

Italy: a first analysis on Regional Elections 14 July 2020

As the **Regional Elections** and the **Constitutional Referendum** on the reduction in the number of MPs) tentatively scheduled for 20 and 21 September are approaching and the race is taking shape with the gradual announcement of the parties' candidates, Telos A&S drafted this comprehensive Report, that covers:

- the state of play of the electoral campaigns
- possible election outcomes
- **their potential repercussions at the national level.**

1. The political context of the upcoming Regional Elections

Veneto, Toscana, Liguria, Marche, Campania, and Puglia are the Regions scheduled to hold their elections this Autumn. These Regions have wildly different political histories. Because of this diversity that the outcome of the upcoming regional elections will offer a clear picture of the political climate across the country. Thus, it is fair to say that these regional elections will serve as a crucial litmus test for the national Government.

In spite of the high stakes, the ruling majority has struggled to join forces in an attempt to stem the nationwide right-wing surge, whereas the centre-right coalition has already unveiled all of its joint candidates for the posts of Regional President.

The latest polls, as well as the recent string of electoral wins by the centre-right, certainly suggest that launching joint PD-5SM bids in the upcoming regional elections could prove decisive for their outcome.

Nevertheless, the 5SM has remained sceptical of running together with PD, particularly where PD has nominated an incumbent President, like in the two Southern Regions of Campania and Puglia. In fact, even since its inception the 5SM has made it a point to rule out any electoral agreement with other parties. To be sure, the 5SM's ideological opposition to running as part of a coalition with other major parties often belies more pragmatic considerations, i.e. the need to reach a compromise on an independent joint candidate.

However, admittedly the track record is not encouraging: it is worth recalling that the only time PD and 5SM supported a joint candidate, namely in the Umbria regional election held in October 2019, they suffered a resounding defeat. Although the local electorate in the former leftist stronghold had been shifting towards the centre-right for years, the wide margin of votes between the winner and the runner-up spoke to deeper issues. On that circumstance, 5SM voters rejected the party's fundamental U-turn to form a Government at the national level with PD – a stance that trickled down to the regional level. In light of these considerations, it comes as no surprise that the 5SM leadership is treading with the utmost care this time around.

On top of that, Renzi's Italia Viva, which is also part of the parliamentary coalition supporting the national Government, will run on its own in most regional elections, further undermining the centre-left's chances of scoring much-needed victories. While Italia Viva enjoys almost negligible voter support, it might still make a difference in a number of close elections. Needless to say, Italia Viva has no chance of electing a Regional President from its ranks if it runs alone: this decision should rather be understood as yet another attempt by Renzi at differentiating himself from his government partners in order to draw public attention as he is lagging in the polls.

By contrast, the leaders of the centre-right coalition, namely Salvini of Lega, Meloni of Fratelli d'Italia, and Berlusconi of Forza Italia, succeeded in striking a deal to support

joint candidates in all of the Regions on the line. Significantly, despite being the leader of by far the largest party in the coalition, Salvini accepted to take a back seat and put forward only one Lega member as the candidate for Regional President (Susanna Ceccardi in Tuscany) in addition to the popular incumbent President of Veneto Zaia, who is safely running for re-election in a longstanding Lega stronghold. While voter support for Lega has skyrocketed across the country over the past couple of years, the party has struggled to make inroads especially in Southern Italy, where two out of six of the forthcoming regional elections are taking place and having a Lega member lead the centre-right coalition might prove counterproductive.

In exchange for giving up Lega members as candidates for regional Presidents in the South, Salvini obtained that Lega members will run as centre-right candidates in numerous mayoral elections in central and southern Italy (e.g., Reggio Calabria, Andria, Chieti, Macerata, Matera, Nuoro), adopting a bottom-up approach to try to branch out of Lega's traditional constituencies.

2. The main candidates and the latest polls

While the Minister of the Interior has yet to adopt the act setting the date of the regional elections and there is approximately one month left to submit electoral lists, the big picture has come into focus. However, please notice that electoral campaigns have not effectively begun yet, therefore polls should be taken with a grain of salt.

Veneto [Incumbent: Luca Zaia of Lega, running for re-election]

Veneto is a longstanding centre-right stronghold where the centre-left coalition has no realistic chance of mounting a competitive challenge. The popular Regional President, Luca Zaia (Lega), is running for a third term and is virtually guaranteed to be re-elected, propelled by surging voter support in light of what has been seen as a prudent and pragmatic management of the COVID-19 pandemic, even though Veneto was one of the epicentres of the emergency in Italy.

According to the latest available poll issued on 26 June by polling institute Noto, Zaia is polling at a staggering 70%, dwarfing PD's candidate Padua Deputy Mayor Arturo Lorenzoni polling at 18, the 5SM's candidate Senator Enrico Cappelletti polling at 7%, and Italia Viva's candidate Senator Daniela Sbrollini polling at 2%.

The Veneto election is arguably **one of the very few cases** where this textbook example of divisions within the ruling majority at the national level is bound to have little consequences.

