

# Italy General Election 2018: Analysis & Forecast



**DISCLAIMER:** The following is not a full-fledged analysis, also because I do not have the resources to perform one. Still, it is not an unreasoned predicting attempt, as I based my forecast on a series of factors influencing the Italian political system. So, you can consider it as an “educated guess” whose aim is to explain some background elements as well as to forecast the election’s results.

Note that the percentages I provide in the end do not refer to the number of votes a given list / coalition will obtain, but to the number of seats that it will ultimately have in the Parliament (after all, this is what matters in the end).

**IMPORTANT:** This is the “full” version of a report that I published on Saturday 3 March. It had by no means the objective of supporting any political force, of providing voting indications or of influencing the electoral outcome in any way. Its aim was purely analytic and illustrative; and it provided no projections. This complete version containing my forecast has been published on 4 March after the closure of the polling places at 11:00 p.m. Italian time.

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04/03/2018

## Intervening Factors

I based my reasoning on the following elements:

- Italy's current electoral system; conceived as the combination of electoral law (the *Rosatellum*), the number of relevant parties / coalitions, the country's nature as a polity, etc.
- The existing balance of power & relations between the relevant parties / coalitions
- The present political discourse
- Italy's electoral and political tradition
- The socio-political sentiments among the Italian society
- Voting surveys
- My "gut feeling"

## Background information

**How *Rosatellum* works:** One-third of the Parliament is elected through a pure majoritarian system (the candidate receiving more votes in a uninominal district wins the seat) and the remaining two-thirds of MPs are elected with a proportional system in plurinominal districts. There is a single ballot for both the majoritarian and the proportional "parts", and panachage (*voto disgiunto*) is not possible: voting a candidate associated with a given list / coalition in the uninominal district will automatically assign the vote in the plurinominal district to that same list, and vice versa. **Given that the plurinominal (proportional) districts will be created by uniting several uninominal (majoritarian) ones, the latter will be more important; as they will influence the outcome of the plurinominal districts due to the automatic transmission of votes to a list / coalition in the uninominal districts to the same list / coalition in the larger plurinominal ones.** The election threshold is at 3% for single lists and 10% for coalitions (that must include a list having obtained at least 3% of votes).

### Relevant lists / coalitions:

- **Center-right:** it revolves around Silvio Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* with a liberal program aimed at boosting the economy; but other parties are included, notably the League (*Lega*) led by Matteo Salvini who pursues an anti-EU and anti-immigration agenda and is criticized in the mainstream political discourse.
- **Democratic Party (DP):** the main party in the center-left coalition, promoting moderate, pro-EU and reformist policies; headed by Matteo Renzi.
- **Five Stars Movement (FSM):** a party proposing a renewal of the political class, a guaranteed basic income and other measures leveraging on the popular discontent, which includes opposing the EU & Euro; it is attacked in the major political discourse and its leader is Luigi Di Maio.

- **Free & Equals (Liberi e Uguali)**: a list formed by the old guard of the DP that seceded from it. Its importance lies mainly in the fact that it may draw a non-negligible share of votes from the DP, weakening it and allowing this list to gain a certain coalition / blackmail potential when the moment of forming a government comes. It is led by Pietro Grasso.

**Relations between parties (lists) / coalitions:** In brief, each of the three main poles (center-right, DP and FSM) runs for victory on its own against the others; but **while some form of cooperation between the center-right and the DP when forming a government is not to be ruled out, the possibility of post-electoral coalitions including the FSM has been excluded by both the party itself and by its rivals.**

## Analysis

**The “Rosatellum effect”:** First, I reflected upon the effects the *Rosatellum* will have. **Due to its nature, this law will tend favoring parties (lists) that present one or both of the following characteristics:**

- Are deeply rooted in the territory, so have local “strongholds” (as they will likely win the majoritarian-assigned seats)
- Have a large and loyal national-level electoral basis (as this increases the likelihood of getting the seats assigned with the proportional system)

**Satisfying both of these conditions is particularly positive, as they mutually reinforce each other due to the impossibility of panachage:** if a party has many strongholds, its candidates will be elected in these majoritarian electoral districts, but it will also automatically get precious votes in the plurinominal districts (made by uniting the uninominal ones); if a party has a large nation-scale voting base, it will receive many MPs in the proportional districts but it will also be more likely to win the majoritarian seats, even just by few votes more than the second-classified party. **In practice, this system is particularly advantageous for the DP, since this party satisfies both conditions; but is also favorable for the League** (as it has secure strongholds in the north). It is not a case that the DP promoted and approved this law with the support from the League and *Forza Italia* (despite they disagreed with the DP on virtually everything else). By contrast, the FSM staunchly opposed it; the reason being that it has few (if any) local strongholds and its voter base (while being large in relative terms) is not so traditional as that of other parties, notably the DP.

**The “nature” of electoral districts:** That said, I divided the electoral districts in two categories: **“Strongholds” and “Open” districts.** The first are those where a given party is rooted and is virtually sure to win; while the second are the actual battlegrounds that will determine the ultimate electoral outcome. The situation is different in the two cases:

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- **Strongholds:** they represent a minority of the districts, but they will have an “**amplifying effect**” for those who hold them due to granted majoritarian seat and the spillover to the proportional part. **This is especially true when a party has many uninominal strongholds close to each other and forming a larger plurinominal one; as in Veneto for the League and Emilia-Romagna for the DP.** In fact, this will sensibly help these two parties and to some degree the center-right in the south<sup>1</sup>. Having little or no true strongholds, **the FSM will not be able to count on this type of district and it will not benefit from the aforementioned “amplifying effect”;** and **this will be a major disadvantage** in determining the ultimate outcome in terms of MPs.
  
