



CRISIS  
OBSERVATORY

# Policy Paper

No 4\_April 2013

## Reform or Perish: Assessing the Results of Italy's Latest General Elections

**Rocco Polin**

PhD candidate of Political Science and  
International Relations at the Istituto Italiano di  
Scienze Umane in Florence, Italy

**ΕΛΙΑΜΕΠ**  **ΕΛΙΑΜΕΠ**

ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΟ ΙΔΡΥΜΑ ΕΥΡΩΠΑΪΚΗΣ & ΕΞΩΤΕΡΙΚΗΣ ΠΟΛΙΤΙΚΗΣ  
HELLENIC FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN & FOREIGN POLICY

Copyright © 2013

Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP)

49, Vas. Sofias Avenue, 106 76 Athens Greece

Tel.: +30 210 7257 110 | Fax: +30 210 7257 114 | [www.eliamep.gr](http://www.eliamep.gr) | [eliamep@eliamep.gr](mailto:eliamep@eliamep.gr)

CRISIS OBSERVATORY | [www.crisisobs.eu](http://www.crisisobs.eu) | [info@crisisobs.gr](mailto:info@crisisobs.gr)

All Rights Reserved

## Reform or Perish: Assessing the Results of Italy's Latest General Elections

### Rocco Polin

Rocco Polin is a PhD candidate of Political Science and International Relations at the Istituto Italiano di Scienze Umane in Florence, Italy. He holds a MA in International Affairs from the University of Bologna and has been visiting student at the Universities of Cambridge, California-Berkeley and at Sciences Po in Paris. He has worked as a trainee at the European External Action Service and with the United Nations in Beirut. His main research interests are Foreign Policy Analysis, Middle Eastern Studies and Italian Politics.

---

*ELIAMEP offers a forum for debate on international and European issues. Its non-partisan character supports the right to free and well-documented discourse. ELIAMEP publications aim to contribute to scholarly knowledge and to provide policy relevant analyses. As such, they solely represent the views of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the Foundation.*

## Table of Contents

A surprising political trajectory: from Berlusconi to Monti and from Monti to Grillo.....	6
Explaining the electoral results.....	7
Possible scenarios for the near future.....	8
Conclusion: it's the institutions, stupid!.....	9
About the Crisis Observatory.....	11

# Reform or Perish: Assessing the Results of Italy's Latest General Elections

**Rocco Polin**

## Περίληψη

Ύστερα από τα απροσδόκητα αποτελέσματα της τελευταίας εκλογικής αναμέτρησης στην Ιταλία, η χώρα έχει περιέλθει σε πολιτικό τέλμα. Το Κίνημα των Πέντε Αστέρων (M5S) του Μπέπε Γκρίλο απέσπασε το αξιοσημείωτο 25.5% των ψήφων, ενώ το Δημοκρατικό Κόμμα δεν κατόρθωσε να εξασφαλίσει μια καθαρή πλειοψηφία στη Γερουσία. Η απογοήτευση και η οργή των Ιταλών πολιτών έναντι της πολιτικής ελίτ προϋπήρχε της τρέχουσας οικονομικής κρίσης, ενώ για να κατανοήσουμε την εμφανώς ανεξήγητη συμπεριφορά τους κατά τη διάρκεια των τελευταίων ετών θα πρέπει να ανατρέξουμε αρκετά χρόνια στο παρελθόν. Ανίκανο να σχηματίσει αυτοδύναμη κυβέρνηση, το Δημοκρατικό Κόμμα πρέπει να βρει τη δύναμη προκειμένου να διαπραγματευτεί με τον Μπερλουσκόνι, ούτως ώστε να διασφαλίσει επιτέλους την επι μακρόν αναμενόμενη μεταρρύθμιση του Ιταλικού συνταγματικού και πολιτικού συστήματος.

