

European  
Elections monitor

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ANALYSIS

# The right-wing parties, led by Giorgia Meloni, favourite for the 25 September parliamentary elections in Italy

On 21 July 2022, the President of the Italian Republic, Sergio Mattarella, dissolved parliament and called early parliamentary elections in Italy for 25 September. This decision followed the refusal of some coalition parties to endorse Council President Mario Draghi.

## THE POLITICAL CRISIS

Officially, parliamentarians clashed over the vote on a €23 billion decree-law designed to help Italians cope with soaring energy prices and which gave special powers to the mayor of Rome to build a waste incineration plant in Lazio.

The text obtained an absolute majority of votes, but the 5-Star Movement (M5s), opposed to this measure, which it considered a "provocation", used it to trigger a governmental crisis by deciding not to participate in the vote of confidence.

Mario Draghi, former president of the European Central Bank (ECB) (2011-2019), has been leading a government of national unity since February 2021, bringing together parties from the right (The League (Lega), Forza Italia (FI)) and the left (Democratic Party (PD), Free and Equal), as well as the M5S. Only Fratelli d'Italia (FdI) has not participated.

The government is united around the need to manage the €209 billion (of which €69 billion in grants and €122 billion in loans) allocated to Italy by the European Union as part of the health crisis and intended for the country's recovery via the *NextGenerationEU* plan.

Parliamentary elections were originally scheduled for February 2023.

The M5S, which emerged as the strongest party in the parliamentary elections of 4 March 2018, is now very weakened. Originally, it had 227 deputies and 111 senators; five years later, it has only 105 and 62 respectively. The party chose to trigger a political

crisis and to use Mario Draghi as a scapegoat in a bid to reposition as an opposition force and to win back voters in the upcoming elections. Giuseppe Conte was certainly not unhappy to take revenge on his successor in the Palazzo Chigi, the residence of the Italian Council President. The M5S hoped to gain power after this move; while the League and Forza Italia thought that by following suit they could take advantage of the new electoral law to assert themselves with Fratelli d'Italia (FdI). Silvio Berlusconi (FI) and Matteo Salvini (Lega) announced that they would refuse to support a government in which the M5S would be participating, thus calling, without making it clear, for the organisation of new elections.

Giuseppe Conte has thus given an unexpected gift to the League and Forza Italia, who were able to bring down the government without having to take responsibility for it. Because it is important to note that Mario Draghi is very popular with the population. Opinion polls show that Italians do not approve of the government's collapse. They hold the League and the M5S responsible for the event. The latter party justified its stance against Mario Draghi's government, saying that its priorities (introduction of a minimum wage and tax incentives for home energy renovation) had not been taken into account, but for political analysts, the party's position was mainly an attempt to oppose Mario Draghi so that it could win back its electorate.

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On 14 July, the President of the Council therefore presented his resignation to President Mattarella, who refused it and proposed that he communicate to both houses of parliament on 20 July. The head of government said he would remain in office if he could get the support of the main political parties and on condition that the coalition parties would fall in line and agree on a government pact jeopardised the previous week by the defection of the M5S. *"The only solution if we still want to stay together is to rebuild this pact with courage, altruism and credibility,"* stressed Mario Draghi. *"The credit for the results we have achieved goes to you. They are the reward for your readiness to forget your differences and work for the good of the country. Italy is strong when it knows how to be united,"* he said. Nevertheless, the outgoing government won only 95 votes, against 38, but the majority abstained, including members of 5S, the League and Forza Italia. *"The confidence pact that supported the government's action has been broken. The Pact of National Unity (the name of the alliance sealed by Mario Draghi in February 2021 to get Italy out of the economic and health crisis it was going through) no longer exists,"* lamented the Council President.

The offensive against Mario Draghi began several weeks earlier when the M5S and the League, declaring themselves in favour of a diplomatic solution to the war in Ukraine, spoke out against sending arms to Kyiv.

### A BRIEF ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN

The mixed electoral system (both proportional and majority) favours large electoral coalitions, especially the one uniting the right-wing parties. The Cattaneo opinion institute has estimated the number of constituencies where the right has an advantage at 70%.

