

## **The Regional Elections of 2010: Much Ado about Nothing?**

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*Abstract: This article, taking its point of departure from the research presented at the annual workshop of the Italian Society for Electoral Studies, analyses the principal outcomes of the elections held in 13 Italian regions on 27 and 28 March 2010. One of the most significant features of these elections is that they do not appear to have resulted in any major changes with respect to the electoral cycle initiated in Italy by the parliamentary elections of 2008. Featuring a very low level of turnout, typical of "second-order" elections and affecting all the parties, the only winners were the parties (the Northern League and Italy of Values) which managed to consolidate their support or limit their losses. The article then analyses in more detail the result obtained by the Democratic Party and dwells on the fact that the success of the centre right, despite winning four of the regions previously governed by the centre left, does not seem, however, to have reinforced the Berlusconi government due to the growing political significance of the League and the conflicts this produces. Ultimately, the regional elections have highlighted all of the dilemmas affecting Italian politics without resolving any of them.*

Keywords: Berlusconi, regional elections, Lega Nord, Democratic Party

As it has become accustomed to doing in the wake of a round of elections, SISE, the Italian Society for Electoral Studies (Società Italiana di Studi Elettorali), decided this year too to organise a workshop – which took place in Milan on 10 May, a few weeks after the regional elections, at the headquarters, and with the support of the Milan provincial government.

The objective of these post-electoral workshops is to enable the "work in progress" of scholars and experts to be compared, through presentations of the initial results of their research, thus allowing direct comparison of the interpretive hypotheses informing their analyses: workshops do not, therefore, have the format of a traditional conference, but rather consist of a series of rapid presentations and brief comments.

The proceedings of the 10 May event, opened by the Society's president, Carlo Fusaro, were more than usually stimulating, featuring as they did as many as 19 presentations touching on numerous aspects of the elections, held on 27 and 28 March, and a large number of in-depth analyses, especially analyses based on the geographical distribution of the

vote. Precisely because of its nature as “work in progress”, and because there were no papers as such, it is not possible to provide an exhaustive account of the work that was undertaken on the day. Rather, we shall attempt to describe the basic outlines of a debate that not only took place at the SISE workshop, but that also informed, more generally, the analyses and comments made in the country at large in the wake of the elections.<sup>1</sup>

### **Who won and who lost? The regional polls as “second-order” elections**

It is understandable that general interpretations of an election result tend to be based on the prior expectations of the actors involved; but sometimes – and in many ways it happened in the case of these elections too – evaluations and comments on results are made without any regard for analyses of the data. In the initial hours following the vote, in the press and among commentators, a series of commonplaces were developed – commonplaces that then failed to stand up to more incisive analyses.

Before the regional elections, expectations, including those of a number of analysts, were driven by a single question: Will these be typical “mid-term” elections? That is, coming as they do two years after the parliamentary elections of 2008, which brought triumph to Silvio Berlusconi, will they register the first signs of weariness and disappointment of the electorate with the government in office? Would Italian voters behave as French voters did fifteen days previously when they severely punished President Sarkozy, rewarding the left opposition? And above all, what would be the impact of the long series of scandals, concerning behaviour both public and private that for many months had been plaguing both Berlusconi and his government?

The situation which, thanks to the elections of 2005, formed the point of departure for the poll was extremely unbalanced: of the 13 regions where voting took place, as many as 11 were governed by the centre left, only two (Lombardy and Veneto) by the centre right. The most obvious criterion to use in judging who won and who lost therefore seemed to be the number of regions likely to be won or lost by the different formations (and, as we know, the centre right won four, giving an overall score of 7 to 6 in favour of the centre left). But this too was a potentially arbitrary criterion: on the basis of the outcome of the European elections of 2009, for example, the centre left was likely to win only in the four “red” regions of central Italy. And few remembered the long-standing fact that if Lombardy and Veneto are excluded in the case of the centre right and the aforementioned four regions in the case of the centre left, then all the others (Piedmont, Liguria, Lazio, Campania, Puglia and Calabria) have always been contestable “swing” regions. In 1995, the contest resulted in a score of 7 to 6 in favour of the centre left, and in 2000, 7 to 6 in favour of the centre right, as the maps compiled by Ilvo Diamanti and his assistants – some of

which were presented at the SISE workshop by Terenzio Fava – clearly show (see the web site [www.demos.it](http://www.demos.it)). The 2005 result was rather unusual, coinciding as it did with the lowest point in the approvals ratings of the second Berlusconi government: indeed, one can say that it was precisely thanks to that defeat that the leader of the centre right reignited his campaign, re-thinking a strategy that was to lead to his comeback, to the spectacular “draw” at the elections of 2006 and to the brief and unhappy period of government by the centre left.

