

Economic Inequality and Voter Choices: The Italian Case*

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1. Introduction

On March 4, 2018, Italy held its long-awaited parliamentary elections, with the new mixed system introduced just a few months before, by law 165/17. The results were not particularly unexpected and generally in line with the recent Western electoral trends: there has been a substantial decrease in support for the “traditional” center-right and center-left parties, while “populist” political groups have greatly improved their previous results.

However, the turnout was the lowest in the seventy years of the Republic's history and, for the first time since the end of the fascist regime, fewer than three out of four eligible voters decided to take part in the election.

In order to explain these phenomena, many theories have been proposed: one of the most interesting tries to establish a link between economic inequality and both voter turnout and elections results. This paper will attempt to analyze the Italian case and assess whether the said correlations have occurred in the last political consultation.

In particular, after a summary of the most recent academic studies on this very issue and a brief country presentation (including a summary of the aforementioned new electoral system and of the

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manifestos of the main political parties), the paper will focus on the data related to economic inequality, collected during the electoral season, in relation to the geographical distribution of turnout and political preferences.

2. Economic inequality: definition and measurement

For the purposes of this paper, we will use the most common definition of economic inequality, measured through the notorious Gini index¹: therefore, we will only consider inequality as a matter of available income (after taxation), but considering also government benefits and other indirect kinds of revenue for the citizens. Needless to say, economic inequality is only one of the various forms that inequality can assume. Just to name another one, voting inequality was the norm in the XIX century in most of the Western world and universal suffrage was introduced only in the first half of the XX century. However, economic inequality is by far the most studied and the easiest to measure with reliable data; moreover, it is often used as a proxy index for other indicators, such as education, life expectancy and access to healthcare.

3. Correlation between economic inequality and voters' behavior

Many scholars have tried to establish a mathematical relation between economic inequality and, broadly speaking, election results: the main fields of research appear to be, on one hand, the correlation

¹ Developed by Corrado Gini, an Italian statistics professor, in his 1912 study “Variabilità e mutabilità” (Variability and mutability). It ranges from 0 (perfect equality) to 1 (perfect inequality, where a single person owns everything). For a more precise mathematical explanation and comprehensive data related to the UK and the rest of the world, see Max Roser, Esteban Ortiz-Ospina, “Income Inequality”, *Our World in Data*, December 2013 (updated October 2016), available at <https://ourworldindata.org/income-inequality>.

between inequality and voter turnout, defined as the ratio between eligible voters and those actually showing up at the polls; on the other, the link between inequality levels and political preference, in the form of party voting.

3.1 Voter turnout

Although the political-demographic studies have incredibly expanded in the last seventy years, there is still no consensus² in academia about the patterns of voters' political decisions, including the paramount choice whether to vote at all. The lack of consensus is probably due to the problematic overlapping of sociological theories "pulling" in one way or the other as far as the effects of inequality on society are concerned. The main ones are three: the Conflict theory, the Relative Power theory and the Resource theory.

The first states that the more unequal a society, the stronger internal conflicts will be; therefore, both the high end and the low end of the income spectrum will be much more interested in avoiding or promoting redistribution, because they would have more to lose or gain, respectively. Consequently, given the greater perceived importance of political decisions in an unequal society, it would be reasonable to suppose that turnout in elections would be higher when

² A comprehensive review of the main hypotheses on this issue can be found in a 2016 study by Nils Brandsma and Olle Krönby. The authors try to verify three theories concerning the mathematical relationship between voter turnout and economic inequality: the first (Brady 2003) supposes a positive correlation, meaning that it theorizes an increase in participation whenever the inequality level arise; the second (Geys 2006) states that a numerical link between the two variables cannot be clearly established, while the third (Solt 2008) claims to find negative correlation between inequality and turnout (i.e., when the former increases, the latter decreases). Nils Brandsma & Olle Krönby, "Economic Inequality and Voting Participation", Södertörns högskola | Institution of Political Economics, Stockholm, Fall 2016. The authors conclude that there is probably a negative correlation.

inequality is higher too, thereby supporting a positive correlation between voting participation and inequality³.

The second theory, instead, suggests that turnout is fundamentally determined by the expectation of influence on the political process possessed by the single voter: if a potential elector thinks that his/her vote is ultimately irrelevant for the purpose of influencing the government actions, the likelihood of voting decreases⁴. Since, even in democracies, it is still a reality that more affluent people are more effective in defending their interests, and therefore manage to influence the government towards what suits them more often, they will be more likely to show up and vote, while the vast majority of lower-class people will be discouraged to do the same. In the long term, even richer voters could start deserting the booths, because they could grow tired of “winning”⁵. To summarize, the Relative Power theory argues for a negative correlation between inequality and voter turnout.

Finally, the Resource theory links the rate of each citizen’s political involvement to three “resources”: civic skills (including, but not limited to, public speaking abilities, empathy, education, information), money (measured as available income) and free time (hours per day not dedicated to work, house care, sleep etc.). The authors of this theory⁶, after dividing political activities in three categories (donations, campaigning and voting), found that only two resources influence each category, with one of the three being

³ This theory was *obiter* presented by Allan H. Meltzer and Scott F. Richard, “A Rational Theory of the Size of Government”, *The Journal of Political Economy*, Vol. 89, No. 5 (Oct. 1981), p. 914-927, where the focus was not specifically on turnout, but on the franchise itself.

⁴ This argument has been frequently used by populist forces to explain rising abstention in recent years.

⁵ In this context, “to win” is to be interpreted as Donald J. Trump would use it. The Relative Power theory was elaborated by Robert Goodin and John Dryzek in “Rational Participation: The Politics of Relative Power”, *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (July 1980), p. 273-292.

⁶ Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman and Henry E. Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*, Harvard University Press, 1995.

basically irrelevant: donations appeared to be associated with money and civic skills, campaigning with civic skills and free time, while voting seemed to be dependent more on civic skills, particularly political interest and education, and, to a lesser extent, on free time, rather than on money⁷. Therefore, it is very difficult to state a general trend of correlation between income and turnout, because, for example, very high-paying jobs may severely reduce free time and political engagement, even though they are often linked to high education.

Other scholars have theorized a more complex relationship between inequality and turnout: for example, there are hypotheses which differentiates the effects of inequality on turnout depending on a particular value of economic inequality⁸: as long as inequality floats under that level, the correlation appears negative, while, after reaching it, the trend reverses and more inequality begins meaning more turnout. Another theory⁹ instead finds that, apparently paradoxically,

⁷ Brandsma and Krönby, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

⁸ D. Guvercin, “How Income Inequality Affects Voter Turnout”, *Economic Alternatives*, 2018, Issue 1, p. 35-48. The author quotes Solt 2008 and 2010 in his research, but also the aforementioned Melzer and Richard. His findings show that the U-turn value is 0.32 Gini, meaning that in substantially equal countries, such as most Western EU states, the correlation is negative, while in more unequal communities inequality plays an important propelling role in determining turnout.

