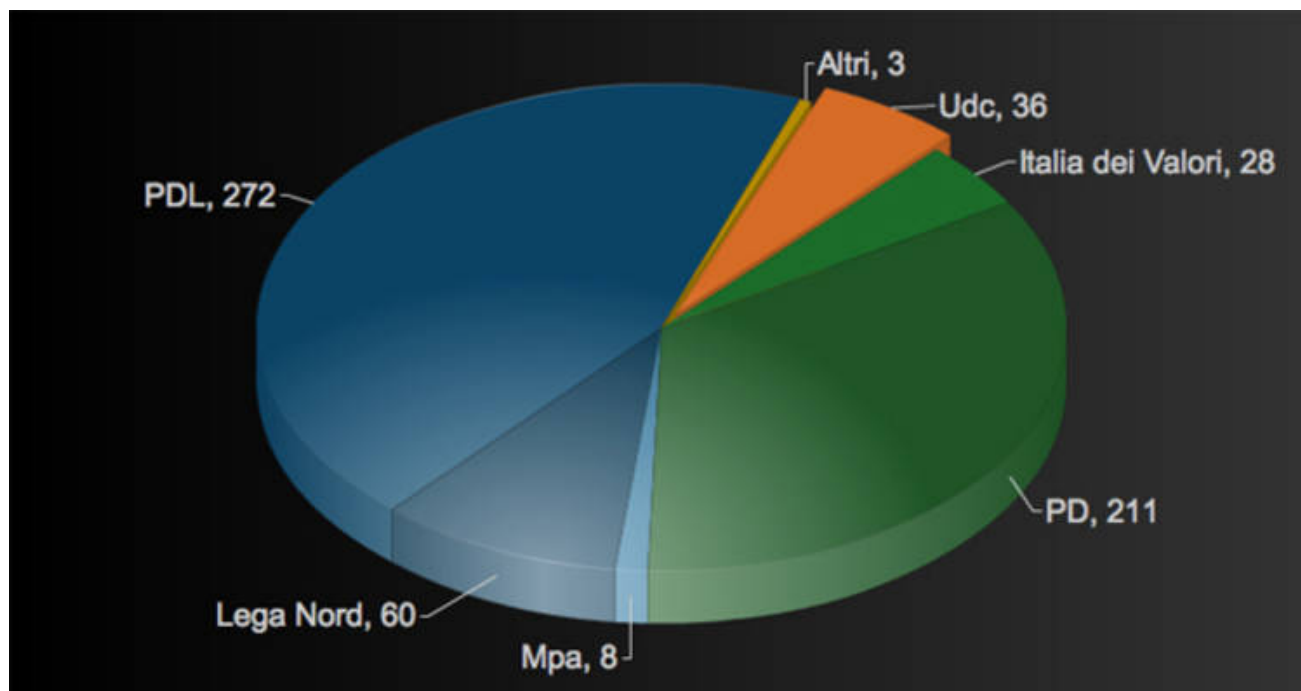


The End of Ideology?

Judith Harris (April 15, 2008)



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ROME - “This is the end of ideology,” was one editor’s rushed comment, in tones of both nostalgia and relief, as the results of Italian general elections came flooding in Monday night. In some ways he was right. This election was mostly about pragmatic issues and personalities, not ideas, and down at Remo’s coffee bar in Rome frequented by workmen, cops, the odd aristocrat, street people, artists and teachers, the line that drew the most applause this morning was, “Hanno detto di lui peste e corna, ma po’ l’hanno votato tutti.” (They said all they could about him, down to calling him cornuto, but then they all voted for him.) No need to explain the “him”—it was Berlusconi, the future premier.

Walter Veltroni won kudos from the commentators by graciously phoning to concede victory to the man called “Berlusca nostra” (our Berlusca’). Less graciously, Berlusconi declared he’d always known he would win, “whatever the pollsters say” (a gratuitously nasty note since he owned most of the polling companies). He also boasted that his victory proves that he’d actually won in 2006, too, but that results were fiddled. Well, hang on for a rough ride with plenty of picturesque scenery.