As one can see, therefore, the regional elections of 2010 have to be interpreted from the perspective of the “electoral cycles” that mark Italian politics: and from this point of view, as many of the scholars (including Paolo Natale, Paolo Segatti, Roberto Biorcio, Cristiano Vezzoni and Roberto D’Alimonte) emphasised in their contributions to the SISE workshop, the regional elections of 2010 failed to mark a shift to any kind of new phase: on the contrary, they can be considered to have been entirely consistent with the cycle that began with the elections of 2008 and, in a certain sense, to represent their sequel.

This is also true when it comes to analysing the result obtained by the Northern League, which was certainly the only party to come away from the vote with a real victory: in particular, Roberto Biorcio showed that the electoral history of the League can be viewed as a succession of three different “waves” (in 1992, in 1996 and in 2008), the party having drawn its support from a segment of the electorate that has oscillated periodically between it and the People of Freedom (Popolo della libertà, Pdl) and which in 2010 favoured the party led by Umberto Bossi.<sup>2</sup> The analyses of the vote flows – presented to the workshop by Piergiorgio Corbetta and Pasquale Colloca of the Istituto Cattaneo in Bologna, and by Lorenzo De Sio of CISE, the Italian Centre for Electoral Studies (Centro Italiano Studi Elettorali) in Florence – too showed the absence of any “systematic shifts” between centre left and centre right – thereby confirming the view that the League’s advance took place essentially thanks to the votes of those who had previously supported the Pdl. “The belief of many observers”, these authors said, “that the League makes its gains by winning over the support of voters from the left, finds no empirical support: in Turin, Milan, Brescia, Padua, Parma, Modena, Bologna, Reggio Emilia – in all of the cities of the North that were examined, without exception – the League advanced at the expense of the Pdl”. In Tuscany too, as revealed by an analysis of the vote contributed by the present author, the League’s gains were to a very large extent to be attributed to an inflow of voters from the right and the far right; and if in percentage terms the party’s growth is significant (its support rising from 4.2 percent at the 2009 European elections to 6.5 percent today), in absolute terms it represents a gain of just 8,000 votes as compared to last year.

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One must not therefore make the mistake of considering these elections from the perspective of newspaper columnists as opposed to the perspective of Italy's political and electoral history: these elections have not changed the balance of political and electoral forces that was established by the elections of 2008. And it is precisely this – the fact that there was no significant novelty – that perhaps constitutes the most significant political problem for all those hoping to build an alternative to Berlusconi.

### **The political consequences of the vote**

As many of the contributions revealed, analysis of the results is a complex task: regional elections, thanks in part to the electoral system, have a large number of peculiarities. For example, there was confirmation of the significance of “exclusive” votes, that is, votes cast for the candidates running for the position of regional president, without the voter having also cast a vote for any of the supporting lists. These amounted to 8.7 percent of the valid votes on average in the 13 regions, suggesting a degree of “personalisation” of the competition – which was the subject of Mauro Barisione's contribution. And interpretations of the actual extent of support for the parties are to a degree falsified by the presence, within each coalition, of numerous small lists “for the presidential candidate”. Moreover, as Roberto De Luca showed in his contribution, the specific region plays a significant role: lists that were not linked to any of the national parties obtained as much as 10.7 percent of the vote (having obtained 6.0 percent in 2005).

Roberto D'Alimonte presented a summary picture (see Table 1) which took account of the “personal” lists supporting the presidential candidates fielded by each of the two main coalitions and which showed the absolute figures (Figure 1): the result is striking, showing the most significant feature of these elections, namely, the enormous decline in turnout, whose geographical distribution formed the basis of a detailed analysis provided by Tomaselli and D'Agata. *All* the parties lost votes (many votes!) including those like the Northern League and Italy of Values (Italia dei valori, Idv) which politically, can nevertheless be considered as the real winners of these elections.

So the point of departure for an analysis of the elections must be this: Italian voters have shown that they consider regional elections to be “second-” (and perhaps even “third-”!) order elections: the low level of participation was certainly fuelled by widespread general feelings of disenchantment with politics, but specific factors were also at work, such as, for example, the perception in a number of regions that there was little uncertainty about the outcome.