## Abstract

Following the unexpected results of the latest political elections in Italy, the country finds itself in a political stalemate. The Five Star Movement by Beppe Grillo won an astonishing 25.5% of the votes while the Democratic Party failed to win a clear majority in the Senate. The disillusion and anger of Italians with their political class predates the current economic crisis and goes a long way in explaining their apparent erratic behavior in the past few years. Unable to form a government by itself, the Democratic Party must find the strength to negotiate with Berlusconi in order to achieve the long overdue reform of the Italian institutional and political system.

## Key Words:

Italy, Italian elections, political crisis, Grillo, constitutional reform, Ιταλία.

The results of the latest Italian general elections were extremely surprising in many respects. Mario Monti, the widely respected former prime minister who run as a leader of a new centrist coalition, got a very disappointing electoral result; Pierluigi Bersani, the centre-left leader who seemed set to win the elections, failed to win a clear majority in the Senate; Silvio Berlusconi, the right wing leader who was deemed to be politically finished after the failure of his last government, made a surprising comeback; and the Five Star Movement, a new populist party led by former comedian Beppe Grillo, received an astonishing 25.5% of the votes.

**Figure 1. The Results of the Italian Elections**

	Percentage of popular vote*	Seats in the lower chamber (majority 315)	Seats in the higher chamber (majority 158)
Centre-left coalition led by Pierluigi Bersani	29.55%	345	123
Centrist coalition led by Mario Monti	10.56%	47	19
Centre-right coalition led by Silvio Berlusconi	29.18%	125	117
Five Stars Movement led by Beppe Grillo	25.55%	109	54

\*the percentage of the votes refers to the elections for the lower chamber in 19 regions out of 20, excluding Valle d'Aosta and Italians voting from aboard (source: Ministry of the Interior)

In order to understand such largely unexpected results, their root causes and their possible future implications, this paper will be divided into three parts. The first section will analyze the political trajectory of the country in the past two years, highlighting the seemingly erratic shifts of popular support from Berlusconi to Monti and then from Monti to Grillo. The second section will try to explain such apparently unpredictable behavior by focusing on Italian's disillusion at their political class. Finally, the third section will examine some possible scenarios for the future and conclude with few recommendations.

## **A surprising political trajectory: from Berlusconi to Monti and from Monti to Grillo.**

While, from 2010 onwards, a transnational movement of protest and indignation was spreading from Cairo to Madrid, to Athens and Wall Street, Italians seemed exceptionally apathetic. They seemed indifferent or resigned about the social and economic decline of their country. They accepted the erratic economic policies and personal behavior of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, and then, when he was forced to resign by a political maneuver enacted by the President of the Republic, accepted his demise with the same imperturbable passivity.

Even more surprisingly, Italians accepted and indeed seemed to largely support the new unelected technocratic government of Mario Monti, a former university professor and European commissioner who succeeded Berlusconi. The same people who few years earlier had elected Berlusconi on the base of the slogan “fewer taxes for everybody”, seemed to suddenly realize the necessity of harsh austerity measures. The same public opinion that accepted and even enjoyed the flamboyant personality of Silvio Berlusconi now seemed enthusiastic of the sober personal style of Mario Monti.

One widespread interpretation held that Italians “had learned their lesson”. They matured to the point of supporting Monti’s illuminated leadership and accepting the economic sacrifices he imposed. This was the story the Italian elite liked to hear; possibly comparing the well behaved and mature Italian public to the unruly Greeks and Spaniards, who rioted in the streets, apparently unable to understand the necessity and benefits of the newly formed Berlin-consensus.

The proof of how profoundly mistaken was such an interpretation came of course from the results of the general elections of last February. The defeat of Monti and Bersani, commonly regarded as the most “responsible” political leaders by both the financial markets and Italy’s European partners, spoke loudly about Italians’ disillusion with austerity measures. On the other hand, the astonishing success of Beppe Grillo showed behind any possible doubt that, far from being apathetic or resigned to the current situation, Italians are indeed eager for radical change.

