

The return of a clear right-left divide in Italy

An analysis of the EU elections 2024

by Luca Barana | July 2024



Introduction

The elections for the European Parliament (EP) on 8 and 9 June in Italy largely confirmed the political balance of forces established during the October 2022 general election and strengthened the leadership of Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni. The hard-right Brothers of Italy, members of the European Conservatives and Reformists in the European Parliament (ECR) and senior partner in the ruling coalition, comfortably won with 28.8% of the votes, slightly more than what had been expected in the polls. They therefore gained 24 of the 76 seats assigned to Italy in the EP. Their performance stood out dramatically in comparison to the 6% that the party obtained at the previous European elections in 2019, cementing the tight grip that Meloni now has on Italian politics. It also showcases that her tenure in government has not brought any significant political downside. Unlike other European leaders in member states like France, Germany and Spain, Meloni topped the polls, legitimising her prominent role within the Eu-

ropean Council. A role that she will still struggle to translate into concrete influence, as shown by the negotiations on the EU's top jobs.

On the contrary, the vote was a crushing defeat for Matteo Salvini's League (member of the rival far-right Identity and Democracy group in the EP), which in 2019 had come top with 34% of the votes. In June it got only 9% of the votes, gaining 8 seats. It was also overtaken by the other partner in the ruling coalition, the resurgent Forza Italia (member of the European People's Party - EPP), which obtained 9.6% of the votes and 9 seats.

The elections also signalled a return to a more traditional left-right cleavage within the political system, with opposition parties on the centre-left faring better than predicted by opinion polls. The Democratic Party (PD - member of the Socialists & Democrats in the EP) became the second political force, with 24.1%, which translates into 21 seats, and will send the biggest national contingent within the S&D group at the EP. Also, the Green and Left

Alliance (Alleanza Verdi e Sinistra, AVS, members of the Green/Left) obtained a surprisingly positive result with 5 seats and 6.8% of the vote, entering the EP after having missed the electoral threshold of 4% in 2019 because of divisions among alliance members.

The two centrist liberal lists that entered the race this year, United States of Europe and Action, both affiliated to Renew, ignored the lesson that a common electoral ticket would boost their chances. They ran separately and, as a result, both missed the threshold and will not send any representatives to the EP. The Five Star Movement (M5S, non-aligned in the EP) led by former Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, experienced a disappointing outcome. Their electoral bet on a pacifist stance on Ukraine didn't succeed, as they scored a disappointing 10%, down

from the 15% that the polls were suggesting only one month before. They will send 8 representatives to the EP.

The turnout was historically low at 49.7%. It is the first time in Italy's republican history that a general or EP election had a turnout of less than 50%. Stark differences emerged among constituencies where the European elections were taking place simultaneously with local elections and those where the only available vote was for the EP, especially in the south. Meloni soon blamed the low turnout on alienation perceived by citizens vis-à-vis the EU.¹ Actually, Italy remains a mildly Eurosceptic country, with only 46% of Italians viewing EU membership in a positive light.² However, a shrinking turnout is becoming an established trait in elections in Italy.³

Figure 1: EP Election Voting Intentions Italy (29 May 2024, Data by Euronews)