⁹ D. Horn, “Income inequality and voter turnout. Evidence from European national elections”, Amsterdam, AIAS, GINI Discussion Paper 16, October 2011. The author finds “that inequality associates negatively with turnout at the national elections (hypothesis 1). Although this is not a very strong effect, but it is net of several factors affecting voter turnout that are empirically well proven – such as individual characteristics or different features of the political system. The literature suggests that this negative association is either due to the lower turnout of the poor relative to the rich in high inequality countries (hypothesis 2) or due to the effects of the universal welfare state, which increases turnout through altered social norms as well as decreases inequality through government intervention (hypothesis 3). Although none of the hypotheses were refuted, neither was really supported by the data. I also tested whether inequalities at the top or at the bottom have a different affect [sic] on turnout. Although the results, again, are not very robust, it seems that larger differences in income between the very rich and the middle decreases overall

inequality has more positive effect on turnout if it is mainly between the middle and the lower class, while if there are only a few very rich people and a poor population, economic inequality depresses turnout.

In general, however, there seem to be a consensus at least on the fact that inequality does indeed affect turnout, in some way and with mixed effects. Moreover, research has extended to include also other variables, such as the type of election (parliamentary v. presidential v. EU elections, where applicable)¹⁰, local income distribution¹¹ and voter suppression/coercion mechanisms¹².

Considering all the above, the expectation from the Italian case is probably a loose form of negative correlation between inequality and turnout, because 1) on 4 March 2018 Italy held parliamentary elections, which are traditionally the most attended by voters, therefore there is little likelihood that turnout had been depressed by the low relevance of the vote; 2) the Italian overall Gini index is slightly above the threshold of positive correlation¹³ as theorized by Guvercin (2018); 3) Italy still enjoys powerful redistribution mechanisms in the form of taxation and welfare state, which reduce overall inequality, but their reach is erratic and often fails to address real problems, due to fraud and corruption.

turnout, while higher difference between the middle and the very poor increases turnout.” The author notes also that this behavior contrasts with the Downsian rational turnout supposition, which links turnout to the expected utility of the vote: in theory, if few people vote, the expected utility of each single vote (defined as the product of the expected gain and the likelihood to succeed) is necessarily positive. However, people do not appear to follow the same reasoning pattern.

¹⁰ See Guvercin, *op. cit.*, p. 40-41.

¹¹ James K. Galbraith and Travis Hale, “State Income Inequality and Presidential Election Turnout and Outcomes”, The University of Texas Inequality Project, Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs, UTIP Working Paper 33, March 2006.

¹² Brandsma and Krönby, *op. cit.*, p. 6; James K. Galbraith, “How income inequality can make or break presidential elections”, 1 February 2018.

¹³ It was 0,33 in 2016, according to OECD data, available at <https://data.oecd.org/inequality/income-inequality.htm>.

3.2 Political preferences

On this issue, there used to be a quite strong consensus among demography experts: the more unequal a society was, the more it would have voted left. The rationale was simple: the left-wing parties have always had, in their programs, more progressive and ultimately redistributive measures, while right-wing and conservative formations tended to represent the interests of the ruling class (generally more affluent and economically strong). The task to analyze these trends is very difficult in countries with a multifaceted party system, because each party will inevitably propose many different measures in its manifesto and each measure could have redistributive effects or not, in the short or long term, depending on the circumstances.

This is why the privileged object in this field of research has been the US political scene. Many factors concur to push electoral researchers to focus on the land of the free: a seemingly indestructible two-party system¹⁴, with a clearly conservative and anti-government redistribution GOP and a more progressive, “big government” Democratic Party; vast amount of data, coming not only from the decennial Census, but also from a myriad of other sources¹⁵; very

¹⁴ Which is a direct consequence of the FPTP electoral system for Congress and Great Electors, according to the famous Duverger’s law.

¹⁵ Just to name a few, the US Elections Project, the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, the MIT Election Data + Science Lab. Political parties often hire private consultants and databases to help organizing the campaign; a quick Internet research may find dozens of them: “In the 2004 presidential election in the United States, the Republican Party used the Voter Vault platform and the Democratic Party used DataMart. Currently, the Republicans use rVotes Data Center and the Democrats use Votebuilder from the Voter Activation Network (VAN). There are non-partisan firms that offer registered voter data in the United States, too: NationBuilder, Aristotle, eMerges and Labels and Lists.” Voter Database entry, *Wikipedia*, 29/1/19. In recent years, voters’ data have been in the middle of great political concerns, due to the possibility of foreign meddling in elections through precise data analysis. US political affiliation data is by far the most pervasive and extensive, so much that in 2015 a database with 191 million US voters has been

frequent elections (even if we only consider nationwide elections, the House of Representatives and a third of the Senate is elected every two years, while most European states hold elections every 4/5 years. If we take into account statewide elections and referendums too, the American public is called to the polls, on average, every year)¹⁶.

The analysis of recent US data seems to confirm the consolidated theories, as Galbraith (2018) explains: indeed, if we look at a US states inequality chart¹⁷, we see that the highest peaks of Gini index are in the Democratic strongholds of New York, Illinois and California, while the Great Plains states tend to be much more economically equal and Republican. There are, however, notable exceptions in places like Texas or Louisiana, very unequal but also very red, or Maryland, quite equal and blue. The correlation is even greater if we consider the increase in inequality, with “the 14 states (including the District of Columbia) with the largest increases in inequality over the quarter-century, without exception, voted for Clinton. The states with the smallest increases largely – not entirely – voted for Trump”¹⁸. Galbraith however notes that the rising inequality in Southern states is also linked to a steep increase in Democratic vote, to an extent unimaginable just a few years ago¹⁹: Democratic candidates in both the Georgia gubernatorial race and the Texas

found on the Internet. See Jim Finkle, Dustin Volz “Database of 191 million U.S. voters exposed on Internet: researcher”, *Reuters*, 29/12/15.

¹⁶ For example, in New Hampshire gubernatorial elections occur every even year, with the next one being scheduled for November 2019.

¹⁷ Which can be found at <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/us-states-by-gini-coefficient.html>, 25 April 2017 or also in Emmie Martin, “US states with the highest levels of income inequality”, *CNBC*, at <https://www.cnn.com/2018/03/12/us-states-with-the-highest-levels-of-income-inequality.html>, 12 March 2018.

¹⁸ James K. Galbraith, “How income inequality can make or break presidential elections”, *cit.*

¹⁹ “In 2016 in Texas, for example, Clinton received three percent more of the vote than had Obama in 2012. Harris County, which includes Houston and is the nation’s third largest county, swung strongly Democratic. The swing was not enough to put any Southern state in play; time will tell a different story.” *Id.*

Senate seat seriously contended the victory to the ultimately successful Republican candidates²⁰.