If that is so, however, why did they seem so supportive of Monti’s reforms? How could his government have been so popular among those same people who now voted for Grillo? After all, Monti and Grillo seem to be politically incompatible: Monti put the European Union at the centre of his political project, while Grillo went as far as proposing a referendum on the Euro, Monti led a technocratic and elitist government, while Grillo proposed to give back the power to the common man, Monti derived his legitimacy from being one “who knows better”, while Grillo was appreciated because he seemed to be “one of us”. Is Italian public opinion completely schizophrenic?

## Explaining the electoral results

The attempt to answer such puzzling questions should start in my view by placing Italy back where it belongs: on the European shore of the Mediterranean Sea. The wave of discontent that spread from the streets of Cairo to the squares of Barcelona, that resounded across the Ocean with the Occupy movement only to bounce back in Europe with the success of the short pamphlet *Indignez-vous*, did not spare Italy as many had thought (or hoped). Italians are as angry at their ruling class as Greeks or Spaniards (or indeed Egyptians and Jordanians). While such feeling of anger and indignation did not lead them into the streets as it did in Athens or Madrid, it is still central in explaining both their apparently contradictory support for Monti and Grillo and the unexpected failure of the Democratic Party at winning the general elections.

Mario Monti and Beppe Grillo, as different as they may seem, share an important similarity, which is precisely what explains their support among the Italian public opinion: they are both perceived as alternatives to the old political class. Both Monti's aristocratic project of a technocratic government by the illuminated few, and Grillo's populist proposal for some kind of direct democracy through the web, have the merit to break away from the hated *partitocrazia* (power of the parties) and its *casta* (the privileged and never changing political class).

The mistake that Monti made during the electoral campaign was to transform himself from a technocrat into a politician. While Grillo marked his fundamental difference from the "political circus" by refusing to appear in talk shows or even talk to the Italian media, Monti adopted the style and the language of the very political class Italians had hoped he could defeat. He promised to lower taxes, allied himself with some widely disrespected centrist parties, and even hoped to win the sympathy of the electorate by appearing in television petting his new dog. As a result, his image quickly changed from that of a technocratic savior of the homeland to that of yet another politician, leader of a small party hoping to get enough votes to influence the future government.

The other surprising result that can be explained by focusing on the anger and indignation of the Italian public against the political class as a whole, is the unexpected resilience of Berlusconi and the parallel failure of the centre left coalition to obtain an outright majority, as most observers had predicted. Such forecast was based on the idea that the almost general consensus on the failure of the centre-right government of Silvio Berlusconi, should have led voters to swing towards the opposing left wing coalition. Yet, what happened is that voters did not perceive the failure of Berlusconi as a failure of his coalition, but rather as a failure of the political class in general, centre-left parties included.

Even more paradoxically, the general disillusion and distrust towards the institutions and the political class of the so called "Second Republic" have probably damaged the left even more than the right. While Berlusconi has been prime minister for ten of the last twenty years, he has always been perceived, somehow oddly, as an outsider rather than as part of the system. Against the unorthodox and almost subversive style of Berlusconi, the Italian centre-left coalition has presented itself as the defender of the Republican Institutions and as the

custodian of the constitutional legitimacy. It is thus not completely surprising that, when the public opinion diverted its anger from the former government to the political and institutional system as a whole, the leftist opposition got damaged even more than Berlusconi did.

## **Possible scenarios for the near future**

Due to the tripartite distribution of the electoral preferences, with Bersani, Berlusconi and Grillo getting almost a third of the votes each, and to the effects of a bizarre and deeply dysfunctional electoral law, Italy is now ungovernable. The left wing coalition has obtained the majority of the seats in the lower chamber but not in the Senate, where even in alliance with Monti it would still remain sixteen seats short of the majority. Since in Italy governments require the confidence of both chambers, Bersani is now forced in an unnatural agreement either with Berlusconi or with Grillo.

