Run-off Elections for Mayor: Surprises May be in Store

Judith Harris (June 14, 2016)

Run-off elections for mayor take place in six of Italy's most important cities Sunday, June 19, two weeks after administrative elections involving 12 million voters. To judge by previous such ballots, a few surprises can be expected.

ROME -- Where there had been no decisive victory, run-off elections take place Sunday, June 19, two weeks after administrative elections were held in 1,342 townships and involved over 12 million voters. Six of these run-off's are crucial, for they will decide the administrations in some of Italy's most important cities. To judge by the previous such ballots, a few surprises can be expected. The consequence, in the eyes of Renato Brunetta, a Berlusconi camp leader: "This is the liberation front from Renzi. If the PD loses this run-off, it tells the government to quit." Premier Matteo Renzi is having none of this, however, and retorted that he is not resigning over these elections, no matter how they end up.

Still, the vote in Rome is crucial. There lawyer Virginia Raggi, 37, representing the Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S) is to face off against Roberto Giachetti of Renzi's Partito Democratico (PD). On June 5 Raggi, a city councilperson since 2013, copped 35.3% and Giachetti, a scant 17.2%, for a difference of no less than 100,000 votes between the two candidates. Analysts here say that the votes for

Raggi, who is married with one child, were a protest coming primarily from relatively disadvantaged outlying districts while the wealthier downtowners tended to vote Giachetti.

The campaign is being watched closely to see if Rome will have a radical mayor representing the party founded by comedian Beppe Grillo. That said, in a campaign speech Raggi gave herself a leftist endorsement by praising the late Italian Communist party leader Enrico Berlinguer, "a prophet of ethics and politics." By way of response, Giachetti quickly paid a visit to Enrico Berlinguer's grave.

The competition is crucially important because the city administration under the past two mayors, right-winger Gianni Alemanno and the semi-independent Ignazio Marino, has been accused not only of negligence, but of having ignored Mafia-style infiltration among corrupt city councillors as well as senior bureaucrats. Indeed, some of these are under formal judiciary inquiry. The intensity of the scandals forced Marino, who is not under investigation, to resign two years ahead of schedule while former mayor Gianni Alemanno goes on trial July 5 on charges of corruption and accepting illicit campaign funds. From one enthusiastic donor he allegedly accepted 75,000 Euros to pay for election dinners and, for his political party, Nuova Italia, 40,000 Euros.m

However, it is worth recalling that back in 2008 in Rome, a former center-left mayor, Francesco Rutelli, copped more than 750,000 votes (45.8%) versus Alemanno's more modest 675,000 (40.7%). In the run-off, however, Alemanno defeated Rutelli, 53.6% to 46.3%.

Milan's run-off will have a far-reaching impact. Candidates are Giuseppe Sala of the center-left and Stefano Parisi, who startled election observers by unifying around his candidacy a Heinz variety of center-rightists. Should he win, Parisi will challenge the old-line Berlusconi crowd as well as the Northern League's anti-immigrant Matteo Salvini for leadership of Italian conservatives. Sala, however, is a formidable rival, for he is credited with the success of Expo 2015 SpA, of which he was CEO.

Unlike elsewhere in the Big Six cities, hot button issues in Milan tend to involve social welfare programs and the quality of health services. Crime, migrants and public order rank further down the list, polls show, with corruption far less a key factor here than in the other mayoral contest cities.

In Turin, the present mayor Piero Fassino of the PD will face off against "la Grillina", or Beppe Grillo's winsome candidate, Chiara Appendino, marketing expert who, at 32, is half Fassino's age. On June 5 Fassino won 42% and Appendino, 31% (incorrectly reported by me last week, with apologies). A risk for Fassino is that the electors from the minor leftist parties who might be expected to vote for him will simply stay home, some of them less out of laziness than resentment of PD's centrist leadership under Premier Renzi. Meantime Salvini says that his Northern League will back Appendino, intimating a swap for jobs in the city administration.

During a heated TV debate Appendino cited the Catholic charity Caritas as deploring that after 23 years of leftist administrations, the city has 100,000 living in poverty. Needless to say, Fassino denied the allegation. Other big ticket items are high unemployment and the costly train line, or TAV, being built to link Turin and Lyon in France, which the Grillo crowd calls "useless." Simply trying to block the often violent anti-TAV demonstrations has cost the city administration over 400 million Euros. In a Sky post-debate poll Fassio was backed by only 34%, Appendino, by 66%.

But here too surprises have resulted from a run-off. Back in 1997 a Berlusconi candidate, Raffaele Costa, won 43% of the preliminary vote in Turin versus the 35.4% of his opponent, Valentino Castellani. But in the run-off Castellani triumphed, 59.4% vs. 49.6%.

In Naples, where crime and unemployment top the voter aggro list, the reigning mayor Luigi De Magistris faces off against right-winger businessman Gianni Lettieri with respectively 43% against just 24%. De Magistris, whose party is called Civiche-Sinistra, is a leftist but there is mutual dislike with the PD establishment in Rome. Two other parties who did fairly well on June 5 can turn the tide: the M5S, with its almost 10%, and the PD with 21%.

Looking back, the same two rivals met in Naples in 2001. That election season Lettieri won 38.5%, and De Magistris, 27.5%. But in the end De Magistris triumphed, with a stunning 65.3% to Lettieri's

miserly 34.7%.

Other fairly big cities with run-off's are Bologna, where a League candidate backed by the center-right seems to be forging ahead. Similarly, in Trieste, a center-right candidate leads the pack, 41% versus 30% for a leftist coalition. By contrast, in Varese, which has been governed by the Northern League since 1992, a PD challenger appears to be gaining consensus.

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