There being no quarrel about who won, that ride is expected to begin around the first of May. It will be all the rougher thanks to the virile 8.4% showing in the Chamber of Deputies of the Northern League. Headed by Umberto Bossi, the League's anti-immigrant policies and federalist projects can hardly be ignored in the future by Berlusconi and his main ally and lockstep prop, Gianfranco Fini. Only days before the election Berlusconi and Bossi had tangled; the latter said he expected a cabinet slot, the former said not in my backyard. We shall see how that plays out.

The first and most important statistic is the high turnout of 80.3%, just 3.5% below that of 2006. It is cause for justifiable pride. Few Italians relished being recalled to vote again after only 24 months, but they turned out dutifully, in election days marred by just three events. One man had a heart attack in a polling station, a woman felt sick in another, and in the confusion of being obliged to store their cell phones while voting, people walked away with the wrong mobile phone.

A few other statistics, limited here to the Chamber of Deputies vote: together Berlusconi's trio of parties (his own Popolo della Libertà, which combines his old Forza Italia action party with Fini's post-Fascists); the Northern League; and the tiny faction MPA (1.1%), claimed 46.7% of the vote. This will give the Berlusconi triumvirate 340 deputies in the Chamber. Berlusconi and Fini together this time claimed 37.2%; two years ago the same two claimed 36%, meaning a real increase of over 1.2% of the electorate.

Pier Ferdinando Casini's U.D.C., a Catholic-oriented moderately conservative party, will be a player, since it claimed 5.6% of the vote, meaning 34 seats in Parliament.

The results were a crushing blow for the ideological left of unborn, reborn and refried Communists. Even the popular Fausto Bertinotti bit the dust and has announced his withdrawal from politics. The trade unionist's party, Rifondazione Comunista, had claimed no less than 5.8% of the vote just two years ago, and he was elevated to the high profile job of president of the Italian Chamber of Deputies, the third highest office in the land. This time his party, called the Sinistra Arcobalena, claimed just over 3% of the vote, but will not have a single member of Parliament.

And indeed the results were more about the losers than the winners. The chatty fattie Giuliano Ferrara, who had campaigned against abortion, basically won no votes and was gloomily criticizing himself. The Socialist party revival flopped. Gone for the moment is any party involving gays; and with them women are put out to the same pasture as were the Greens.

Another flop: the exit polls, which initially showed Walter Veltroni, leader of the new Partito Democratico, well ahead of Berlusconi's formation.

A bright spot was the positive showing on the left of the anti-Mafia, anti-crime political action party headed by former Palermo mayor Leoluca Orlando and by Antonio Di Pietra, the prosecutor who spearheaded the anti-corruption trials of the Nineties. Their 4.4% of the vote entitles them to 31 deputies, who are certain to be a thorn in Berlusconi's side. Campaigning for them was the Neapolitan toxic rubbish scandal.

That success is part of the larger picture, a fascinating snapshot of Italy today: The election results show a country tired of the old ways and eager for new, but uncertain. They show that some sectors of the country long to emulate Berlusconi's business success but others are troubled by the obvious presence of crime in business. They show fatigue with the vieux jeu trade unions and Seventies rhetoric but at the same time concern over the hordes of immigrants, who include a criminal



component.

They also show, and perhaps this above all, fear of the future, with Berlusconi—tasteless wise cracks, hair dye, flirtatious ways and all—welcomed as a comforting, reassuring presence.

The very best election comment came from the stock market in Milan. Cement company shares suddenly rocketed: Berlusconi has promised major public works projects, with all that implies. The road may be rocky, but at least it's a road to build, or a bridge, and building means work and profits to be spread all around, without examining the beneficiaries too closely.

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