The scenario of a "Mario Draghi camp" confronting those who brought down the president of the Council seems to have had its day. *"For the left, this is the only possible strategy if they want to win the elections, while the declarations of voting intentions show that they are almost 13 points behind the right, and that is if the centrist parties are included,"* said Nando

Pagnoncelli, director of the Ipsos institute in Italy, adding *"What will the traditional right-wing voters who had a very positive image of Mario Draghi do? That's the real question"*. Finally, the implosion of the M5S should change the game and sign the end of the tripartite system that has dominated Italy for the past ten years.

The right-wing forces, led by Fratelli d'Italia, and headed by Giorgia Meloni, who could become the first woman president of the Council, hold a clear lead according to the polls. Considered as the opposition figure, the question is therefore less who will win the elections on 25 September than the extent of the victory of the right-wing forces. Will they gain an absolute majority? What will the balance be between the different parties that make up the right?

On the left, Enrico Letta leads a party divided between its social-democratic wing and a more radical left-wing pole. *"My voice is that of the only party that does not have the name of its leader in its symbol. I claim this choice because a party is a community, not a leader,"* he said. The sentence is correct, but the Democratic leader nevertheless suffers from having been unable to extend his leadership by forming a broad coalition with some centre parties. Moreover, the lack of agreement between the Democratic Party and the M5S has further weakened the left-wing camp.

According to the latest opinion poll published on 20 August, Fratelli d'Italia is due to forge ahead in the parliamentary elections with 25% of the vote. The League is due to win 12.5% and Forza Italia 7.5%. In total, the right-wing forces are due to garner 47.5% of the vote.

The Democratic Party is due to come second with 20.5% of the vote but the left-wing coalition (which includes Emma Bonino's Europa + (EU +), Luigi Di Maio's Civic Commitment (IC) and the Green and Left Alliance (AVS)), is only forecast to win 25.5%.

The M5S is due to win 12.5% of the vote.

Finally, the centrist coalition formed by Azione and Italia Viva is forecast to win 7.5% of the vote.

## ENRICO LETTA HAS FAILED TO FORM THE BROADEST UNION

"The fall of the Mario Draghi government is a collective suicide. The country is at a crossroads: either we win or Giorgia Meloni's far right will prevail," repeats Enrico Letta. To win, the leader of the Democratic Party has worked hard to build a broad alliance bringing together democrats and progressives. The break with Giuseppe Conte's M5S, considered by the Democratic leader to be primarily responsible for the fall of Mario Draghi's government, seems final and irreversible.

"The electoral law, which is the worst in history, requires us to be united. It is my duty to do everything, because I know what Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini's right-wing is and that if they were to win, the Italian government would change its axis in Europe to align with Poland and Hungary," said Enrico Letta, adding that the refusal of the centrist parties to ally with the Democratic Party "would be a gift to Giorgia Meloni".

However, the Democratic Party has failed to establish the electoral agreement it had hoped for, which would have brought together personalities ranging from the radical left to the Berlusconi right, who had rallied to Mario Draghi, as well as centrists and defectors from the M5S. The implosion of the latter and the failure to unite with the 'small' parties are certainly weakening the forces on the left.

Enrico Letta, former president of the Council (2013-2014), can rely on the support of Civic Commitment (IC), a party created by Luigi Di Maio, former leader of the M5S (2017-2020) and outgoing Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, who has allied with the Democratic Centre (CD) in Together for the Future (IF) for the elections.

Luigi Di Maio left his party on 21 June because of its lack of support for Ukraine. "Enough ambiguities. Faced with Vladimir Putin's barbarity, we cannot hesitate," he declared. 60 elected representatives followed him. He hoped to attract voters who had opted for the M5S in the March 2018 election and who, according to opinion polls, were opposed to the fall of Mario Draghi's government.

"The Democratic Party will have to prove the opinion polls wrong, which already show it as the big loser in these elections. It is presenting itself to the electorate as the only force loyal to Mario Draghi, whose reformist programme it is taking up, but it will have to reckon with the traditional scattering of left-wing forces. The absence of a strong and charismatic leader could, in this context, prove to be an advantage," said Massimiliano Panarari, a political scientist at the Mercatorum University in Rome.