- **Open districts:** Here, I believe the **large national lists / coalitions will be favored**, as people will tend to vote these major and mediatized political entities (to some degree also for strategic reasons – to avoid wasting their vote by choosing a small party). It should be reminded that the list / coalition getting more preferences will not only get more of the proportional-assigned MPs but will also win the majoritarian-assigned seat. So, a further distinction needs to be made:
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  - o In **uninominal districts** the outcome presents a significant degree of **unpredictability** due to the high number of parties and the very nature of the majoritarian system: to win the seat, it is sufficient that a list (even if globally in minority) gains slightly more votes than the others. **As such, so the main battle in these districts will be between the DP and the FSM**, since they have many votes as single parties; but the former will be more advantaged as its vote base is more homogenously distributed, making it more likely to prevail than the FSM. The center-right, while possibly having a quite significant share as a coalition, is fragmented into parties that taken alone represent a relatively low quote and this will negatively affect its performance in the uninominal districts.
  
  - o In **plurinominal districts** the situation **will generally reflect the national-level voting distribution**, but since voters will tend to vote for large parties (lists) / coalitions, **preferences will flow to major political forces** like the DP, the FSM and the center-right group. In regard to the latter, the League’s presence may dissuade some moderate voters to vote right, but this may well be compensated by those that support and vote for the League without admitting it.

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<sup>1</sup> League excepted, of course; despite the recent efforts to make it a national party, it is still largely perceived as a “northern” political force.

## Forecast

**Remember:** these are expressed in terms of approximate quote of Parliamentary seats obtained; not in number of votes!

- **DP ±35%:** It is a party with a large, loyal and distributed electoral base, is present on the territory and has many strongholds; It embodies the mainstream discourse and is positively regarded at the EU level. Finally, for the reasons outlined above, **the electoral system benefits the DP:** its victory in the strongholds will spill over to the proportional districts, and its national-level popularity will allow it to gain significant seats from the disputed districts. **I do not exclude that it may even get more MPs and get close to holding 40% of the Parliament.** As a result, **it is poised to be the main party in the next legislature and have a key role in forming the government.**
- **FSM ±25%:** While the **FSM will get much votes, the MPs it will ultimately have will not be as much as numerous because of the disadvantages the electoral system poses for it;** notably the fact that it has no strongholds (meaning that it will not benefit from the “amplify effect” they grant) and that its voters represents a minority (albeit consistent) at the district-level, so it will have difficulties in winning the majoritarian seats in the disputed districts and will have to rely mainly on the plurinomial ones. Its “institutionalization” as a political force has also reduced its appeal as a destination for protest votes, differently from the last elections. Finally, **due to its isolation it will not be part of the government; still, it will obtain a notable share of votes and will become the main single opposition force.**
- **Center-right ±25%:** Despite Berlusconi’s certainty of victory, **I think the result for the center-right coalition will be somehow deceiving.** Berlusconi lost his credibility in the eyes of many Italians due to the scandals and processes he was involved in, as well as to his political heritage and his “attachment to the seat”. Moreover, the coalition is too fragmented to have good results in the uninominal disputed areas; and finally the League is considered too extremist in the main political discourse thus dissuading moderate / unsure voters. **Because of that, I think it will get about 25% of MPs, and they may even be less.** But at the same time, **the League is the force that will likely keep the right afloat,** due to the popular discontent with the rise in immigration and to its rooted presence in the territory, which will grant this party a notable share of seats (also due to the strongholds “amplification effect”). I believe that a large share (if not the majority) of the center-right’s seats will be held by the League.
- **Free & Equals <5%:** Some more aged left voters may decide to remain loyal to the old guard, thus granting it a certain number of seats obtained in traditional left strongholds by draining them from the DP and causing some troubles to it. But this will be likely limited, and I doubt this list will ultimately have much more than 5% of MPs. Still, **this will give it some precious coalition / blackmail potential** at the moment of forming a government.

## Final Considerations: Key Projections

- **The DP will be the main winner, and it will be at the core of the next governing coalition.**
- **The FSM will ultimately get less seats than it may be expected from the sheer number of votes**, due to the disadvantages this electoral system poses to it and because it will suffer a drop of protest votes it will receive due to its “institutionalization”; **but will remain the principal opposition force.**
- **The center-right will have a globally deceiving result; and it will owe much of its votes to the League, which will be the coalition’s driving force and maybe even its first party.** While having its good share of MPs, the center-right will probably remain at the opposition, but its internal fragmentation will limit its capability to become a solid opposition force. Cooperation between the DP and the right will be made more difficult than now due to the League’s increased influence; but it is likely the two poles will find some kind of informal agreement to counter the FSM.
- **The true challenge to the political mainstream and the EU will come from the League rather than the FSM;** still, the latter’s losses will compensate the former’s success, thus **the influence of anti-mainstream forces in Italy will remain globally unchanged and under control.**
- **All in all, the next government will be centered on the DP allied with other minor parties; the center-right will be an opposition force where the League will play a stronger (if not prominent) role but they will cooperate to counter the FSM, which will be the main opposition party.**