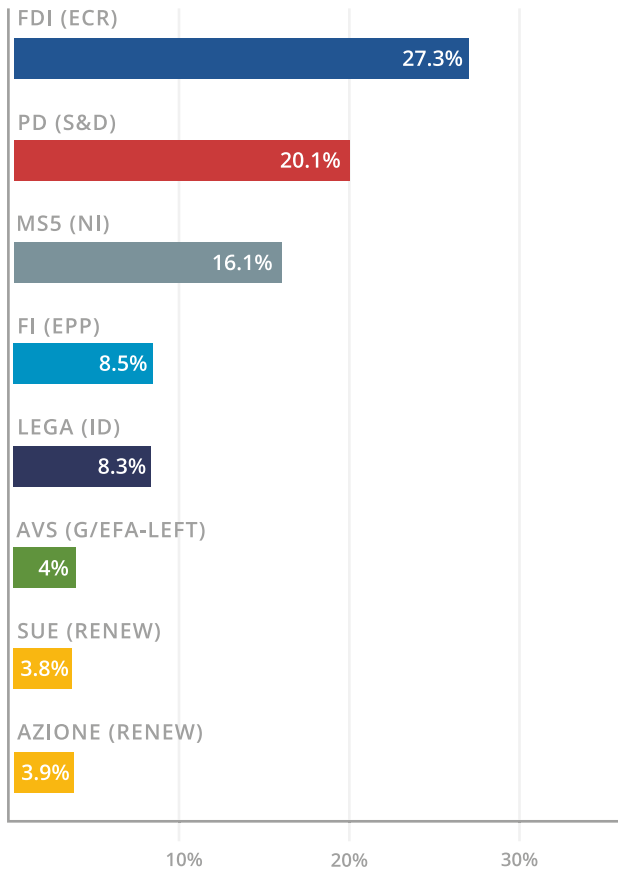
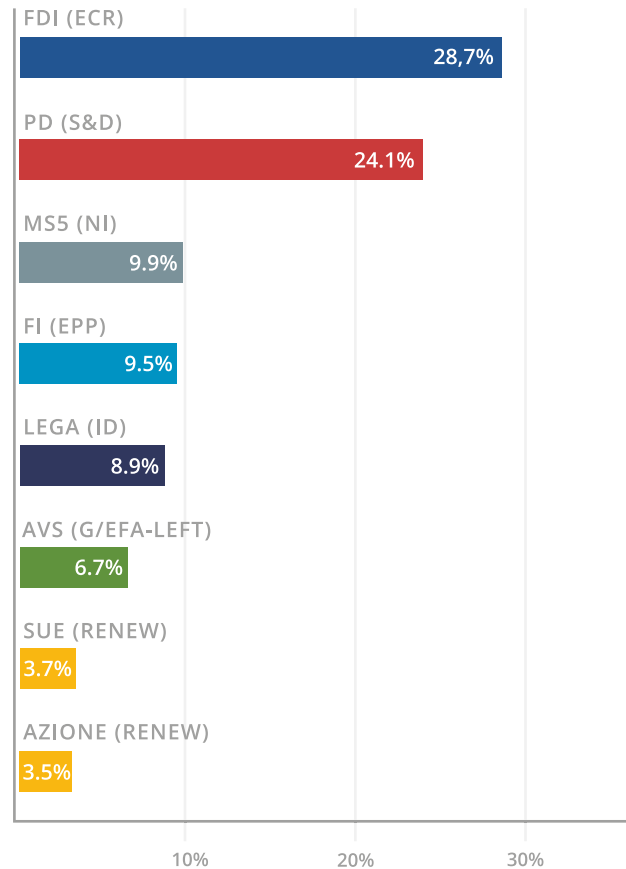


Figure 2: EP election results in Italy (10 June 2024, Data by Euronews)



The context of the elections: from Draghi to Meloni

Since the last European elections in 2019, Italy has gone through the same systemic shocks as its European partners, namely the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. The pandemic has hit the country hard, with Italy's economy being severely affected. However, it has rebounded better than others, also thanks to expansive fiscal policies and the first disbursements from the Recovery and Resilience Fund (RFF).⁴ The Russian war against Ukraine was a wake-up call for a country heavily dependent on Russian gas imports and for national parties that had cultivated political links with Moscow's regime.⁵ Rome reacted quickly by endorsing political, financial and military support for Ukraine's resistance.

The initial consequences of the war were managed by Mario Draghi's government, supported by a broad parliamentary coalition. Meloni remained staunchly in the Opposition, while progressively embracing a more supportive attitude towards European and NATO responses to Russia. Her decision paid off at the general elections in October 2022, when a right-wing coalition led by Brothers of Italy, and composed of the League and Forza Italia (who had both supported Draghi), took power, with Meloni becoming the first female prime minister in Italian history. The coalition has proved to be pretty cohesive in its first 20 months in power, despite the three major parties belonging to different political groups in the EP. Their task was also facilitated by a weakened opposition, which has been going through a significant reconstruction, especially when it comes to the centre-left Democratic Party. Under the new leadership of Elly Schlein, the PD has turned left and has been trying to find common ground with M5S. The results of the European elections will have implications for building a centre-left alternative at domestic level, as the PD is now clearly back in the lead.