If the Democratic Party manages to develop and disseminate a clear and effective message on key issues such as employment and the environment, and if it does not just denounce the danger of a victory for the right-wing forces, then the left can hope to attract voters from the M5S, which, with four weeks to go before the election, seems to be losing ground.

The Democratic Party and its allies present themselves as a pole open to civil society and to all those who believe in the Constitution and in a true ecological transition with a programme based on three axes: work and social justice, civil rights and sustainable development. It promises to work on the reduction of social inequalities (bonus for the energy upgrading of houses, GDP growth of 6.6%), to fight against corruption and impoverishment of the population and to reduce taxes.

The Democratic Party coalition is not the favourite, but the left-wing parties can count on their strongholds in the largest cities (Rome, Milan, Turin, Genoa, Bologna, Florence and Naples) and part of Italy's former red zone, Emilia Romagna and Tuscany. "It's either us or Fratelli d'Italia", says Enrico Letta, who has only one opponent, the coalition led by Giorgia Meloni, and his aim is to make the Democratic Party the leading party in Italy on the evening of 25 September.

## ADVANTAGE TO THE RIGHT-WING FORCES

The Fratelli d'Italia is the only Italian party to have refused to participate in the national unity government led by Mario Draghi and, moreover, to have chosen the opposition camp during the last three governments. It is now leading in the opinion

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polls for the 25 September elections, trailing Enrico Letta's party. Its leader, Giorgia Meloni, claims to be the leader of the opposition. She nevertheless needs the support of her allies, the League and Forza Italia. The three parties are battling over the name of the next president of the Council in case of victory. *"The party that gets the most votes will decide who will take the reins of the country for the next five years,"* said Matteo Salvini on TV channel Canale 5. However, Giorgia Meloni, who is aiming to become Italy's first female leader, stressed that no alliance could be concluded without agreement on who would head the government. *"If we cannot agree on the name of the right-wing candidate for the presidency of the Council, running together makes no sense,"* she said.

*"For several days now, I have been reading articles in the international press about the forthcoming elections that will give Italy a new government, in which I am described as a danger to democracy, to Italian, European and international stability,"* said Giorgia Meloni, who totally refutes this kind of statement: *"The Italian right has for decades consigned fascism to history, condemning without ambiguity the deprivation of democracy and the infamous anti-Jewish laws",* she said, addressing Enrico Letta: *"We will not accept lessons from someone who presents himself as a defender of Atlanticism and who allies himself with the radical left nostalgic for the USSR".*

The Fratelli d'Italia, whose name is formed by the first words of the Italian anthem, is a nationalist, conservative, Eurosceptic party that defends very firm positions on immigration. It is the successor to the Social Movement (MSI), a neo-fascist party founded in 1946, and the far-right National Alliance (AN) of Gianfranco Fini (who also led the Social Movement). The Fratelli d'Italia has not participated in any government since its creation in 2012. *"The party might therefore attract voters who declare themselves distrustful of politics,"* explains Marc Lazar, historian and sociologist at Sciences Po. The party is conservative, it defends the traditional family, constituted around a man and a woman; it has firm positions on immigration - Giorgia Meloni promises to stop the arrival of migrants from Libya on the island

of Lampedusa - and the threat of an *"Islamisation of Italy"* - she wants to promote *"the historical and cultural roots of Europe and its identity"*. *"I am Giorgia, I am a woman, I am a mother, I am Italian, I am Christian and you can never take away any of these elements of my identity"* Giorgia Meloni likes to repeat in her meetings. She has adopted as her slogan *God, Family, Fatherland*.

The Fratelli d'Italia is trying to appeal to both hard right voters and supporters of a more moderate right. *"Fratelli d'Italia wants to build a future based on work, family and our identity. Values that we must defend against attacks from the left,"* says Giorgia Meloni. Thus, she wants to put an end to the citizenship income. *"We believe that a fair state should not put those who can work and those who cannot on the same level. We need a tool to protect those who cannot work: the over-60s, the disabled, families with no income who have minors to support. For the others, on the other hand, what is needed is training and the necessary tools to encourage employment,"* she said.