The analysis of data from Italy is therefore probably poised to show that regions with higher inequality voted proportionally more for parties high in the “redistribution score” list, while more equal parts of the country will prefer parties with less emphasis on universal welfare and progressive taxation in their manifesto. It must be underlined, however, that inequality is only one, albeit crucial, of the many reasons behind the electoral choice. Therefore, the data must be read taking into account variables such as historical voting patterns (e.g., some regions have voted left - or right - for decades, more by definition than because of true conviction), recent political events (e.g. the ousting of the former mayor of Rome by his own Democratic Party) and important projects pertaining to certain territories (e.g. the High Speed Train in Piedmont or a gas pipeline in Salento).

4. Italy: a country in usual emergency

Like the vast majority of European countries, Italy can be easily classified as a “social-democratic state”, i.e. a country where the democratic institution are entrusted not only with the maintenance of public order and security²¹, but also with the welfare of the population at large: this mission entails vast state intervention in the economy and a substantially redistributive approach in both social benefits and taxation alike²². The width and pervasiveness of the public welfare

²⁰ The final results saw Kemp (R) become governor with less than 60.000 more votes than Abrams (D) and the incumbent Senator Cruz (R) win 50,9% to 48,3% against new candidate O'Rourke (D). Data from <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/us/elections/calendar-primary-results.html>, 21 January 2019.

²¹ In the classical liberal *laissez-faire* approach of XIX century liberal governments.

²² Clear suggestions of this approach can be found in the 1948 Constitution, which provides for, *inter alia*, substantial equality (art. 3.2), healthcare (art. 32),

system, combined with a very strong social (mainly due to family bonds) and private (low-debt and high-saving family budgets²³) financial safety net, have reliably granted Italy a low score of economic inequality²⁴. However, the impact of the financial crisis of 2008, though partially absorbed by the aforementioned features of the Italian society, has increasingly reduced the scope and financial firepower of the government redistributive programs, because of the exploding interest costs²⁵ of the staggering pile of debt accumulated in the previous thirty years by improvident (and often corrupted) public administrators²⁶ and the pressing obligations stemming from the participation in the Eurozone²⁷. Meanwhile, the rising unemployment rate, especially in the younger strata of the population, has put to the test the ability of many families to cope with the lack of stable income for a prolonged period of time.

education (art. 34), fair pay for workers (art. 36), support for disabled persons (art. 38) and a progressive revenue system (art. 53).

²³ OECD data, available at <https://data.oecd.org/hha/household-debt.htm#indicator-chart>. show that private debt is 87% of GDP, less than the OECD average, and household net worth is 556% of net disposable income, the fifth highest value after Belgium, the Netherlands, Japan and the United States.

²⁴ As said *supra*, the same OECD database records a 0,33 Gini index for the country, which puts Italy in the low inequality group.

²⁵ Italy spent 27,5% of its public revenues in interest payments in 1995, but with the entry in the Single Exchange Mechanism and then the euro, the interest rate fell considerably. In 2016 the country allocated 9,82% of its revenues to pay interests on public debt. Data World Bank, IMF, available at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/GC.XPN.INTP.RV.ZS?locations=IT&view=chart>.

²⁶ Transparency International's CPI 2017 lists Italy as the 54th least corrupt country with 50/100 points, a great improvement from the 2012 42/100, which put Italy at the 75th place in the world.

²⁷ The Maastricht Treaty required no more than 3% structural deficit and 60% debt/GDP ratio to enter the Monetary Union, then the 1997 Stability and Growth Pact made the requirements permanent. After the crisis hit, Italy ratified in 2012 the Fiscal Stability Treaty (Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance in the Economic and Monetary Union), which led to the incorporation of the zero-deficit rule into art. 81 of the Constitution.

After almost three years of recession²⁸, the GDP began hovering around +1% in 2014-2015, but, also due to the modifications in the country's redistributive systems²⁹, economic inequality increased as well, in a trend common to most Western countries, where the post-crisis gains have been mostly directed to those who were already well off: established professionals, "urban élites", financial operators, high civil servants etc. to the detriment of both the lower and the middle classes. In Italy, where the social elevator is not particularly efficient, and the job market is notoriously driven by not always clear (nor meritocratic) forces, the hope for a better future were heavily damaged and discomfort erupted in vast portions of society³⁰.

The reactions of various governments³¹ were mixed, to say the least: while there have been many attempts to promote economic growth through public investment and industrial policy³², on the front

²⁸ World Bank data indicate a -2,81% growth in 2012, -1,73% in 2013, 0,11% in 2014 and 0,95% in 2015. See GDP growth (annual %), World Bank and OECD data, available at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?end=2017&locations=IT&start=1961&view=chart>.

²⁹ For instance, VAT (an indirect tax, with anti-redistributive effects) increased from 20% to 22% 2010-2013, while the tax on business was reduced from 27,5% to 24% in 2016. Moreover, two comprehensive reforms of the social security system were adopted in 2011 and 2012 ("Sacconi" and "Fornero" reforms), with the objective to reduce the staggering pension expenditures.

³⁰ The Censis (Center for Social Investments Studies) reported in late 2018 that Italians had become rancorous and desperate about their future. See "L'Italia preda di un sovranismo psichico", Censis, 7/12/18, available at http://www.censis.it/7?shadow_comunicato_stampa=121184.

³¹ After the ousting of Mr. Berlusconi under threats of financial collapse in 2011, former EU Commissioner Monti took power until the 2013 elections; the subsequent XVII Legislature (2013-2018) supported three different Prime Ministers (Presidents of the Council of Ministers): Letta (2013-2014), Renzi (2014-2016) and Gentiloni (2016-2018), all from the center-left Democratic Party (PD).

³² One of the most relevant measures was the so-called "Industria 4.0", a government program aiming at incentivizing private investment in technology, by allowing tax deductions and eased credit lines for business that planned to invest in new machinery and software, creating patent boxes and promoting innovative

of social expenditures, the trend was generally conservative³³, and very few steps were undertaken to challenge the omnipresent burden of bureaucracy and mafia-style corruption. On top of that, the geopolitical turbulences in Africa and the Mediterranean (especially due to the political chaos still paralyzing Libya) caused an unprecedented flow of migrants towards the Italian shores³⁴, an humanitarian crisis of such a scale that neither Italy, nor the European Union were even remotely ready to manage properly.

Finally, Italy has suffered from a rampant internal territorial inequality since the very beginning of its history³⁵, with the northern regions of the country leading in almost every single indicator of welfare and economy and the southern parts lagging behind: at the end of 2017 three of the richest regions voted³⁶ to begin a process granting them more autonomy and resources from the central government, causing widespread discussion on the duty of redistributive/levelling solidarity, enshrined in the Constitution³⁷, and its application in real life³⁸.

startups. Another measure was the aforementioned tax reduction for companies from 27,5% to 24%.

³³ In particular, there have been cuts in education and transfers to local authorities, responsible *inter alia*, of public health. See “Tutti i numeri di 10 anni di spesa pubblica italiana”, *Truenumbers*, 24/5/18, available at <https://www.truenumbers.it/andamento-spesa-pubblica/>.