Institutional constraints and the personalisation of politics

The electoral campaign for the European elections began quite late, as party programmes and lists were presented only in late April. This can be partially explained by a string of regional elections in the first few months of 2024 in Sardinia, Abruzzo and Basilicata, which preoccupied the parties. The centre-left victory in Sardinia and the centre-right confirmation in the other two elections were interpreted as a test for Meloni's government. The media and political parties also framed the EP elections as midterm elections. At her campaign launch in Pescara in April, Meloni adopted this narrative, saying she was asking Italian voters to express their satisfaction with the government.⁶

In Italy, the electoral law for the EP elections is purely proportional, with a 4% national threshold and great importance given to votes for individual candidates within party lists.⁷ These institutional constraints have two implications. First, the proportional system does not require the formation of any coalition, which means smaller parties are incentivised to campaign for themselves.⁸ The electoral campaign has thus deepened the rifts among coalition partners, especially within the ruling majority. The affiliation to different political groups at the European level has gained fresh importance, with Salvini's League staking out a much more Eurosceptic approach, in line with the ID message, vis-à-vis Meloni's attempt to institutionalise and normalise her own hardline conservative view on the need to profoundly change Europe from within. The rivalry has been particularly stark between the League's Euroscepticism and the traditional pro-European message of Forza Italia, as the two partners have been competing head to head for a long time in the polls.

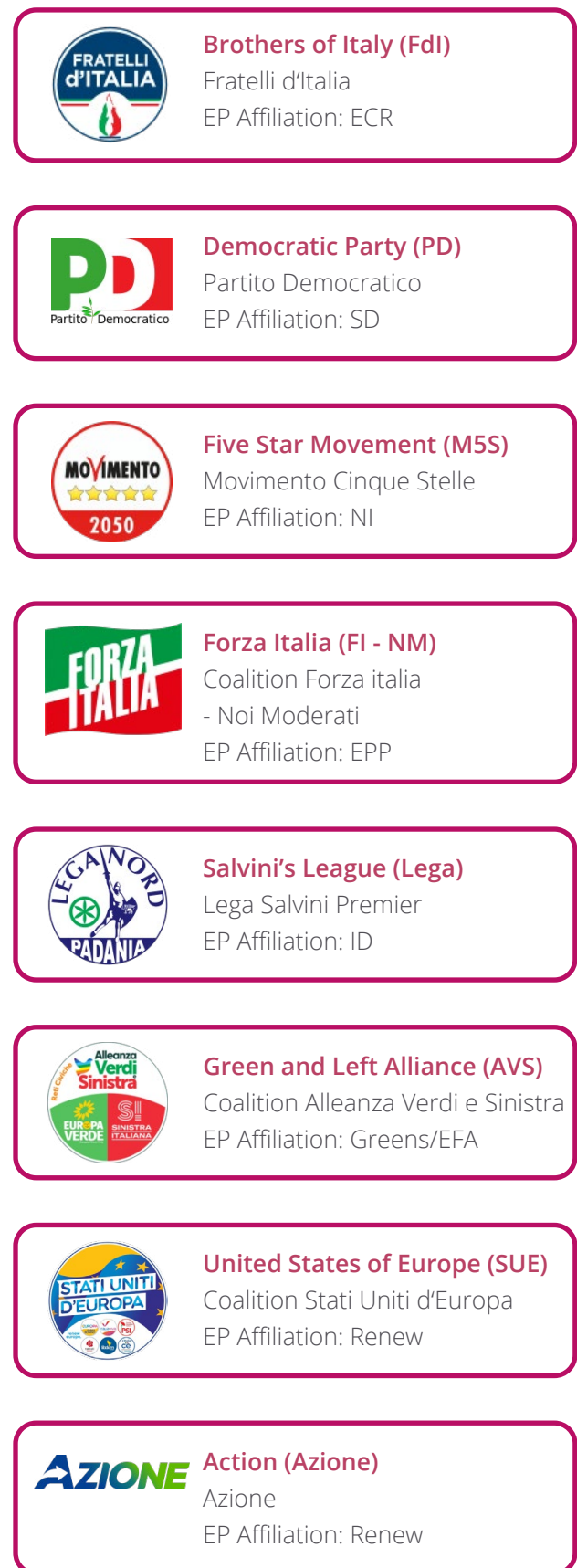
The second implication was the pronounced personalisation of the campaign.⁹ The weight of a can-

