

Why Were Italians Swayed to the Right by the Brothers of Italy?

Article by Thomas Simon Mattia

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In a shocking sweep to power, the far-right Brothers of Italy emerged as the country's biggest election winners. How could the far-right win despite its weak platform and extreme politics? Researcher Thomas Simon Mattia argues in the context of war and energy insecurity, voters were swayed by the promise of security rather than ideology.

The end of the state of emergency in Italy brought an end also to its 67th government which was appointed by President Sergio Mattarella to provide national unity in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. A technocratic government was the answer of former European Central Bank President Mario Draghi – appointed as Prime Minister to lead Italy through the post-pandemic crisis – who received near across-the-board confidence from the parliament in February 2021 as parties put aside their ideologies in favour of national recovery. But just as restrictions were lifted in July 2022, the anti-establishment Five-Star Movement (M5S) withdrew its support and followed by the populist right-wing League (Lega) and the liberal-conservative Forza Italia (FI), brought the government to an end, forcing Italy into its 19th legislature.

Everyone had foreseen it and on the 25th September, Italian constituents ensured the triumph of Brothers of Italy, a far-right party with post-fascist roots. Brothers of Italy (Fdi) was the strongest and nearly exclusive force of opposition to Draghi's government, standing for election in a centre-right coalition alongside Lega and FI, with which it shared a common platform. Despite this, only Brothers of Italy result was really a success. At 24 per cent, their vote share was six times greater than that of the previous general elections in 2018. All other parties declined, some dropping by half. The result marked a major turning point in Italian politics; Italy now had its most right-wing government since Mussolini.

Trouble within the majority

During the process of forming a government, the centre-right coalition showed signs of internal conflicts. Lega and FI both demanded more than half of the ministries (despite each having a third of the votes of Fdi), and Fdi leader Giorgia Meloni accusing her peers of blackmail. Matters were further aggravated when Silvio Berlusconi's private remarks about exchanging gifts and "sweet letters" with Vladimir Putin were leaked to the public and Giorgia Meloni declared that the formation of the government would be compromised if it had to include those who called the Russian invasion an "operation to replace Zelensky's government with decent people".

These evident struggles within the centre-right coalition left many wondering how the Left managed to achieve such a poor result. Overall, the right-wing turned up at the elections

united and came out divided in terms of results and opinions. These differences in outcome are most commonly attributed to Giorgia Meloni's exceptional campaign and her party's positive reputation as the only right-wing party not to have entered coalitions with its political rivals on different parts of the spectrum. However, this perspective does not explain, for example, how FdI gained votes even from previously left-wing voters.

What drew the line

The fact that FdI came out twice as popular as the other parties it shared a platform with in its coalition, reveals an advantage that can only lie in a different perception of the parties and their priorities. In a survey by CISE, respondents from the different parties revealed differences in their priorities respectively. Their analysis shows that the parties of the right-wing coalition place a similar importance on the abolition of the citizens' income, a form of conditional unemployment benefit introduced by M5S in 2019. What drew the line between FdI and the rest of the coalition were four issues in particular: the construction of new gasifiers, bringing Italy closer to a presidential system, reducing the powers of the judiciary, an abolishing green renovation grants for home-owners (this policy suffered from false claims and abuse). Meanwhile the other parties of the coalition performed more strongly on classic conservative issues such as keeping euthanasia illegal, limiting abortion, tax forgiveness, and reducing access to welfare by immigrants.

This preference for strengthening the government, increasing energy security, and cutting spending – even at the expense of the environment – above issues such as immigration or taxation, is fully in line with the priorities of Italians as of summer 2022. According to the Standard Eurobarometer 97, many voters deemed addressing the energy supply and the economic situation 12 to 16 per cent more important than climate action, and 18 to 25 per cent more important than dealing with immigration or taxation.