³⁴ UNHCR recorded 648.117 arrivals by sea in the 2014-2018 period, data available at <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean/location/5205>.

³⁵ The northern part of the country had better education and productivity scores even before the unification in 1861. See G. Pescosolido, “La costruzione dell’economia unitaria”, *L’Unificazione*, 2011, http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/la-costruzione-dell-economia-unitaria_%28L%27Unificazione%29/

³⁶ Lombardy and Veneto held a referendum, while Emilia-Romagna let the regional assembly decide.

³⁷ See art. 119, Italian Constitution: “State legislation shall provide for an equalisation fund - with no allocation constraints - for the territories having lower per-capita taxable capacity”.

³⁸ See, *inter plurimos*, F. Bruno, “Perchè il Sud non è la Germania dell’Est”, *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 3/5/16.

To summarize Italy's current situation, the CIA Factbook 2019 states that the country's "persistent problems include sluggish economic growth, high youth and female unemployment, organized crime, corruption, and economic disparities between southern Italy and the more prosperous north"³⁹.

4.1 The "Rosatellum"

Law 165/17, adopted in late 2017, regulates the electoral process to renew the 630-members House of Representatives and the 315-members Senate. It creates a curious mixture of First Past The Post (FPTP) and proportional representation: 12 representatives and 6 senators, making up 2% of the seats, are elected by Italians residing abroad; 37% of the seats (232 for the House, 116 for the Senate) is assigned according to a plurality vote in single-member districts covering the whole Italian territory; the remaining 61% of the seats (368 House/193 Senate) is apportioned with a simple, mathematically proportional, calculation⁴⁰. The voter can only choose one of the candidates in his/her single-member district or one of the short lists of "proportional" candidates supporting the FPTP candidate: in any case, the vote is counted for both the candidate and the list(s). Therefore, there is no mechanism to exclude the votes already "used" to elect the FPTP candidate from the proportional part of the election. Only parties with more than 3% of the total vote can enter the proportional distribution, while the winners of the plurality vote in their constituency are always admitted to Parliament.

Therefore, this system tends overall to ensure a form of proportional representation, but it contains an important FPTP quota, which could, in some instances, modify the results of the

³⁹ CIA Factbook, available at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/it.html>, 8/1/19.

⁴⁰ More precisely, the Hare-Niemeyer method of the largest remainder.

elections in a very meaningful way and clearly reduces the weight of smaller formations, beyond the 3% threshold⁴¹.

4.2 Main political parties

The 2018 election campaign saw six major political players (with some of them forming coalitions⁴²) competing for the vote. In order to link the preferences of the voters with perceived economic inequality, it is fundamental to know how each party “scored” on the issue of redistribution and to assess synthetically their plans. The parties and their manifestos will then be listed in descending order of proposed redistributive policy intent.

- Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S - Five-Star Movement): a new force, entered in Parliament only in 2013 by vocally⁴³ denouncing both corruption and inequality of the “honest, common working citizen” against the evil élites. While its position on traditional moral/value issues is still unclear⁴⁴, as well as its attitude towards the

⁴¹ Because, even if a small party reaches 3% without capturing any FPTP district, it receives only 3% of the 61% proportional seats available, therefore 1,83% of the total seats.

⁴² The center-left coalition, with the Democratic Party and other minor lists and the center-right coalition, with Forza Italia, Lega, Fratelli d'Italia and Noi con l'Italia. M5S and LeU instead chose to run alone.

⁴³ Its founder, comedian Beppe Grillo, famously sponsored two national initiatives known as “Vaffa-day”, (expletive-day) on 8/9/07 and 25/4/08, to protest against corruption in politics, public financing to political parties and political control over the media.

⁴⁴ In the XVII Legislature there have been significant “moral” votes, i.e. on matters pertaining to ethic choices, such as same-sex civil unions and biological self-determination. M5S famously abstained at the final vote on civil unions, despite an internal, online vote backing the law (see data Openparlamento on ddl 3634 Cirinnà, available at <https://parlamento17.openpolis.it/votazione/camera/ddl-unioni-civili-pdl-3634-voto-finale/30904>) and, despite voting in favour to self-determination, is now proposing an amendment which could greatly diminish the actual possibility to express the final choice (see “Dal M5S tentativo di sabotare il testamento biologico”, Luca Coscioni Association, 24/1/19, available at

EU⁴⁵, its manifesto focused on tackling poverty, unemployment and inequality, by substantially increasing current benefits and public support, even if this entailed more deficit spending. Its signature measure was the “Reddito di Cittadinanza”⁴⁶ (citizenship income), a form of unemployment benefit designed to help the recipients while they are looking for a job.

- **Liberi e Uguali (LeU - Free and Equal):** a far-left federation of smaller parties, brought together by common ideology, similar manifestos and the 3% electoral threshold⁴⁷. It planned to grant free access to all public universities, increase welfare expenses and roll back the cuts implemented by previous governments⁴⁸.

- **Partito Democratico (PD - Democratic Party):** the main center-left and former governing party, wounded by seemingly continuous internal disputes and facing decreasing support from its base. It proposed, on one hand, to create, for the first time in Italian

<https://www.associazionelucacoscioni.it/notizie/comunicati/m5s-tentativo-sabotaggio-del-testamento-biologico/>.

⁴⁵ Curiously (and absurdly, given the importance of the EU for Italy and vice-versa), the electoral manifesto does not mention the Union, see https://dait.interno.gov.it/documenti/trasparenza/Doc/4/4_Prog_Elettorale.pdf.

However, in other sources, M5S vows to renegotiate CETA and block TTIP, allow the exit from the euro, reduce the Union’s budget and avoid an EU army. In that same document, the party proposes to increase systematically the use of the ordinary legislative procedure (which is a reduction in Member States’ sovereignty) and give the EU a stronger voice on fiscal, welfare and redistribution matters. See <https://www.movimento5stelle.it/programma/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Unione-Europea.pdf>.

⁴⁶ The funds to cover the expenses for these programs have been recently reduced to match the recommendations of the European Commission. The decree outlining the requirements and sanctions was approved on 17 January 2019 and the measure is planned to be activated by April 2019.

⁴⁷ And quickly dissolved after a few months, but it kept the unified parliamentary group, which entails numerous advantages in terms of procedure and public funds.

⁴⁸ See LeU political manifesto (in Italian), available at <http://liberieuguali.it/programma/>.

history, a minimum wage, on the other, to further decrease corporate tax. It also focused on reducing North-South disparities⁴⁹.

- Lega (League): heir to the former Northern League, after twenty years of local autonomy/federalist requests its new leader Matteo Salvini vowed to create a national right-wing, populist and eurosceptic party. Together with Forza Italia and Fratelli d'Italia, it proposed to lower the retirement age and adopt a flat tax (around 20%), thereby reducing the redistributive effects of Italy's progressive taxation system. Most of its campaign was focused on the immigration issue⁵⁰.

