

Local Elections Stun Pundits

Judith Harris (June 01, 2013)



Local administrative elections this past Sunday and Monday in Rome and other key cities throughout Italy caught observers by surprise. The turnout was 20% lower than the last round five years ago, as nearly half those entitled to vote in the cities, which included Rome, Ferrara and Siena, stayed home or abstained. Whereas the left-leaning Partito Democratico (PD) made a surprisingly good showing, Berlusconi's Partito della Libertà' (PdL) slumped behind the PD, and Beppe Grillo's Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S, or Five-Star Movement) just dropped a few stars. For them, no one had predicted a debacle on this level.

ROME - Local administrative elections this past Sunday and Monday in Rome and other key cities throughout Italy stunned pundits and the rest of us, and not only because of the results. The turnout was 20% lower than the last round five years ago, as nearly half those entitled to vote in the cities, which included Rome, Ferrara and Siena, stayed home or abstained. Whereas the left-leaning Partito Democratico (PD) made a surprisingly good showing, Berlusconi's Partito della Libertà' (PdL) slumped behind. Even more interesting was that Beppe Grillo's Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S, or Five-Star Movement) just dropped a few stars. No one had predicted a debacle on this level. Just what their shellacking means, and what they are to do about it, is being hotly debated by the losers.

The inner tensions have one obvious conclusion: the government headed by Enrico Letta of the PD, and backed by Berlusconi's party, is strengthened.

The elections for a new mayor and city council in Rome help to explain why. Amazingly, with 512,000 votes, Ignazio Marino, the mayoral candidate of the PD, captured almost 43% of the total vote in Rome. Just three months ago in national general political elections the Partito della Libertà (PdL), headed by Silvio Berlusconi, had 299,000 votes. Last weekend the PdL candidate to succeed himself



as mayor, Gianni Alemanno, had one-third as much, with only 100,000. Elsewhere the PdL vote sagged by from 20-30% from just three months ago. The slump showed in North Italian cities like Brescia and Treviso and, on the Adriatic coast, at Ancona, where some 40% of the electorate deserted the polls.

Similarly, the Northern League vote lost ground. Among the surprisingly big losers in Rome were the six candidates standing for former Premier Mario Monti's Lista Civica, who altogether reaped less than 2%. This triumph was all the more surprising in the light of the fragmented Partito Democratico, which today has no less than eleven quarreling factions. What also casts a slight shadow over the PD victory, besides the fact that the high abstentionism muddies the waters, is that the leading candidate for the Lazio regional election (again, only three months ago) had 715,000 votes, 200,000 more than Ignazio Marino.

Beppe Grillo's showing was particularly disappointing to his followers. By one estimate, one Grillo voter out of 10, or some 40,000, deserted the M5S to vote for the Rome PD candidate Marino. In Ancona, Grillo took only one-quarter of the votes he had won in the same city in political elections in February. According to Prof. Piergiorgio Corbetta of the respectable Istituto Cataneo think tank, half of Grillo's supporters chose to abstain rather than turn out to vote for the M5S again. In Barletta in the South half of those who voted in February for Grillo fled back to the PD. The poor showing of the M5S has Grillo himself in an obvious quandary. His most recent shock tactic: to attack Stefano Rodota, the leftist intellectual whom Grillo had supported as candidate for Italian president. "He [Rodota] is an octogenarian who had a miracle thanks to the Internet - he's freshly put in brine and brought of the mausoleum." Asked about this savage about-face attack, Rodota said only, "Well, I'm not surprised." In his editorial for La Repubblica daily Thursday, Massimo Giannini picked up the cudgels of the insults to Rodota and accused Grillo of suffering from a "delirium of omnipotency."

As a result, at least some of Grillo's mostly untested representatives in Parliament are threatening to bolt and to shift their loyalty elsewhere. "His voters are immature," in Rodota's analysis. "Those without a strong presence in the territory tend to find themselves in difficulty. It's no coincidence that the party that won the most votes in these elections was the PD, despite the high abstentionism meaning fewer voters altogether." His conclusion: "It's not enough for Grillo just to talk." As for Grillo himself, he seems confused and accuses others of spying on his movement. "He's destroying the very movement he created," said Giannini. Grillo's own professorial supporter and M5S guru Paolo Becchi seemed disoriented, admitting that, "I would not have used such harsh words about Rodota."

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