Toscana [Incumbent: Enrico Rossi of PD, not running for re-election]

By contrast, Toscana is one of the few remaining centre-left strongholds, where nonetheless the centre-right coalition is increasingly competitive at the ballot box.

According to the latest available poll issued on 26 June by polling institute Noto, Toscana Regional Council President Eugenio Giani, the centre-left candidate supported by PD and Italia Viva, is leading with 46% of the vote. It is noteworthy that the centre-right candidate, MEP Susanna Ceccardi of Lega, a Salvini loyalist, is polling at 40%. In 2015, the candidate of Lega won only 20% of the vote and another candidate supported by Forza Italia won around 9%. The 5SM candidate, Toscana Councilwoman Irene Galletti, is polling at 8%.

Since Ceccardi is the only centre-right candidate from Lega besides Zaia and the race in Toscana seems to be relatively close, Salvini will have great incentive to go out of

his way to campaign there. In fact, a centre-right victory in a centre-left stronghold would send shockwaves through the national PD-5SM Government, potentially signalling that this awkward alliance has come at too high a political price. Salvini missed this chance in Emilia-Romagna in January, where a centre-right victory was thought to be more likely than in Tuscany, but the unprecedented victories enjoyed by the centre-right in Mayoral elections in several Tuscan cities over the last few years (e.g. Arezzo, Pisa, Siena, Massa) keep Salvini's hopes alive.

Liguria [Incumbent: Giovanni Toti of a minor **centre-right** party, running for re-election]

Liguria seems to be the only Region with concrete prospects for a PD-5SM coalition.

However, negotiations to designate a joint candidate have stalled until now. Il Fatto Quotidiano journalist Ferruccio Sansa, former Dean of the Genoa Polytechnic University Aristide Massardo, President of the Genoa Jewish Community Ariel Dello Strologo, and Director-General of the National Multiple Sclerosis Association Paolo Bandiera have been the potential candidates considered so far, but due to the crossed vetoes of PD and 5SM the process has ground to a halt.

According to the latest available polls issued on 2 June by polling institute Opimedia, outgoing Regional President Giovanni Toti (from *Cambiamo*, a breakaway party from Forza Italia) is enjoying a solid lead over any potential competitor, hovering between 59%-55%. Assuming that PD and the 5SM run together, their voter support would range between 27% and 40% based on the candidate they eventually pick. On their own, they would win respectively 25% and 8.1% of the vote. Renzi's Italia Viva is polling at 2%.

Any poll in Liguria will be arguably unreliable, though, until PD and the Five Star Movement announce their candidates.

Marche [Incumbent: Luca Ceriscioli of **PD, not** running for re-election]

Marche is another Region where there is ground for a PD-5SM agreement, but no concrete step towards this goal has been taken, yet.

The centre-left candidate (supported by PD, Renzi's Italia Viva, the Left, and a host of smaller centrist parties) is Senigallia Mayor Maurizio Mangialardi, who in recent days launched a press campaign calling on the 5SM to run together. While the 5SM has put forward Tolentino Councilman Gian Mario Mercorelli – who won online primaries with a grand total of 454 votes – as its candidate for Regional President, the party has signalled that in principle it is open to entering into talks with PD to work out a joint bid. PD's decision not to support its outgoing president, Luca Ceriscioli, can pave the way towards an alliance with the Five Star Movement.

However, reaching an agreement in Marche presents a number of challenges. In fact, if Mercorelli were to step down, the 5SM primaries would be disregarded, whereas if the 5SM joined the centre-left coalition led by Mangialardi, Italia Viva might decide to quit it due to its firm opposition to running together with the 5SM.

The centre-right coalition's candidate is MP Francesco Acquaroli from the far-right Fratelli d'Italia, who won 19% of the vote in the 2015 Marche regional election.

According to the latest available poll issued on 26 June by polling institute Noto, Acquaroli is polling at 48%, while Mangialardi is polling at 40% and Mercorelli at 9%. While Marche is a minor

Region, a centre-right win would have great political significance since it has always been governed by the centre-left.

Campania [Incumbent: Vincenzo De Luca of PD, running for re-election]

The outgoing Regional President, Vincenzo De Luca (PD), has gained national – and by some standards international – name recognition during the COVID-19 pandemic, more thanks to his hour-long weekly interviews teeming with sarcastic punchlines than to an effective management of the emergency. For the third time in a row, De Luca will run against the centre-right coalition candidate Stefano Caldoro (who defeated De Luca to become Campania Regional President in 2010 and was defeated by De Luca in 2015) while 5SM has nominated Campania Regional Councilwoman Valeria Ciarambino.

Thus, the centre-left has concrete chances of clinging to the post of Regional President.

However, it is worth pointing out that De Luca's potential victory would be more of a personal feat than an accomplishment of PD.

Although there is no chance that the Five Star Movement supports De Luca, the latter seems to be well positioned to beat his centre-right opponent Caldoro thanks to his vast popularity despite the very poor showings of PD in all the latest elections in Campania.