- Forza Italia (FI - Forward Italy⁵¹): founded (and still led) by the media mogul Silvio Berlusconi, it represents the moderate center-right, liberal and Christian-democratic part of the electorate. As a member of the center-right coalition, its manifesto was the same as Lega's one.

- Fratelli d'Italia (Fdi - Brothers of Italy⁵²): a traditional far-right, nationalist and eurosceptic party, lesser member of the center-right coalition. It shared the same manifesto as the other two right-wing parties. Together with Lega, it denounced immigration as one of the bigger, if not the main, concerns of the country.

⁴⁹ See PD manifesto (in Italian), available at <http://ftp.partitodemocratico.it/politiche2018/PD2018-sintesi-programma-B.pdf>.

⁵⁰ See Center-right common manifesto (in Italian), available at http://www.forza-italia.it/speciali/Programma_centrodestra_condiviso_10_PUNTI.pdf.

⁵¹ There is a dispute over the translation of the party's name, which, besides meaning Forward Italy, is also a widespread sport (especially football) chant, used to encourage national teams.

⁵² The first three words of the national anthem are used as the name of the party.

5. The Italian election of 4 March 2018

5.1 Turnout

The elections, held for the first time only on Sunday (in previous years, voting was possible on Sunday and Monday, to allow a greater participation but with obvious higher costs), saw an average turnout of 72,94% for the House and 72,99% for the Senate⁵³, 2,31% less than in the 2013 race.

However, there have been quite relevant disparities across the country: data referring to each Region show that, in general, the northern territories registered higher turnout, with a consistently slightly higher percentage in the Senate results⁵⁴.

REGION	TURNOUT - HOUSE	TURNOUT - SENATE
Aosta Valley	72,27%	72,40%
Piedmont	74,29%	75,09%
Lombardy	76,84%	77,03%
Trentino-Alto Adige	74,34%	75,06%
Veneto	78,72%	78,86%
Friuli-Venezia Giulia	75,12%	75,10%
Liguria	71,99%	71,90%

⁵³ The difference in turnout between the two chambers is due to the not-completely-overlapping voter eligibility criteria, which, according to art. 58 of the Constitution, prevent from voting for the Senate anyone under the age of 25, while the normal voting age is 18. Data from Italian Home Affairs Ministry, 20 March 2018, available at <http://www.interno.gov.it/it/notizie/elezioni-2018-i-dati-viminale>.

⁵⁴ Data from Home Affairs Ministry, Electoral Archives: <https://elezionistorico.interno.gov.it/index.php>.

Emilia-Romagna	78,29%	78,30%
Tuscany	77,47%	77,34%
Marche	77,29%	77,08%
Lazio	72,69%	72,68%
Umbria	78,23%	77,97%
Abruzzo	75,25%	75,00%
Molise	71,63%	71,31%
Campania	68,18%	67,85%
Basilicata	71,11%	71,11%
Apulia	69,08%	69,14%
Calabria	63,64%	63,51%
Sicily	62,76%	62,98%
Sardinia	65,51%	65,76%

In order to verify an overall correlation between inequality and turnout, the first step is clearly to cross examine the data and try to find a pattern.

REGION	AVERAGE TURNOUT	GINI INDEX ⁵⁵
Aosta Valley	72,34%	0,294
Piedmont	74,69%	0,293

⁵⁵ Data from National Institute of Statistics - Istat,
<http://dati.istat.it/Index.aspx?QueryId=4836>.

Lombardy	76,94%	0,324
Trentino-Alto Adige	74,70%	0,284
Veneto	78,79%	0,290
Friuli-Venezia Giulia	75,11%	0,281
Liguria	71,95%	0,315
Emilia-Romagna	78,30%	0,294
Tuscany	77,41%	0,306
Marche	77,19%	0,289
Lazio	72,69%	0,368
Umbria	78,10%	0,281
Abruzzo	75,13%	0,320
Molise	71,47%	0,309
Campania	68,02%	0,343
Basilicata	71,11%	0,313
Apulia	69,11%	0,318
Calabria	63,58%	0,355
Sicily	62,87%	0,359
Sardinia	65,64%	0,342

Let us now use georeferenced elaboration, in order to make the comparison easier:



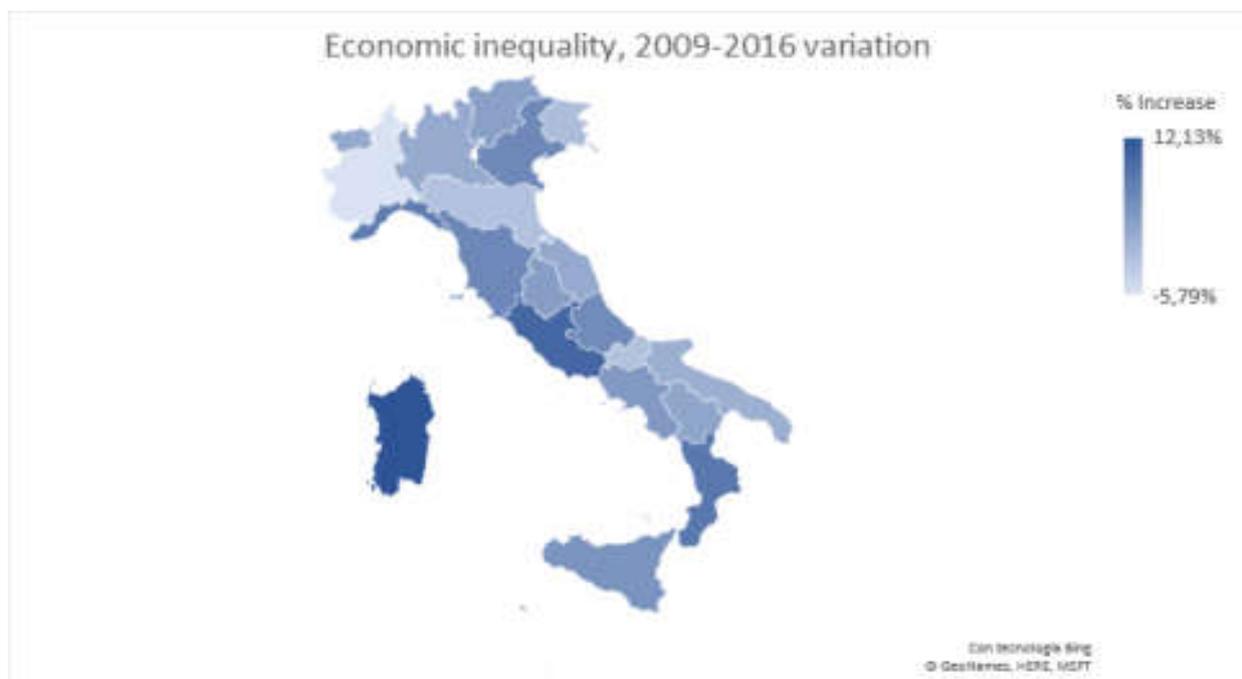
At a first glance, even though some patterns can be found, the correlation, clearly negative, appears however not particularly strong⁵⁶: southern Regions present higher inequality and lower turnout, but, for example, the most equal Region is Umbria, in the center of the country, and it did not register the highest turnout. Nevertheless, some discrepancies can easily be explained through a deeper analysis of the results: for instance, Lazio and Lombardy are outliers if compared to neighboring Regions, because they have a

⁵⁶ The R^2 of the distribution is 0,496, which indicates some form of correlation, but nothing either too clear or to be necessarily relied upon in the future.

much higher inequality value (in the case of Lazio, the highest in the nation); this higher Gini score is probably due to the presence, in their territory, of the two biggest Italian cities (Rome and Milan, respectively). As it is well known, also from US-based studies⁵⁷, cities are generally more unequal than rural territories, because, despite the higher salaries they provide to their residents, they also have a much higher cost of living and tend to host the top earners, thereby increasing the inequality parameter.