The Fratelli d'Italia is often referred to as a Eurosceptic party, but no one believes that a government led by Giorgia Meloni would relinquish the €209 billion European Union stimulus package for Italy. The populist party is calling for a revision of the EU treaties, the creation of a confederation of sovereign states in place of the EU and the pre-eminence of national law over EU law. The party, whose slogan is *Less Europe but a better Europe*, does not support Italy's withdrawal from the eurozone but calls for a radical reform of the ECB!

The programme of the right-wing coalition, named *For Italy*, is based on 15 points such as the institution of a presidential system for Italy (*"presidentialism is the system needed in a state like ours, which is politically fragile and therefore unstable"*, declared Giorgia Meloni), a firmer stance on immigration, major tax cuts and the establishment of a flat tax (a single rate tax for VAT, income and business). However, the three right-wing parties do not agree on the rate, with the League in favour of a 15% rate

and Forza Italia of 23%. The right-wing coalition also plans to replace the citizenship income with "more effective measures". Since March 2019, Italian residents have been able, under certain conditions, to apply for citizenship income (*reddito di cittadinanza*), totalling between €480 and €9,360 per year, designed to combat poverty and promote integration into the labour market. This income can be provided for 18 consecutive months. Three and a half years later, it provides for more than one million families.

Finally, it should be noted that while the League and Forza Italia have on several occasions shown their sympathy towards Vladimir Putin's Russia, Giorgia Meloni has always been clear about her support for the Atlantic Alliance. She has strongly condemned Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine. "Italy is an integral part of Europe, of the Atlantic Alliance and of the West. The country will respect its commitments to NATO and supports Ukraine in the face of Russia's invasion," reads the right-wing coalition's programme.

Despite the competition between Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini for the post of Council President, and despite the marked ideological opposition between Forza Italia and its two allies around sovereignty and, finally, the disagreement between the Fratelli d'Italia and its partners on the issue of the war in Ukraine, the right-wing coalition has the advantage over the left-wing opposition. "We are ready. This nation is in desperate need of recovering its self-respect, its pride and its freedom," repeats Giorgia Meloni.

### DO THE CENTRE PARTIES HAVE A CHANCE?

Carlo Calenda, leader of Azione (Az), and Matteo Renzi, leader of Italia Viva (IV), have chosen to refuse to form an alliance with Enrico Letta and have established a third pole, positioned in the centre of the political spectrum. The two men reproach the leader of the Democratic Party of having been unable to choose between social democracy and the radical left (represented, for example, by Europa Verde and

the Alliance of Greens and Leftists (AVS)), which brings together environmental and left-wing parties, described as populist by Matteo Renzi, former President of the Council (2014-2016).

Carlo Calenda and Matteo Renzi are confident that they can find a place on the Italian political scene and aim to garner between 15% and 20% of the vote on 25 September. "We will convince the Italians that, faced with such a degree of deterioration, the only way to save the country is to apply the Draghi method," said Matteo Renzi. "Moving forward with the Mario Draghi agenda, with the Mario Draghi method and, if possible, with Mario Draghi as President of the Council" is the core of the centrist programme, whose slogan is Continuity. "I think that if we manage to secure a good result in the proportional system, the road to parliament will be open to bring Mario Draghi back as President of the Council. If the right wins, it is not the Constitution that is in danger but the state coffers. The flat tax would be madness," said the leader of Italia Viva.

Reformist, liberal and pro-European, the centrist pole sees itself as kingmaker on the evening of 25 September. "By leaving the Democratic Party and going alone to the next elections, Carlo Calenda hopes to bite into the right-wing electorate by attracting the moderate voters from the League and Forza Italia, who do not want to remain in an alliance with the nationalists of Fratelli d'Italia. A gamble that, if successful, could change the game," said Luca Tomini, professor of political science at the Free University of Brussels, adding "If voters move to the centre, the right-wing coalition will be weakened; conversely, if it doesn't work, the right will win with two-thirds of the seats in parliament."

"I don't think there is a risk of a fascist government if Giorgia Meloni wins. However, I believe there is a risk of Italy being totally isolated from the major European countries and Fratelli d'Italia's lack of administrative and international experience will be a threat. With a government led by Giorgia Meloni, we will not have fascism but chaos," warned Carlo Calenda.