De Luca as a matter of fact is ahead in polls: although the latest available poll (issued by polling institute Winpoll on 7 July) that gives De Luca a commanding lead with 65.4% of vote intentions (vs Caldoro's 21.9% and Ciarambino's 10.9%) is arguably unreliable, another recent poll (issued by polling institute Noto on 26 June) showed that the coalition supporting De Luca would win 45% of the vote, compared to Caldoro polling at 39% and Ciarambino at 13%.

Puglia [Incumbent: Michele Emiliano of PD, running for re-election]

Similarly to Marche, PD and the 5SM are struggling to reach an agreement on a common candidate in Puglia, even though a joint bid seems to be the only option for them to be competitive in the regional election.

The outgoing Regional President, Michele Emiliano, is running for re-election and has repeatedly called for a joint bid with the 5SM. Please note that Emiliano was one of the earliest proponents of a permanent alliance between PD and the 5SM. Emiliano's position has often been echoed by Minister of Regional Affairs Francesco Boccia, who is also from Puglia.

However, yet again the ruling parliamentary majority splintered at the regional level: the 5SM's candidate is Regional Councilwoman Antonella Laricchia, who already ran in 2015 winning 18.4% of the vote, while Italia Viva's candidate is Undersecretary of State for Foreign Affairs Ivan Scalfarotto.

The centre-right coalition's candidate is MEP Raffaele Fitto, who already served as Puglia Regional President between 2000 and 2005. Fitto seems poised to win the regional election, as according to the latest available poll issued on 26 June by polling institute Noto, he is polling at 45%, compared to Emiliano's 38%, Laricchia's 11%, and Scalfarotto's 4%.

3. Potential repercussions at the national level

Over two months out from the regional elections, a lot can still change. The polls reflect a balance of power at a time when electoral campaigns have yet to begin, and **in several**

Regions there is still leeway, however limited, for a pragmatic PD-5SM agreement which may alter the results projected at the present time. As things stand, it is entirely possible that PD (either alone or in a coalition with 5SM in some of the races) only holds onto 2 regional administrations out of the 4 they currently hold (Tuscany and Campania), and the centre-right coalition gains 2 regional administrations (Marche and Puglia). Such an outcome would clearly put additional strain on the fragile PD-5SM Government, since it would highlight that this alliance has proven mutually detrimental.

The Government risks reaching a low point at a crucial juncture, when the shaky parliamentary majority is expected to vote on a number of divisive issues, including the ESM and the new electoral law, amid a profound economic crisis and severe gridlock on virtually all key items on the executive's agenda. **Prime Minister Conte is well aware of that.** In recent remarks to the press, he urged PD and the 5SM to "*come together in the regional elections. Going it alone would be a defeat for everyone, myself included. It is paramount to have to courage to take this step*". Conte's statements reflect his transition from a mere figurehead to the aspiring champion of a supposed progressive front formed by PD and the 5SM and indicate that he senses the potential personal repercussions he would suffer in case of a resounding defeat in the regional elections.

Under these circumstances, **it is no coincidence that Conte, as well as PD, have begun cultivating closer ties with Forza Italia.** In recent days, Conte tried to drive a wedge in the centre-right coalition by praising Forza Italia for its "*constructive attitude open to dialogue with the Government*", while PD Deputy Secretary Orlando called for "*careful dialogue with Forza Italia*". Berlusconi has been responsive to this overture, giving several high-profile interviews on major newspapers to signal his interest in "*possibly engaging in talks with responsible forces willing to form a different and better Government*".

As the parliamentary majority keeps shrinking – and more 5SM MPs may quit the party after the regional elections – and Government's persistent stalemate has essentially blocked the approval of any major piece of legislation, Forza Italia could breathe new life into the ruling coalition. After all, PD and Forza Italia are united by a commonality of interests on several issues, for instance the ESM and the proportional electoral law. Furthermore, unlike his centre-right allies, Forza Italia has no interest in snap elections, since it would see the number of its seats in Parliaments significantly diminished. What is more, Berlusconi could reap personal and business benefits from having a say in the upcoming round of appointments to public bodies, including the Independent Communications Authority (AGCOM).

While it might be a far-flung prospect, it is not entirely out of the realm of possibility that Forza Italia will eventually decide to shore up the weakened Government coming out of a resounding defeat in the regional elections.

A further incentive to ward off the specter of early elections is offered by the confirmative referendum on the reduction in the number of MPs, which will take place on the same day as the regional elections and is virtually guaranteed to result in a "yes" victory.

With much fewer available seats, it would be in the interest of Forza Italia and even more so the 5SM to make sure that this parliamentary term lasts. While a Government relying on the support of political parties as different as PD, Italia Viva, the Left, Forza Italia, and at least part of the 5SM would hardly prove more effective than the incumbent, the need to avoid early national ballots could serve as a strong glue holding together this possible alternative majority.