Since the direct measurement of inequality does not appear to be strongly correlated to voter turnout, we could instead focus on the increase in economic inequality through time: the National Institute of Statistics provides data from 2003, but it makes probably more sense to begin the analysis from 2009, because it was the first full year after the financial collapse. Comparing 2003 and 2016 (the last available)

data could result in a distorted picture of reality. However, the graphic shows even less correlation than the simple Gini index⁵⁸. Therefore, it can be concluded that, in line with the opinions of many scholars, the Italian case confirms that a loose negative correlation



between inequality and turnout can be established. However, inequality data must be weighted taking into account other variables, especially demographic trends and population distribution.

5.2 Political results

After the final tally of the votes, the overall results were as follows (coalition results include also minor parties, not mentioned above)⁵⁹:

PARTY	HOUSE		SENATE	
Center-right	265	42,06%	137	43,49%
Lega	125	19,84%	58	18,41%
FI	104	16,51%	57	18,10%
FdI	32	5,08%	18	5,71%
Others	4	0,63%	4	1,26%
M5S	227	36,03%	111	35,23%
Center-left	122	19,37%	60	19,05%
PD	112	17,78%	53	16,83%
Others	10	1,59%	7	2,22%
LeU	14	2,22%	4	1,27%
TOTAL	628		313	

⁵⁹ Data from <https://elezioni.repubblica.it/2018/cameradeideputati>. Two senators and two representatives, elected by Italians abroad as independents, are not counted.

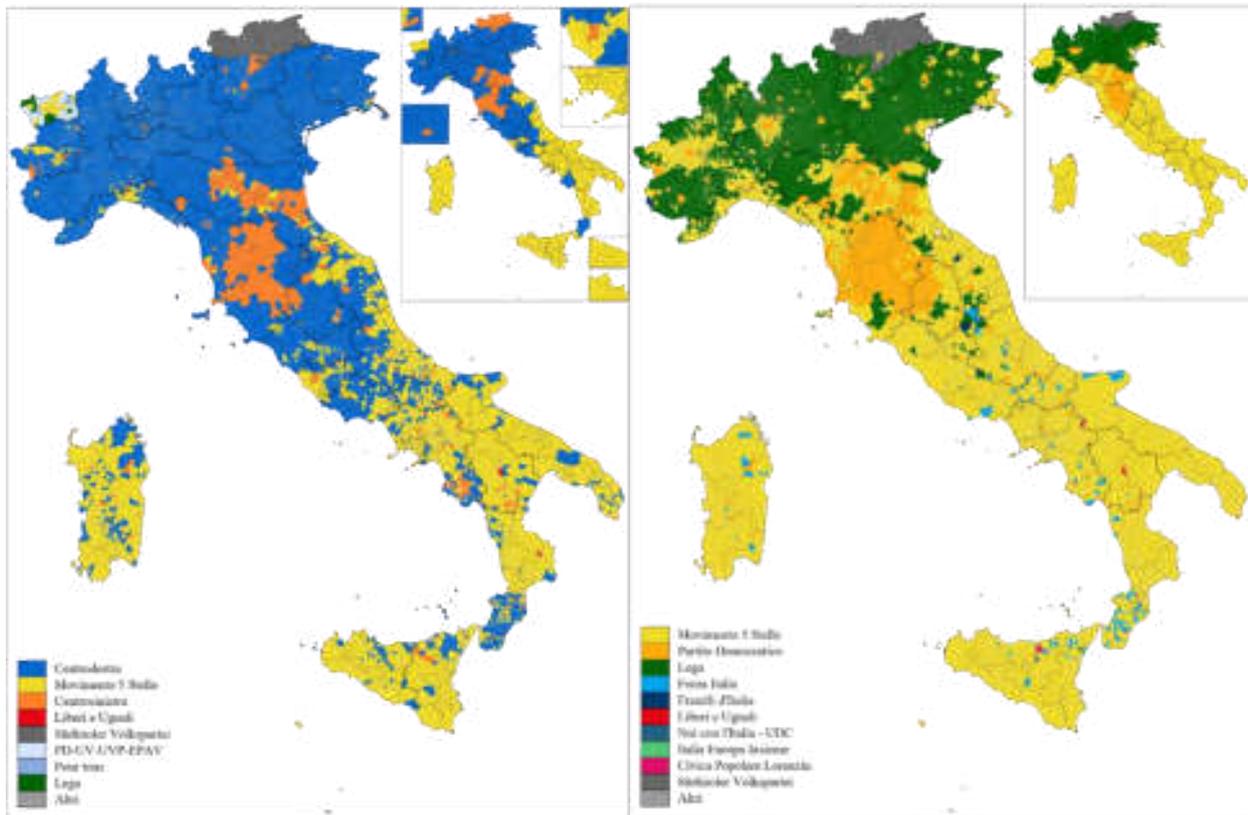
As it is immediately clear from the data above, no party or coalition managed to get a majority in Parliament, with the center-right coalition reaching around 42% of the seats, but the biggest party being the M5S, which managed to double its 2013 results in terms of seats (by only receiving 7% more votes)⁶⁰. The first month of negotiations, led by President Mattarella, led to a prolonged impasse, while all the political options were tried and examined. Eventually, the only viable compromise was found between M5S and Lega, whose leaders Di Maio and Salvini signed in mid-May the “Contratto per il Governo del Cambiamento” (Contract for the Government of Change), a coalition agreement including the main points of both electoral manifestos⁶¹.

Let us proceed to examine the territorial distribution of the vote: the maps⁶² show in different colors the winning party/coalition in each Italian municipality.

⁶⁰ In 2013 the party obtained 108 seats in the House and 54 in the Senate, with 25,56% and 23,80% of the votes, respectively. The heavy difference in the result is mainly due to the change in electoral system, from the unconstitutional law 270/05 to law 165/17. Data from Italian Home Affairs Ministry, available at <https://elezionistorico.interno.gov.it/index.php?tpel=C>.