**WILL THE FIVE STAR MOVEMENT DISAPPEAR?**

The M5S presents itself as an alternative to the forces on the right and centre. Its programme is based on social justice and the reduction of social inequalities. The party wants to increase the minimum wage (to €9 per hour), fight corruption and accelerate the ecological transition. It also wants to reduce working hours and advocates a 36-hour week, compared to the current 40 hours, with no loss of pay. It proposes to grant Italian citizenship to people who arrived in the country before the age of 12 or to those born of foreign parents who have completed a full course of study in Italy.

Its leader, Giuseppe Conte, former president of the Council (2018-2021), denounces "*false alliances and marriages of convenience*". "*We prefer commitment and, therefore, we are on the other side of this wheeling and dealing, which is the right side,*" he said. However, the M5S is losing ground in opinion polls and has been badly affected by departures. In recent days, two prominent figures have left the party: Davide Crippa, former president of the group in the Chamber of Deputies, and Federico d'Inca, outgoing minister for relations with parliament. Both disagreed with the M5S's decision to withdraw its support for Council President Mario Draghi in July.

**THE ITALIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM**

The Italian Parliament has two chambers elected for a period of 5 years. The electoral system in force in the country is called Rosatellum. Since 2020, the House of Deputies has had 400 members and the Senate 200. In both houses, parliamentarians are elected according to a mixed system: three-eighths of the members (i.e. 147 deputies and 74 senators) are elected by majority vote; five-eighths (245 deputies and 122 senators) by proportional representation. Italians living abroad elect 8 deputies and 4 senators

according to a specific proportional system (which allows for preferential voting).

Italian political parties not represented in parliament must collect between 1,500 and 4,000 signatures of voters living in a constituency (300 in Valle d'Aosta) before they can stand for parliamentary elections in that constituency. Candidates for the office of deputy must be at least 25 years old and those running for the upper house must be at least 40. Furthermore, while Italians aged 18 and over can elect their deputies, only those aged 25 and over are allowed to elect members of the Senate.

Seats are distributed according to the Hare method. The threshold for being elected by proportional representation is set at 3% in parliament (10% for a coalition of parties).

The main political parties currently represented in the Chamber of Deputies are:

- The Five Star Movement (M5S), a populist party founded on 4 October 2009 by Beppe Grillo and Gianroberto Casaleggio and led by Giuseppe Conte, has 112 elected members;
- The League (Lega), a radical right-wing populist party founded in 1989 by Umberto Bossi and led by Matteo Salvini, has 59 seats;
- Forza Italia (FI), a centre-right party created by former Council President (1994-1995, 2001-2006 and 2008-2011) Silvio Berlusconi, who still leads it at 86, has 57 deputies;
- The Democratic Party (PD), founded by Walter Veltroni in April 2007 from the Democrats of the Left (DS) and La Margherita. Led by Enrico Letta, it has 52 MPs;
- Fratelli d'Italia (FdI), a far-right populist party founded on 21 December 2012 from a split between the People's Freedom Party and the National Alliance (AN). Led by Giorgia Meloni, it has 18 MPs;
- Free and Equal, 14 seats

Reminder of the results of the 4 March 2018 parliamentary elections in Italy

Turnout: 73.01%

House of Representatives

	Party	Total seats
Right Coalition	League (Lega)	73
	Forza Italia (FI)	59
	Fratelli d'Italia (FdI)	19
	Single-Member candidates	111
5 Stars Movement (M5S)		133
	Single-Member candidates	92
Left Coalition	Democratic Party (PD)	85
	SVP - PATT	2
	Single Member Candidate	28
Free and Equal		14

Source : [Home Affairs Ministry](#)

Senate

	Party	Total seats
Right Coalition	League (Lega)	37
	Forza Italia (FI)	33
	Fratelli d'Italia (FdI)	7
	Single-Member candidates	58
5 Stars Movement (M5S)		67
	Single-Member candidates	44
Left Coalition	Democratic Party (PD)	43
	SVP - PATT	1
	Single Member Candidate	13
Free and Equal		4

Source : [Home Affairs Ministry](#)

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