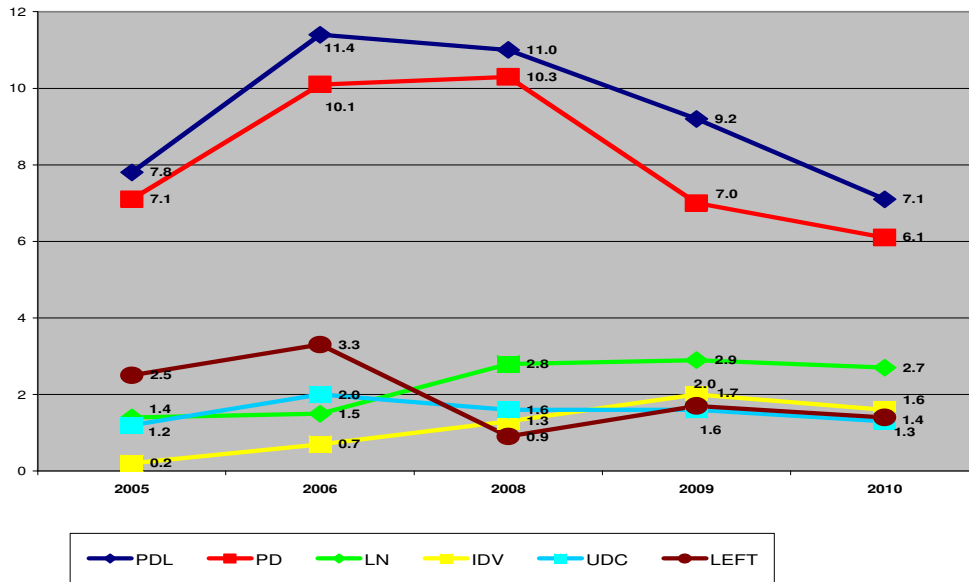
In this situation of low turnout, the parties that managed to consolidate their support or at least to limit the outflows, were the ones that emerged as the real winners: in particular, the Northern League, obtaining

Table 1: Votes for parties at various elections, 2008-2010

	Regional elections 2010		European Election 2009		General Elections 2008	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
PDL	7,030,320	31.3	9,218,800	35.3	11,086,83	36.7
PD	6,080,820	27.1	6,957,330	26.6	0.6373264	34.1
LN	2,749,840	12.3	2,944,790	11.3	2,866,989	9.5
IDV	1,565,760	7.0	2,039,530	7.8	1,293,022	4.3
UDC	1,248,800	5.6	1,625,100	6.2	1,598,960	5.3
LEFT	1,435,320	6.4	1,741,090	6.7	942,234	3.1

Source: D'Alimonte (2010), "Voto di preferenza e voto personalizzato".

Figure 1: Votes for parties at various elections, 2005-2010 (million of people)



Source: D'Alimonte (2010), "Voto di preferenza e voto personalizzato".

the election of its presidential candidates, for the first time, in two such important regions of the North as Piedmont and Veneto, showed that it knew how to capitalise on its role in the government based in Rome without losing its ability to root itself in the periphery. It was the perfect example of a party "of combat and of government" as an old Communist Party slogan put it! But as is meanwhile shown by the deep conflicts that have emerged in the governing majority in the weeks since the elections, the outcome - which failed to reward the opposition - has not however stabilised or consolidated political equilibria within the Government either;

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nor has it alleviated any of the growing difficulty with which Berlusconi is performing his role as leader. The League is growing ever stronger within the Government and this is something which in the coming period, risks undermining and weakening the coalition of the centre right. It is enough to think of the effects of the economic and financial measures taken in June and of the growing problems of the Pdl in the South, which is an extremely important source of electoral support for Berlusconi's party.

On the other side of the coalitional divide, Idv, despite losing half a million votes as compared to the European elections of 2009, and despite declining from 7.8 to 7.0 percent, has continued to enjoy the political rent given it, in 2008, as the sole ally of Walter Veltroni's Democratic Party (Partito democratico, Pd). Idv, as also shown by the analysis of the vote flows by Corbetta, Colloca and De Sio, siphons off large numbers of votes from the Pd (even though where they are present, as in Emilia, the lists fielded by Beppe Grillo in their turn draw voters away from Antonio Di Pietro): these are voters whose priority is the quality and the intensity of a party's opposition to Berlusconi.