⁶¹ The text can be found here http://download.repubblica.it/pdf/2018/politica/contratto_governo.pdf, 18 May 2018.

⁶² Their - Opera propria, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=71577870> and following images.

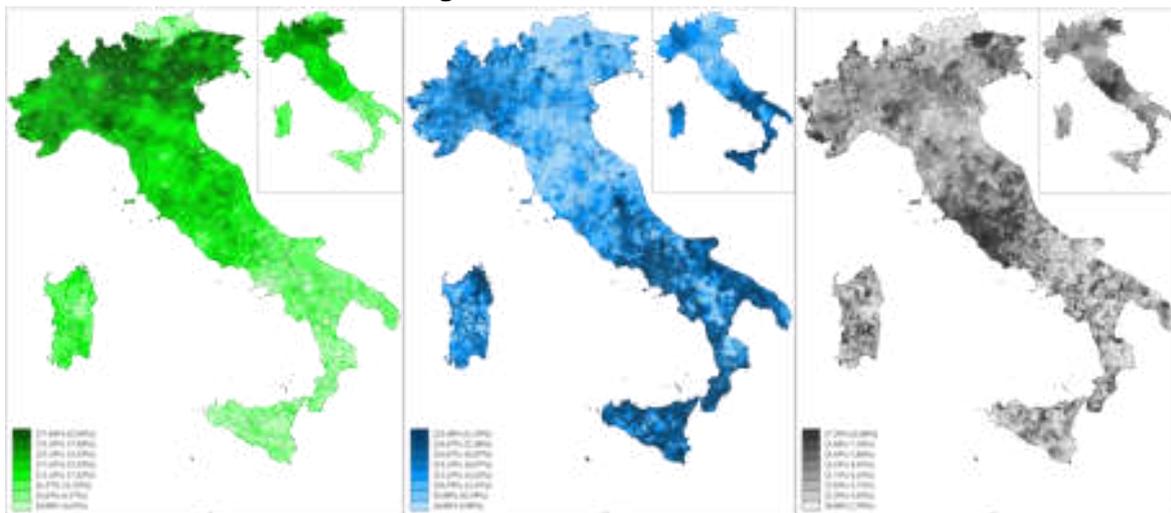


In the map on the left, which shows the winning coalition/party, the country appears clearly divided into three zones, with the northern part almost exclusively blue (center-right), a central area of transition, where the center-left (orange) was able to draw some support, and the southern territories, where the M5S (yellow) was the undisputed winner. This distribution is partially compatible with the Gini index chart above: it acknowledges that the more equal northern parts of the country voted for less redistributive manifestos, with the exception of some urban areas (Turin and Genoa), while the more unequal South strongly supported the very redistributive plans of M5S. The map even accounts for the Lazio inequality anomaly, because it confirms that most of the increase in the regional Gini index is actually caused by Rome, which in turn voted massively M5S (the yellow spot in the geographical middle of the map). Similar

conclusions can be drawn from the chart on the right, showing the single, most voted party in each municipality (therefore ignoring coalitions). Here M5S seems much more present, because it was the most voted party at national level, and only Lega (green) in the north and PD in the center were able to unseat M5S from its advantage position. The map also show the clear advantage Lega had over Forza Italia, which was not able to replicate, in the south, the results of its ally in the North (with the well-known political consequences that followed).

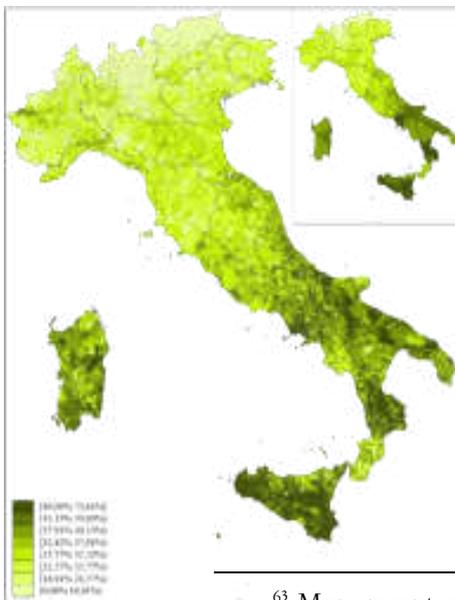
In order to deepen our analysis, it could also be useful to examine how the votes for each party were distributed, because it may help to understand the decision patterns followed by voters when they went to the polls.

5.2.1 Center-right coalition



In green, we can see the results of Lega, a party traditionally entrenched in north-east Italy, where it used to represent the productive middle and lower classes and propose autonomy and/or secession from the rest of the country. However, with its new national, more populist and conservative strategy, the party managed to extend

its reach far beyond the north⁶³, draining support from the former senior partner in the coalition, Forza Italia (in blue), which almost perfectly drew votes where Lega was not able to do so, but with way less success than its northern ally, as we saw *supra*, losing almost everywhere to M5S. Also, Fratelli d'Italia (in grey) scored relatively well in its traditional “nationalist” strongholds in and near Rome and, for historical reasons, near the eastern border⁶⁴.



5.2.2 Five stars movement

The map shows incredible support for the party in the South, with some districts, such as Mr. Di Maio’s Acerra⁶⁵, near Naples, registering more than 60% of the votes for “yellow” candidates. It is easy to suppose that the strong redistributive and anti-inequality programs of the newborn political star would have taken ground in the economically weaker southern regions, which have some of the highest unemployment, crime and poverty rates in the entire EU⁶⁶. However, more recent polls, while

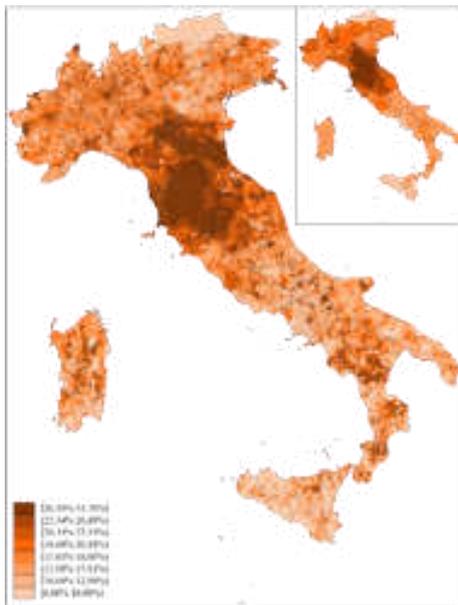
⁶³ More recent opinion polls show an approximate 32% support for Lega at national level, about double its electoral results and with much more uniformity in distribution. See <https://www.termometropolitico.it/1381903-sondaggi-elettorali-swg-lega-9.html>.

⁶⁴ After World War II, many Italians were forced out from Istria and other regions of then-Yugoslavia by communist forces led by Tito.