didate-oriented vote has been enhanced by the division of the Italian territory into just five broad electoral constituencies, each one comprising multiple regions.¹⁰ Party leaders – including high level personalities such as the Prime Minister Meloni and Foreign Affairs Minister Antonio Tajani (Forza Italia) – ran for the EP in top-of-the-list positions, while stating that they would not sit in Parliament if elected. Meloni ran in all five constituencies, further stressing her direct connection with voters by inviting them to use her first name “Giorgia” in the ballot box and collecting more than two million personal votes. Former EP President Tajani ran in four constituencies out of five.

The same decision was adopted – with mixed results – by other leaders, such as Carlo Calenda (Azione, five out of five), Matteo Renzi (United States of Europe, four out of five) and Elly Schlein (PD, two out of five). Salvini opted not to run, but his name appeared on the League’s electoral logo. In the M5S, party leader and former Italian premier Giuseppe Conte decided not to run, while still dominating the party’s campaign. The PD’s good showing was also partly down to the choice of well-known local politicians.

Several parties decided to work with independent candidates, who would be able to draw personal votes to their lists. Some of them ended up acting as trend-setters during the campaign. Former Army General Roberto Vannacci stood out in League lists, setting the tone for the campaign with its aggressive hard-right message on values, minorities’ rights and immigration. He overshadowed his own party leader and obtained more than 500,000 personal votes. The centre-left also turned to independent candidates: the PD elected anti-war voices from civil society like Marco Tarquinio and Cecilia Strada, while AVS enlisted Ilaria Salis, a political activist incarcerated in Hungary, so as to characterise the party’s campaign and denounce Budapest’s breach of the rule of law. A move that proved successful.

Figure 3: Italian Political Parties and Affiliations
(Source: Politico)



A domestic debate around different ideas of Europe

In such a personalised environment, the content of parties' political programmes and the actual campaign conducted by the candidates grew increasingly detached. Election manifestos reflected clear distinctions in proposals and principles on EU policy areas as diverse as the ecological transition, European defence or migration. However, day-to-day campaigning was dominated by domestic developments. These embraced heated debates on constitutional reform or accusations against the government of censoring public TV or limiting abortion rights. Italian public opinion has grown accustomed to political polarisation revolving around party leaders and leading candidates that makes any discussion about serious European policy issues less and less palatable for them.¹¹ Paradoxically, the campaign that played the most on European issues was the Eurosceptic one conducted by Salvini's League.

This does not mean that a debate around diverging ideas of Europe and future relations between Italy and the EU was completely absent.¹² However, political parties usually filtered their views through the lens of domestic politics and relied on simpler messages, setting out their rival perspectives on the EU. One striking trait of this election campaign, especially compared to earlier ones, has been the almost complete absence of calls for Italy to leave the euro or the EU, even from the most outspoken Eurosceptic movements. This trend may have been driven by the innovative response that the EU gave Italy during the pandemic, through instruments like SURE (to reduce unemployment) and the RFF (to support the economy post-pandemic), which may have mitigated the country's persistent Euroscepticism.¹³ However, these EU programmes barely figured in the campaign, as parties and indeed the electorate seem to have taken them for granted.

Meloni's Brothers of Italy promoted a confederal vision of the EU, based on the principle of subsidiarity

and denouncing the concentration of power in the hands of a European Commission "without democratic legitimacy". Her party warned against Brussels overreach in sectors such as competitiveness and fiscal governance. However, Meloni also pointed to a "European common destiny", especially via a common security and defence policy.¹⁴ She championed the concept of changing the EU from within, distancing herself from the more explicit Euroscepticism of Salvini's League. She convinced her electorate that the EU can be an instrument to promote national interests on the global stage, if managed properly, while reassuring certain economic sectors, such as farmers and small and medium enterprises (SMEs), that the government would protect their interests against Brussels "excesses".