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Where the Left failed

The centre-left coalition – comprised of the Democratic Party (PD) alongside pro-European +Europa (+E) and the Greens under a common symbol with Italian Left (Verdi/SI) – was instead divided not so much in terms of priorities, but rather in terms of popularity and credibility. The most popular Democratic Party attempted to differentiate itself from the Right by criticising the least decisive concerns, instead of focusing on alternatives to their strong points. In fact, a survey by CISE revealed that PD was deemed most credible on ensuring easier access to citizenship for children of legal immigrants and progressive taxation. The party was also the second least partisan among the parties that made it into parliament, placing 36 per cent less of a priority on highly divisive issues than FdI. When it comes to the classic workhorses of the Left such as the minimum wage, wealth taxation, drug legalisation and environmentalism, Italians deemed the PD less credible than other parties in its coalition and, in some cases, even less than the Five Star Movement which is

not even formally left-wing. This was aggravated by the fact that left-wing voters interested in the smaller +E or Verdi/SI – which did have the credibility in terms of their positioning – were discouraged to vote by the current Italian electoral legislation. Many voters were turned away by the fact that the electoral system grants parliamentary seats to the Democratic Party even if constituents voted for a different party in its coalition. This voter apathy partially explains Italy's lowest election turnout since World War II. Overall, the Left made itself replaceable with the Right by downplaying its values, focusing instead on discrediting its opponents.

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A matter of history

Divisions within the majority though are not at all uncommon in Italian politics. An average of 67 days to form a government after a general election and a rate of 0.9 governments per year make Italy famous for its political instability. An Anglo-Saxon-style political model is Giorgia Meloni's answer to this problem, who says that if she were British, she would have been a Tory. Her proposals to bring Italy towards a presidential system and her admiration for bipartisan political systems have made many draw comparisons between her and Margaret Thatcher, especially in conjunction with her criticism of Marine Le Pen's economic interventionism and her Atlanticist and classically liberal stances on various issues.

Classic liberalism envisions a state only necessary to protect individual freedoms and legitimises civil disobedience in the event of the sovereign stepping beyond this boundary. Across Europe, the Second World War taught Europe the limits of this ideology after Hitler and Mussolini both found backdoors to dictatorship via democracy. In the aftermath of the war, countries like Germany and Italy became prime examples of social liberalism – also known as left-liberalism in Germany and simply liberalism in the United States – which envisions an interventionist state that can limit individual freedoms if they result in damage to society as a whole, ensure the separation of powers and an independent media, and maintain an equitable distribution of economic power.

With the famous phrase “who is society? There is no such thing^[JK1]”, Margaret Thatcher dismantled the United Kingdom's welfare state to pave the way for a stronger nation that reflected her ideology. Thatcher's streak of liberalism, which sees defence as a greater priority than social spending gained popularity at the height of the Cold War. It is no surprise that this politics is making a comeback now that war is raging in Ukraine. With the new rise of tensions in Europe, Meloni is determined to make Italy stronger by following the example set by the Republicans and the Tories 40 years ago, embracing the neoliberal agenda and enhancing individual freedoms over social welfare. Meanwhile, the Italian centre-left lacks the courage to make the tenets of social liberalism, particularly regarding state intervention in the economy, a central part of their programme. They focused on associating Meloni with Viktor Orbán even though it was apparent that Brussels would not tolerate sovereigntism and Italy could not afford to lose EU support. They concentrated more on pointing out Fdl's origins in post-fascism while forgetting to remind its constituents what made Italy a social liberal democracy in the first place.

A change of perspectives

Rising prices are the first concern of EU citizens, who attribute them primarily to the war in Ukraine. It is to be expected then that concerns around political ecology will lose prominence as the priority turns to maintaining a strong state that can weather crises. Self-critical countries, such as Italy, tend to compare themselves to other countries. Germany's vulnerability, exposed by Europe's energy crunch, determined its fall from grace as one of Italy's historic points of reference. Italians are now looking elsewhere – at the French presidential system and neoliberalism in the Netherlands – political and economic governance models.

With little alternatives on the Left, Italians did not vote for fascism but the promise of security – an objective currently more urgent than social equality. However, in the context of the war in Ukraine and increasing scepticism regarding the market's ability to produce welfare autonomously, progressive parties have an opportunity to make the case for economic intervention and social liberalism. For small parties with big ambitions such as Verdi/SI, this vision combined with electoral reform should be priorities.



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