There is no doubt that the election result was very disappointing for the Pd. In keeping with his disinclination to be in the glare of the spotlights as leader, the new general secretary, Pier Luigi Bersani, has concentrated and is concentrating on a slow and laborious process of rebuilding the organisational fabric of his party; and he was well aware of how unlikely it was that the Pd's vote would be spectacular. But certainly a better result was expected, both in terms of votes and in terms of the number of regions won (or rather, successfully defended). And in fact, it would have taken little to change the impression made by the results, the mood with which they were received, within the party: it would have been enough, for example, for the centre left to have hung on in Piedmont, where the presidential candidate, Mercedes Bresso, was defeated by just 9,000 votes.<sup>3</sup> In these elections too, the Pd found itself as if caught in a pair of pincers: between Berlusconi and his tendency to accentuate, ever more provocatively, his populist and plebiscitary traits, intolerant of any attitude of respect for rules or constitutional limitations; and on the other hand, significant segments of those on the left, well represented by the stances of daily newspapers such as *la Repubblica*, who live with and feel strongly – sometimes to the point of obsession – the urgent need to fight Berlusconi and who make this the one and only criterion by which they evaluate the parties. Bersani's Pd is caught in the middle, asserting its intention to embrace both the issues of democracy and social welfare, and seeking to develop an alliance strategy and a credible alternative in the run-up to the elections due in 2013, but vulnerable to being perceived as a party still suffering from an uncertain identity and profile, without a clear strategy. Against this background, the Pd's hold on about 27 percent of the vote, slightly above the 26.1 percent it achieved at the European elections, was

considered within the party too, by the minorities led by the ex-general secretaries Dario Franceschini and Walter Veltroni, as a major defeat, especially when compared with the 33 percent obtained in 2008 (though this analysis overlooked the fact that that result was heavily “drugged” (*drogato*) and inflated by the effects of the “useful votes” (*voto utile*) cast at the expense of the radical left). In the opinion of the present author, in contrast, this level of support for the Pd can be viewed as an open result, neither outstanding nor catastrophic, bearing in mind the characteristics of these elections and the fragmentation of the line-ups among which voters were called upon to choose. It is a result on which Bersani can continue to build in light of the first, the most fundamental objective the new general secretary seems to have set himself in the current political circumstances: to build a party worthy of the label, which the Pd has not yet in practice ever been; to root it in every region and in all of the thousands of large outlying areas of the country; to succeed in getting it to speak to ordinary people, escaping the illusion that a significant media presence or a leader-centred appeal are enough to revive the party’s electoral fortunes.

Indeed, one of the keys to understanding the Pd’s electoral performance is the degree of rootedness of the party, its presence on the ground in the various regions – which is in its turn, the reflection of a lengthy period of political and electoral history, certainly not easy to turn around in a few months. This is true of Veneto which the contribution of Marco Almagisti and Selena Grimaldi was focused. And it is true of Lazio: the analysis presented to the SISE workshop by Antonio Caputo showed that the Radical leader and centre-left candidate, Emma Bonino, won handsomely in Rome, especially in the most central districts – while she lost heavily in the most suburban areas of the metropolis and in all the other provinces of the region (traditionally much further to the right, however). That is, she lost in those areas, in those small towns and villages, where the Pd, as an organised party, was simply *not present*... And it is true of Piedmont, where there was an analogous contrast, in this case between the province of Turin, where there was a majority for the centre left, and the other provinces of the region, where the League’s candidate, Roberto Cota, came out on top, as was shown in the contribution by Franca Roncarolo and Giuliano Bobba, who provided an exhaustive account of the entire episode, giving special attention to the political communication strategies of the two candidates.

The importance of an organised party, one present on the ground and capable of renewing its leadership team, also emerges, though in a positive way this time, from the improved result obtained by the centre left in Tuscany with 60 percent of the vote – which stands out all the more when contrasted with the difficulties experienced by the Pd in the other large “red” region, Emilia-Romagna. The electoral success of the new Pd president of Tuscany, Enrico Rossi (who in the previous ten years had

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overseen implementation of the region's health policy bringing standards of health care, according to a widely held opinion, to new levels of excellence) cannot be considered as just the result of a local left-wing "tradition" that shows no signs of giving way: it was also the effect of a capacity for renewal which has been expressed in recent years in many areas of policy, regional and local. In the "red" regions voters no longer make their decisions on the basis of long-standing ideological commitments: they are deeply committed to norms of 'civiness' and fairness, but they reward (or punish) candidates on the basis of specific political judgements (and can therefore even send the left into opposition, as happened last year in the case of the municipal elections in Prato, Tuscany's second city, while it is noteworthy that in the same city the centre left this year regained a majority).