A further element of uncertainty is due to the fact that the Presidency of Giorgio Napolitano is set to end next May and, according to the Italian Constitution, in the last six months of his mandate the President is not allowed to dissolve the Parliament and call for new elections. As a result, some kind of agreement between opposing political parties is needed, however unattractive this may seem to most voters, and indeed to most political leaders.

The first option is a coalition between Bersani's left wing coalition and Grillo's Five Star Movement. This seems to be Bersani's favourite strategy as it would allow him to govern without entering in any agreement with Berlusconi and, possibly, to pursue an agenda of radical change and reforms. Hoping to force Grillo to stand up to his responsibilities, Bersani has thus proposed a political platform that contains most of Grillo's early slogans, from cuts in the privileges of the political class to the end of austerity measures. So far, however, Grillo has rejected all such proposals. Indeed, he knows that by entering in agreement with the old political class he would immediately lose most of his support. Conversely, by forcing Bersani in an unholy and deeply unpopular alliance with Berlusconi, he could greatly increase his popular consensus.

For some observers the cynicism shown by the Five Star Movement is appalling. Grillo, they denounce, thrives on popular discontent and is thus refusing to contribute to the solutions of the country's problems hoping to further discredit the current political class and inherit its power. On the other hand, it must be acknowledged that the newfound urgency of the Bersani's Democratic Party to reform a system that they have done nothing to change in the past decade, is at least suspicious. Grillo is then probably quite right in fearing that by entering in alliance with the Democratic Party, his young and inexperienced parliamentarians would easily be tricked into preserving the status quo. In the country of "The Leopard", changing everything so that nothing really changes is an old political trick.

A refusal by Grillo to agree to any alliance, would then force the Democratic Party to consider an agreement with Berlusconi's right wing coalition. Considering how bad this

would be received in the left wing public opinion, it is likely that such agreement would produce a government somehow non partisan in nature and limited in scope. The endless Italian political creativity has elaborated several names and formulas for such governments (*governissimo, governo di scopo, governo del presidente* and so on), and indeed minor variations can make a big difference. It can be a fully technocratic and non partisan government, or a government somehow led by the Democratic Party (but probably not by Bersani himself). Berlusconi's coalition could be fully brought in government or only provided with veto power on some key issues such as the election of the new President. The government could have a full mandate or, most likely, a limited time frame and few specific goals, above all the electoral law reform. Such scenarios, of which many other variations are possible, would of course put Mario Monti back in the game.

If none of these options results feasible and Giorgio Napolitano is unable to forge any agreement between the different political factions, the only option left would be to call for new elections. The Parliament would need to quickly elect a new President and then it would be immediately dissolved. New elections would be held hoping for a different result. While the Greek precedent encourages some to consider this solution, it must be remembered that if the current electoral law is not changed it is very unlikely that a clear winner could emerge from the vote and Italy would find itself again in the same situation of uncertainty and un-governability.

## **Conclusion: it's the institutions, stupid!**

While in the last few years the economic crisis understandably took priority over all other matters, the root cause of most of Italy's problem lies in the malfunctioning of its political institutions. If in times of financial crisis, high unemployment and bleak economic perspectives, Grillo's invectives against the privileges and ineptitude of the political class may seem peripheral and relatively unimportant, they are quite contrary of great urgency and central significance. In his intense year of government, Mario Monti has done what he could to fix the outstanding financial imbalances and alleviate the economic problems of the country. It is now time to take on the even greater challenge of the political and institutional reforms. Somehow paradoxically it took an "anti-political" movement such as Grillo's to remind us that the key to the country's future lies in its political institutions.

Italy needs to complete the transition it had started at the beginning of the nineties. At that time, the end of the Cold War, the introduction of a new electoral system and the corruption scandals that engulfed most of the old political class, led to a profound transformation of the Italian political landscape. While some commentators were quick to celebrate the birth of a "Second Republic", characterized by turnover in government, centripetal political competition and sound economic policies, such political promised land has never been reached and Italy has been left wondering in the desert for over twenty years. Indeed, without a Moses to lead them, Italians started to worship the golden calf of Berlusconi and never succeeded to elaborate new Tablets of Law and to reform their institutions.

