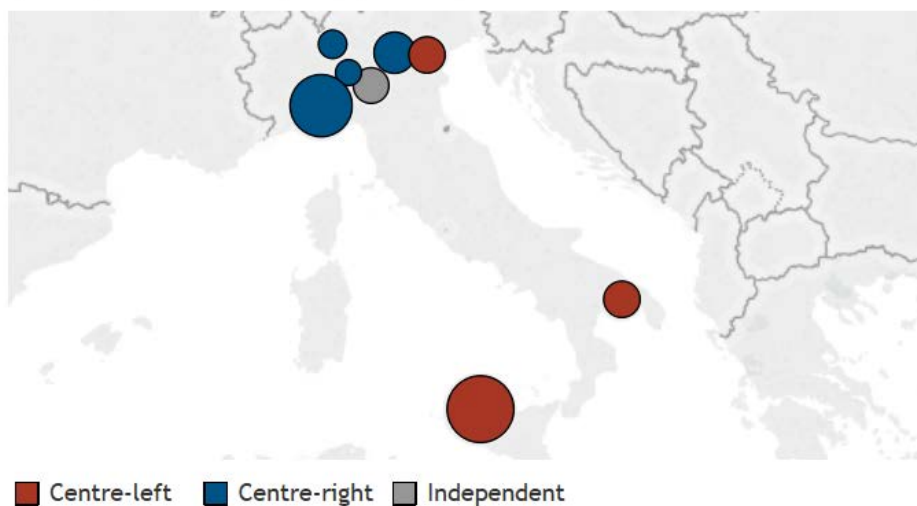


Could Italy see the return of Berlusconi?

Blog post by Senior Associate Roberto Robles, 27 June 2017

Sunday's Italian municipal election results demonstrated one of the golden rules of Italian politics - never underestimate Il Cavaliere. Former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's party Forza Italia and its ally, Lega Nord, had a string of very good results in some of Italy's largest cities, with victory in the erstwhile left-wing stronghold of Genoa being the most symbolic.

2017 Italian local election results
(municipalities over 100,000 population)



Source: Ministry of the Interior

To some extent, the centre-right's success is due to the failure of its two rivals. The Five-Star Movement failed to make it into the run-off in any large city, compared to 2016 when it notably won Rome and Turin. In the second round, its voters mostly flocked to centre-right candidates, partly as a way to punish the governing centre-left. Italian voters are increasingly distinguishing between the local and national contexts, and while backing away from the Five Star Movement at a local level - with the party's perceived mismanagement of the city of Rome perhaps having served as a cautionary tale - they are still prepared to support it at a national level, with the party continuing to top most opinion polls. As with other populist parties in Western Europe, this may be not because voters perceive the Five Star Movement as having the right answers, but because they think it is at least asking the right questions and see a vote for it as a way to put pressure on established political parties.

While the centre-right has proved that it can be a winning alliance at the local level, combining Berlusconi's Forza Italia and Matteo Salvini's Lega Nord would be much more difficult at a national level. The two parties differ significantly on key policy areas like eurozone membership - with

Salvini advocating a full euro exit, while Berlusconi has recently touted the idea of a 'parallel currency' - that would not necessarily prevent a local alliance, but would prove problematic in government. But it's also a question of personality and leadership. While historically Forza Italia has been clearly the senior party in centre-right coalitions, both parties are now hovering around 13-14% in the opinion polls. This poses the question of who would lead such a coalition, and not only do Salvini and Berlusconi have clashing personalities, they also have different visions for the right; for Salvini, one modelled after Marine Le Pen's Front National, and for Berlusconi, one closer to the mainstream European centre-right.

These differences are unlikely to be surmounted before the next parliamentary elections in Spring 2018, relegating one of the right-wing parties to supporting a centre-left government or even a Eurosceptic Five-Star Movement one. But last week's local elections showed that if the centre-right did coalesce, it might be a competitive force, adding yet more uncertainty to Italy's political landscape. Berlusconi is still Italy's last elected prime minister; four prime ministers later and 23 years after his first election, Italy has not written him off just yet.