### **Some conclusions**

The regional elections of 2010 essentially highlighted once again all of the dilemmas afflicting Italian politics without resolving any of them. On the right, we are witnessing, notwithstanding the electoral success, a continuation of the slow decline of Berlusconi's capacity for leadership, without being able to make out any real alternatives (though without any signs that Berlusconi himself is aware of the need to prepare the succession or cares in the least about it!) We are witnessing, too, a growth in the political importance of the League, which wants to "bring home" federal reform, creating increasing tensions and possible repercussions for the presence and the strength of the Pdl in the southern regions. On the left, the forces on the ground are not such as to suggest that they constitute a credible alternative: the Pd is trying with great difficulty to define its own identity but remains riven by a large number of uncertainties and divisions. Idv seems interested only in gaining from the Pd's difficulties. The radical left (having reorganised itself around two formations: the 'Federation of the Left', bringing together Communist Refoundation and the Italian Communists, and 'the Left, the Environment and Freedom', under the leadership of Nichi Vendola) has regained some support. Vendola, in particular, re-elected as president of the Puglia region, was the author of a stunning victory. However, the radical left still seems to be suffering from widespread feelings of disillusion among its potential voters, whose support is also vulnerable to Di Pietro's efforts of self-promotion. For the Pd, these elections have again raised, intact, the problem of developing a new alliance strategy, one sufficiently credible and coherent to take the place of the illusory "majoritarian vocation" of the Pd under Veltroni, with its solitary and unsuccessful race in the parliamentary elections of 2008. The Pd's attempt to go into these elections by initiating a dialogue with the Union of the Centre (Unione di centro, Udc) did not turn out to be very



fruitful: as Natascia Porcellato showed, the Udc obtained worse results in areas where it was allied to the Pd.<sup>4</sup>

Against this background, Italy seems to be sinking; the public mood seems to be one of depression; anti-political sentiments reign supreme. Next year, voters will be asked to return to the polls in a number of the large cities including Turin, Milan, Naples and Bologna. Will Italian politics then have anything new to offer?

*Translated by James L. Newell*

### Notes

1. This article cites almost all of the presentations made at the SISE workshop. Here we note, in addition, the important contribution of Nicola D'Amelio, of the Università di Roma 3, who analysed the way in which the electoral systems in force in the various regions impacted on the seats parties were able to win. It should be borne in mind, in fact, that reform of Title V of the Constitution has given each region the autonomy to choose its own electoral system for regional elections. Only a few regions have not made use of this facility continuing to vote using the old "national" system: many, on the other hand, have taken advantage of their statutory autonomy to change their electoral systems to greater or lesser degrees, the result being a kind of patchwork of regional electoral systems. Finally, we note the contribution of Daniele Comero, of the electoral observatory of the province of Milan, who analysed the results from the point of view of their implications for the municipal elections to be held in Milan in 2011.

2. The analysis of a young researcher, Andrea Bussoletti also focussed on the League's vote "in historical perspective": besides, among the havoc dominating the stage of Italian politics, the League is now the "oldest" party, the only one that has been part of the scene for more than two decades...

3. As this article was going to press, it was announced that the Administrative Court of Piedmont had ordered a recount of the votes obtained by two small lists that had been fielded in support of the Northern League's presidential candidate, Roberto Cota. The appeal, launched by the centre left, was based on the claim that the two lists were affected by irregularities of various kinds. The votes cast for these lists were few, but at 12,000 and 27,000 respectively, they turned out to be decisive. Were the centre left's appeal to be successful, then the outcome in Piedmont could be reversed or, as seems more likely, fresh elections would have to be called.

4. The difficulty the Udc's moderate voters have in staying with the party as it changes its placement is also confirmed by a case study, presented at the SISE workshop by Forcina, Bracalente and Gnaldi, concerning a possible estimate of "strategic voting" by supporters of the Udc in Umbria, where the party ran alone: the data show that centrist voters, making use of split ballots, mostly preferred the presidential candidate fielded by the centre right.