What Italy's new Decalogue (or Constitutional reform) should contain is more or less agreed by most parties: a new majoritarian electoral system, more powers for the Prime Minister, a reform of our inefficient form of perfect bicameralism, possibly contemplating the abolition of the Senate, a new and more efficient federal structure of the State, the abolition of the provincial districts and few other agreed constitutional adjustments.

To enact these complex and important reforms Italy quickly needs a strong government with a large political legitimacy and a vast parliamentary support. Given the disengagement of the Five Star Movement, in order to form such a government the centre-left coalition needs to seek the help of its arch-enemy Silvio Berlusconi. Legitimizing Berlusconi as a partner in government and as a constituent is seen by the Democratic Party as a certain pathway to a future electoral defeat, as it would be seen as an intolerable compromise by most of its electorate.

With all due respect for the understandable instinct of self-preservation of the Democratic Party elite however, the future of Italy is more important than that of the current centre-left coalition. President Napolitano knows it very well and, once again, his political wisdom and high moral authority will be crucial to guide the country in the right direction.

## About the Crisis Observatory

In the context of the worst economic crisis in the history of post-war Greece and the wider European debt crisis, initiatives for the systematic and scientific documentation, study and analysis of the crisis in both Greece and Europe are sorely needed.

The Crisis Observatory aims to answer this call. The Crisis Observatory is an initiative of the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP), with the support of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation.

Its primary objective is to become a central hub for information, research and dialogue for both the Greek and European crises. The Crisis Observatory's guiding principle is the presentation of new research, policy proposals and information, which are based on solid arguments and empirical evidence, with a view to improving the level of public discourse about the crisis. In order to achieve this objective, the Crisis Observatory's work is organized around three central pillars:

- The provision of educational material with a view to enhance the ability of the average citizen, who often does not have a good hold on economic issues, to understand basic parameters of the crisis.
- The provision of serious, evidence-based and representative, in terms of subject focus and theoretical/political approaches, information about the crisis.
- Intervention in the public discourse about the crisis, through the creation of a venue for the free expression of different views and policy proposals promulgation of new research about the crisis.

The team of the Observatory is:

### Head of the Observatory

- Dimitris Katsikas, Lecturer, Department of Political Science and Public Administration, University of Athens [International and European Political Economy]

### Postdoctoral Fellow

- Kyriakos Filinis, PhD, Department of Political Science and Public Administration, University of Athens [Political Economy]

### Research Associates

- Marianthi Anastasatou, Economist, Reseach Associate, Council of Economic Advisors [Macroeconomics, Economic Growth, Competition, International Trade]
- Nikos Chrysoloras, PhD, Journalist, Correspondent for European Institutions, Brussels

### Special Advisor

- Nikos Koutsiaras, Department of Political Science and Public Administration, University of Athens [European integration, Employment and Labour Market Policy, Social Policy, EMU and Macroeconomic Policy]



**ΠΑΡΑΤΗΡΗΤΗΡΙΟ**  
ΓΙΑ ΤΗΝ **ΚΡΙΣΗ**

**ΕΛΙΑΜΕΠ**  **ΕΛΙΑΜΕΠ**

ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΟ ΙΔΡΥΜΑ ΕΥΡΩΠΑΪΚΗΣ & ΕΞΩΤΕΡΙΚΗΣ ΠΟΛΙΤΙΚΗΣ  
HELLENIC FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN & FOREIGN POLICY

Λεωφ. Βασιλ. Σοφίας 49, 10676 Αθήνα | 49, Vas. Sofias Avenue, 10676, Athens Greece  
Tel. +30 210 7257 110 | Fax +30 210 7257 114 | E-mail [eliamep@eliamep.gr](mailto:eliamep@eliamep.gr)