

News

Italy's Populist Parties Rule the Day, But Will They Rule?

No one party or coalition captured enough seats to rule, making country's future unclear

By Frances D'emilio  
Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Italy's voters have spoken, and the populists ruled the day. But whether these euroskeptics can put aside their distrust and rivalries to rule together was the big question Monday as the nation embarked on a new era following a quarter-century of largely predictable coalition-formula politics.

More than half the ballots cast Sunday went to two populist forces that knew how to read the angry mood in a country where the brightest youths must go abroad to find decent careers and where hundreds of thousands of migrants were essentially marooned when many European Union partners slammed the door on these asylum-seekers rescued at sea.

The math added up to big dilemma, though. Because no party or coalition captured enough seats to rule alone, and because the populists went into the election as sharp rivals despite their similar "Italy, first," stances, it was unclear if a government with the potential to last could be forged to tackle Italy's pressing economic and social problems.

No one seemed to have



(GIUSEPPE LAMI/ANSA VIA AP)

Scrutineers start counting votes in the Italian general elections in Rome, Sunday, March 4, 2018. More than 46 million Italians were voting Sunday in a general election that is being closely watched to determine if Italy would succumb to the populist, anti-establishment and far-right sentiment that has swept through much of Europe in recent years.

the answer Monday.

"The (next) government is an enigma," read the front-page headline of the daily Corriere della Sera.

Emerging on top — and the pick of nearly a third of those who cast ballots — was the anti-establishment 5-Star Movement, founded in 2009 by comic Beppe Grillo and the largest opposition force in the just-ended legislature.

The other main player in maneuvers to try to form a government is the anti-immigrant League, led by Matteo Salvini, which expanded beyond its northern base to outpoll the conservative Forza Italia, the party created in the mid-1990s by Silvio Berlusconi.

"March 4's vote represents a watershed, with the maximum affirmation of anti-establishment parties in the Western Europe panorama, from the post war to today," said Rome's LUISS university's center for Italian electoral studies.

For roughly a quarter-century following the political upheaval in Europe set in motion by the demise of Eastern bloc communism, Italy's elections had largely alternated power between a center-right coalition headed by Berlusconi, who served three terms as premier, and a center-left bloc built around the Democratic Party, many of them former communists.

That system had been

dubbed the "second republic." It followed the so-called "first republic" of the post-war generation, in which Christian Democrats anchored government after short-lived coalitions, cobbled together with the aim of keeping what was then Western Europe's largest communist party out of power. That system crumbled in the early 1990s amid corruption scandals that swept away virtually an entire political class.

"Today for us is the start of the third republic. And the third will finally be the republic of the citizens," exulted Luigi Di Maio, the 5-Star Movement's 31-year-old candidate for premier.

But how that new era will take shape is very unclear.

Berlusconi, sidelined from holding office due to a tax fraud conviction and relishing the prospect of playing kingmaker after Sunday's vote, suffered what could be a definitive blow for the 81-year-old media mogul. Berlusconi's Forza Italia captured only 14 percent of the vote, compared to 18 percent for coalition partner Salvini's League, which achieved virtual dominance in Italy's prosperous northern regions, where Berlusconi made much of his immense wealth.

The League's votes, along with Forza Italia and those of a smaller partner, the far-right Brothers of Italy, totaled 37 percent of ballots cast — nowhere near the absolute majority needed to win the confidence votes in each chamber of Parliament required under Italy's system for

governing.

The 5-Stars Movement's better-than-expected 32 percent showing was boosted by its dominance of the south, where Forza Italia had long held sway.

This north-south divide is a new element that could complicate any power-sharing, political analyst Angelo Panebianco said.

"Government formation will take longer because of this division" as leaders adjust to new territorial equilibriums, he said on Sky TG24.

Further complicating the path toward a new government are campaign vows by the 5-Stars Movement never to govern in a coalition.

Savoring the center-right's performance, Salvini vowed that the bloc had won "the right and the duty to govern." Berlusconi and Salvini huddled on Monday at the mogul's estate on Milan's outskirts, but there were no indications what strategy the two leaders might chart.

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