Mainstream parties on the left and right of the political spectrum advanced the vision of a more federalist Europe. Forza Italia on the right reiterated its traditional pro-European message based on freedom, security and Christian identity. PD and AVS on the left advocated for further European integration, favouring the retention of joint economic tools post-RFF. Broadly speaking, leftist parties depicted the image of an EU keener on social and green issues. However, the PD campaign was mainly driven by domestic promises, such as buttressing the public health system and introducing a minimum wage, policy spheres where member states hold competencies, not the EU.

The tone of the campaign was set by the slogans adopted by the parties, rather than by specific proposals, from the highly critical "Less Europe, more Italy" of the League to the proactive "The Europe we want" of the PD. But no slogan proved as successful as "With Giorgia, Italy is changing Europe", which encapsulated both the personalised nature of Meloni's campaign and her intent to influence the EU from within.

Implications for the next EU institutional cycle in key policy areas

Italian party manifestos framed the Green Deal very much in accordance with the positions of their EU political families. The parties in government were as one in their criticism of EU rules on the green transition as an obstacle to competitiveness and as a source of regulatory burden, especially for SMEs that still constitute the backbone of several economic sectors in Italy. The three ruling parties, in particular Brothers of Italy and the League, also morphed their criticism against an “ideological” green transition into a defence of traditional values espoused by the Italian right, like home and car ownership, in order to cling on to their traditional electorate’s support. On the contrary, the centre-left supported the need to strengthen the Green Deal through vast programmes of public investments and boosting its social dimension, even if highlighting the costs of the transition was an electoral gamble.¹⁵ Their support for green policies may well have helped the PD and AVS attract substantial numbers of young voters, as championing green policies increasingly resonates with Italian youth.¹⁶

Italy is likely to push for complementing the Green Deal with industrial and competitiveness policies that protect its manufacturing. Delaying and watering down the most impactful measures of the Green Deal could also be one of the policy areas where Brothers of Italy could cooperate on a case-by-case basis with the EPP, and where Meloni could attempt to exert her growing influence in the Council.

A similar pattern of selective cooperation could be followed on Ukraine and on the broader issue of common European defence. However, Meloni faces an uphill challenge in making the case for aligning with the European powers-that-be on Ukraine because of widespread fears of a military escalation among the Italian population and deepening rifts within the ruling majority, which were further exposed by the election campaign.¹⁷ Salvini’s campaign progressively became more outspoken on

Ukraine, especially after Macron’s and Stoltenberg’s support for the use of Western-provided weapons into Russia’s territory. Salvini harshly criticised ‘plans’ for a “European army” and culminated by labelling Macron “a criminal”.¹⁸ This rhetorical escalation can be read as a tactical shift to distance the party from its partners in government, even though it proved unsuccessful in terms of electoral results, but also to refurbish the League’s credentials on Euroscepticism and thus re-align with its traditional partners within ID.

Other movements made peace and disarmament one of their major electoral cards: M5S even included the word “peace” in its own symbol on the ballot paper. AVS also promoted a pro-peace platform, usually combining the demand for peace negotiations on Ukraine with the denunciation of Israel’s retaliatory war in Gaza. The PD adhered to the European Socialists’ line of supporting Ukraine to achieve a “just peace”, but without concretely specifying what it means, as the party’s programme does not pinpoint Ukraine’s territorial integrity as an explicit condition.¹⁹ While it will not dent the party’s pro-Ukraine approach, the inclusion in its lists of Tarquinio and Strada, civil society personalities who have clearly stated their opposition to prolonging military assistance to Kyiv, has also created an undoubted embarrassment for Schlein’s leadership.

