italian.

One could argue that left-right self-placements of M5s voters reflect their ideological past more than the current outlook. A recollection of the voters’ political biographies could suggest that they are inconsequential as to their future party preferences. However, that does not seem to be the case. M5s voters seem to differ not randomly as regards the degree of certainty they would vote again for the party they voted for in February 2013. Instead they differ according to their ideological self-placement.⁶ A few days after the February 2013 elections, ideology still

⁶ The index of certainty is simply the difference between the first and the second party preference of a voter’s preference. The party preferences of the respondents are measured by a question on their probability to vote ‘in the near future’ for a list of parties. In the case of data used in this paper, the range was from 1 to 10, subsequently rescaled from 0 to 1, where 0 means never and 1

influenced the degree of certainty of voting for M5s versus voting for the Pd and Pdl. Table 3 shows that leftist and rightist M5s voters in February differed when they were asked to say which party they were likely to vote for in the ‘near future’. The certainty to vote for the M5s decreases among February 2013 M5s leftist voters when the Pd is considered as second preference and vice versa among the rightist M5s voters when the Pdl is considered as second preference. On the contrary, determination to vote for the M5s increases when voters are being asked to choose between more ideologically distant parties.

These data suggest that immediately after the February 2013 election, M5s voters were still constrained in their party preferences by the traditional representation of political space. The persistence of the left-right continuum combined with the massive success of the Grillo movement is one of the most noteworthy and puzzling aspects of the February 2013 elections. Grillo’s 5 Stars Movement was able to capture the vote of many of those who in the past voted for the political right or left. It is possible that those voters who voted for a party that defined the left-right contraposition as meaningless, did not do so because they agreed on the irrelevance of the left-right contraposition per se, but instead because they perceived that (a) the M5s electoral proposal was focussing on issues outside of the left-right contraposition, and (b) that a focus on issues outside the left-right contraposition has become more salient as decisional shortcut than the left-right ideology. Discontent with politics in general or discontent with the Pdl and Pd in particular (leading to joint support of the Monti government from November 2011 to December 2012) may go along with the emergence of the above-mentioned new issues outside of the left-right continuum, regardless of whether they emerged due to political scandals or Italy’s main parties’ inability to adopt policies countering Italy’s economic decay.

In sum, this means that Italy’s political space has become bi-dimensional in 2013 (De Sio and Schadee 2013). The prevailing dimension is still the left-right contraposition. However, there may be a second contraposition that can be defined as a contraposition between ‘partitocracy’ against new politics, ‘old against new’ so to speak. How long this dimension can persist in the future remains, however, yet to be seen. It is likely that, if M5s is able to consolidate itself in Italian politics, its position will be assimilated into the left-right continuum, eventually paving the way for a meaningful and fundamental transformation of Italian politics. Thus, if the bipolar representation of political space has not changed yet, it might do so in the near future.

(Footnote 6 continued)

certain to vote for that party. The probability to vote ‘in the near future’ for a list of parties may be conceived as the utility a voter may feel to have in voting for one party, regardless of what the reasons might be (policy or non-policy). The interesting aspect of this instrument is that it allows to identify second or third preferences a voter may have, something which is impossible to gauge with the classical question on vote recall or voting intentions (Tillie 1995). For a detailed discussion on the probability to vote as instrument to assess the certainty to vote for a party see Vegetti (2013).

Table 3 Degree of certainty among M5s voters to vote for M5s instead of voting for Pd and Pdl, in the week immediately after February 2013 elections

	M5s versus Pd	M5s versus Pdl
Left	0.5	0.9
Center	0.6	0.8
Right	0.7	0.6
DnPlace/DnWant	0.7	0.8

Source Archivio dati Ipsos-Unimi

5 Conclusions

Each elections have their own peculiarities. Electoral campaigns can be more or less effective in mobilizing voters or even in convincing voters to switch from one party to another. Voters may or may not punish those in power because they are or are not dissatisfied with the state of the economy before the elections. Taking into account past performances of governments and the opposition, Italian voters typically voted in accordance with their ideological predispositions. Ideological shortcuts can explain why vote choices are fairly stable and, if they change, suggest that the reasons for change are election-specific considerations as opposed to long-term predispositions, such as partisanship or ideological outlook. In the Michigan model of electoral behaviour changes like these are referred to as ‘deviations’ (Campbell et al. 1980).

In February 2013 Italian voters were confronted with a particularly difficult task. They had to cast their vote at a time when all main parties supported the Mario Monti caretaker government. In a situation like this, voters did not know whom to blame and whom to punish with their voting choices. Voters also found it difficult to rely on ideology when parties did not seem to differ in terms of contents and substance and are from the voters’ perspective equally involved in a deeply-rooted web of corruption and abuse of public funds.

Voters could have taken the above-mentioned cues of the Catholic Church as reference, at least those who are church attendants. However, there is no evidence that voters voted in accordance with the preferences of the Catholic Church in February 2013. They also could have followed the cues of the labour unions, which were did not support the Monti-led government. But, again, there is no evidence of that. They could have followed their ideological predispositions. The evidence we collected show that the context in which Italians had to make their voting choice in February 2013 has not modified the representation of the political space whose prevailing dimension has remained the left-right contraposition. However, the empirical evidence seems to suggest that in the February 2013 elections the effect of the left versus right ideology determining Italians’ voting choices has weakened. This in turn made more salient the voters’ traditional negative perceptions of politics, which were again confirmed by reality.

Moreover, Italy's deep and prolonged economic crisis made more dramatic the perception of a failure of the existing political class. In similar circumstances, vote choice can become volatile provided that there is a political supply able to exploit the existing discontent and disaffection with politics.

The 2013 elections do not seem to be a case of simple deviation from previous consolidated patterns of vote choice, if we take the magnitude of the electoral earthquake into account. Does it mean that the vote choice of many Italians results from a change of their more general political predispositions, i.e. are we detecting a harbinger of an incoming political system? The Michigan model would call what happened in Italy in February 2013 'realignment'. Attempting to answer the question whether the February 2013 elections are a case of such 'realignment' was the main task of this chapter.

Post-electoral data seems to indicate that the 2013 electoral outcome does not (yet) stand for a radical restructuring of the political predispositions, similar to the one that took place at the beginning of the 1990s. Many voters changed their vote, but they still maintained their previous ideological affiliations. Their vote switch was made possible because a new dimension of party competition, across the left-right continuum.

We may be in a limbo. If this is the case, expectations of what could happen politically will have to be verified with theories and empirical observations. The state-of-the-art electoral research suggests that one important determinant of political change is political supply. The electoral changes, which occurred in Italy in the 1990s are a case in point. Voters did not only move from one party to another, but they were indeed 'forced' to adjust their perception of the political space to the post-1994 pattern of party competition. They did so fairly quickly. Simple observations of the events after the February 2013 elections suggest that maybe we are once again on the verge of a reshuffling of the party supply. An incomplete list of these events include increasing factionalism within the Pd, the emergence of centre parties, new divisions within the Pd, the weakness of Berlusconi's leadership, and finally the challenge by a strong anti-establishment party. All of these events might engender a radical reshuffling of the party supply that emerged after 1994. If this is case, one may conclude that the 2013 elections have paved the way to a turning point in Italian political history.

However, Italy's existing party system could also re-invent itself, adopting institutional reforms (beginning with a new electoral law) that may be helpful to redress the state of crisis. We will see whether this will happen any time soon. For now, the electorate's voting behaviour in February 2013 was not by itself a harbinger of a future political system. Like often in the past, Italian day-to-day politics might have mattered more.

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