Overall, Meloni’s personal commitment to Ukraine should reassure the allies on Italy’s position – for the time being. However, the US elections might prove to be a turning point: in the event of Donald Trump’s victory, Meloni will probably be forced to choose whether to side with an isolationist, but ideologically kindred, US administration, or with Italy’s EU partners. Also, the opposition to Kaja Kallas’ choice as High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy is a signal that the Italian government’s declared commitment to a common European line can simply be overtaken by sheer political calculation. The prime minister’s strategy of building up her personal standing internationally seems to have borne fruit on migration, as the government successfully managed to reduce its political salience in the campaign. While the need for a European policy on irregular migration and asylum has dominated the

agenda during the negotiations on the New Pact²⁰, it has been virtually absent from the electoral debate, until the last week when Meloni strategically visited Albania to promote the government's commitment to outsource migration management. The elections are unlikely to change Italy's approach to migration: the parties in government will still push for outsourcing asylum, cooperating on selected legislative packages at EU level with the traditional EP majority. At the same time, support for the New Pact might be too big an obstacle for Brothers of Italy to cross within the ECR and in view of potential – but unlikely – cooperative attempts with ID.

Finally, all parties elected to the EP uniformly and decisively reject austerity policies. Fiscal governance will likely be where the mildly cooperative attitude of the Italian government will be tested the most. Headlines in parties' manifestos such as "The end of austerity policies" (League), "Moving beyond austerity" (Brothers of Italy), "Stop austerity" (M5S) or "Europe against austerity" (AVS) underline how pervasive this political narrative is in Italian politics. The same could be said about how the PD cast austerity as a source of support for the right because of its detrimental economic consequences. The implementation of the reformed Growth and Stability Pact is thus likely to provoke a dispute between Italy and the EU.

Conclusion

The renewed left-right cleavage emerging from the EP elections at the national level will influence Italy's relations with the EU and coalition choices in the EP. Meloni has already had an impact in the sense that she successfully steered Europe towards the right on migration, with backing from the EPP.²¹ The Italian government's stance in the Council is unlikely to change significantly after these elections. The prime minister is one of the few European leaders to have emerged strengthened from the polls and will likely carry on leveraging her support for current priorities – assistance to Ukraine and a common European defence – against concessions on Brussels

perceived overreach in other sensitive dossiers for Italy, such as industrial policy and the "costly" green transition. This balancing act will be put to the test on fiscal matters, where a confrontation between the Italian position and other European countries (the "frugals") and the Commission is most likely to emerge. Another contentious area is likely to be the rule of law, even if the Commission seems to have stayed its hand on (alleged) Italian government restrictions on media freedom.²¹ Meloni may have been isolated in the top jobs wrangling, but is still demanding a high-profile portfolio for Italy in the next Commission, matching the electoral successes of the ECR.²³

Speculation that the ECR – or Brothers of Italy on its own – could join a new EP majority seems more unlikely to come to pass due to the election results that have confirmed the traditional majority of pro-European political forces, even if in reduced proportions, and appealed to foreign observers more than Italian voters. Italian mainstream media enthusiastically covered the topic²⁴, but typically filtering it through a domestic lens, applying how Italy's parliamentary system plays out while bypassing the role of the Council in policymaking entirely, so as to make European politics more comprehensible to Italian voters. Meloni has strategically kept her cards close to her chest during the campaign and will probably try to steer ECR towards a case-by-case support for specific legislative packages up for debate in the next EP, choosing her battles selectively.

This potential case-by-case cooperation by ECR is likely to be staunchly opposed by the PD, which as the biggest contingent in the S&D group will drive it further away from any form of cooperation with the right. The Socialists are the only political group within the traditional governing EP majority where an Italian party has any significant influence, as Forza Italia has less clout inside the EPP (especially in comparison to other powerful parties in Germany and Spain) and as Renew has no representatives elected in Italy. Overall, Italian relations with the EU will continue to be driven by national politics after these European elections.

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This report is one of four country reports analysing the election campaigns and results in France, Germany, Italy and Poland. These country reports will be part of a bigger report which will also include an EU chapter and recommendations on how to Europeanise the European elections.

The authors of the different country reports have used their own sources for the polling numbers as well as for the election results in their respective countries. As such, there might be slight differences in numbers between the graphics and the text when it comes to poll numbers before the election.

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