⁶⁵ In his district, Mr. Di Maio was elected with 63,42% of the votes. Data from Home Affairs Ministry, at <https://elezionistorico.interno.gov.it/index.php?tpel=C&dtel=04/03/2018&tpa=I&tp e=L&lev0=0&levsut0=0&lev1=19&levsut1=1&lev2=1&levsut2=2&lev3=2&levsut3=3&ne1=19&ne2=191&ne3=1912&es0=S&es1=S&es2=S&es3=S&ms=S>.

⁶⁶ See Eurostat GDP, poverty and crime data, available at <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistical-atlas/gis/viewer/?year=&chapter=06&mids=BKGCNT,C06M01&o=1,1&ch=ECF,C06¢er=50.03696,19.9883,3&>.

still showing M5S as the first party in the South, indicate also a high grade of anxiety and dissatisfaction among yellow voters, especially on some fundamental issues such as the environment (TAP and Ilva cases) and unemployment, which remains above the national average and does not appear to be on the path of decrease⁶⁷.



5.2.3 Democratic Party

Traditionally, the party in power suffers in the next elections, but it is rarely punished as hard as PD and its allies were. The Democratic Party managed to retain only some parts of its former apparently inviolable territories in central Italy but lost by enormous margins in the North and even bigger margins in the South. It did not score badly in the main cities' central zones, especially in Milan and Rome⁶⁸, but this occurrence only confirmed the public perception that PD had moved from being a center-left party to representing only the élites. By cross-checking the electoral results with the inequality

data, it appears that the party was not able to exercise its (moderately redistributive) appeal on the people who felt the burden of inequality the most. Many experts⁶⁹ suggest that this was probably the result of

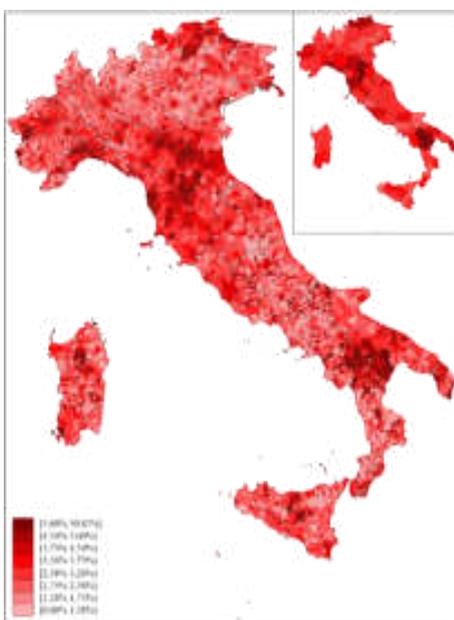
⁶⁷ See the government's own statistics, available at http://www.mef.gov.it/inevidenza/article_0399.html, 10/4/19.

⁶⁸ Where PD elected roughly 30% of its the FPTP senators and representatives.

⁶⁹ After the party's political debacle, almost every Italian journalist and/or political expert wrote that it had been a foreseeable result and lashed against PD's betrayal of its base and its values. See, *ex plurimis*, "Ecco come il Pd ha perso sei milioni di voti dal 2008 a oggi", *Il Foglio*, 17/9/18; P. Gawronski "Il Pd è morto perché ha perso i suoi ideali", *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 26/6/18; N. Addario, "Perché il PD ha perso", *LibertàEguale*, 19/7/18. Even Mr. Renzi tried to explain the reasons of the electoral loss: "Matteo Renzi elenca i 10 motivi per cui il Pd ha perso le elezioni", *Huffington Post*, 7/7/18.

bad PR choices and contradictory, “centrist” and moderate statements⁷⁰, in the context of an extremely heated and confrontational campaign, more than the effect of any particular decision of Mr. Gentiloni’s government⁷¹. The voters, therefore, showed discontent by protest voting⁷² and, for sure, one of the main reasons behind the discontent was the increasing perceived inequality.

5.2.4 Liberi e uguali



Finally, in LeU voting patterns, we can immediately recognize the traditional left tendency of Emilia Romagna and Tuscany, combined with good results in the largest urban centers; however, the party drew considerable (for its standards) support in some Southern regions, especially Basilicata and Apulia. LeU’s manifesto was mainly focused on reducing inequalities and promoting State intervention in welfare, education and job protection, therefore it is likely that its good results are, at least in part, due to the high inequality conditions in the local communities. Moreover, the stark contrasts with the political action of the Democratic Party (in whose lists more than half of LeU elected

⁷⁰ Especially on the EU and migrants, see “Ecco come il Pd ha perso sei milioni di voti dal 2008 a oggi”, *cit.*

⁷¹ Who is still quite appreciated, even by M5S voters, see D. Allegranti, “Perché Di Maio e il Movimento 5 stelle non attaccano Paolo Gentiloni”, *Il Foglio*, 30/9/18.

⁷² See A. Pritoni, D. Tuorto, “4 March 2018 Elections”, Cattaneo Institute report, available at <http://www.cattaneo.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Analisi-Istituto-Cattaneo-Elezioni-Politiche-2018-Partecipazione-5-marzo-2018.pdf>. The Authors also argue that M5S was an important wall against abstention in the South.

representatives were elected in 2013⁷³), allowed the party to run as an opposition force, despite having supported the incumbent government, at least for some time. However, its final results were probably damaged by the 3% electoral threshold, which, as data show, led many potential voters to strategic voting for other parties, mainly PD and M5S⁷⁴.

6. Conclusion

The analysis of the data shows that, in determining the result of the Italian parliamentary elections of 4 March 2018, economic inequality has been both a decisive campaigning issue (especially, though with very different results, for M5S and LeU) and an important guiding principle for the voters. In general, areas with higher economic inequality registered a lower turnout and a stronger preference for redistributive manifestos. However, it is probably not possible to establish a secure correlation between inequality and either turnout or political preferences in zones where it was a less decisive factor in voters' minds. Other significant variables were traditional local voting trends, unemployment rate, local GDP composition and, of course, moral/ethic and ideological concerns, as well as the performance of governing parties.

Since, after the elections, Lega and M5S are in power, the scientific value of future results could be hindered by the outcome of their policies. More recent Italian elections (regional elections in Basilicata and Abruzzo, as well as House by-elections in Cagliari)

⁷³ During the XVII Legislature, part of the MPs elected in PD lists seceded from the parliamentary party, as a protest against some policies of the government, and created three different alternative left-wing groups: MDP (Movimento Democratico e Progressista), SI (Sinistra Italiana, born from some PD fugitives and the rests of SEL - Sinistra, Ecologia e Libertà) and Possibile.

⁷⁴ For an extensive coverage of the mathematical phenomena behind the 4 March elections, see S. Trancossi, *Gli effetti della quota FPTP nel "Rosatellum-bis"*, *Rivista AIC*, 4/2018, p. 441-469.

showed a greatly diminished support for M5S and an almost identical rise in suffrages for Lega⁷⁵, probably due to the perceived more efficacy of Lega in pursuing its manifesto goals, from immigration to public order and pension reform, and, for sure, because local elections tend to favor parties with extensive infrastructure, political acquaintances and power connections (often in the form of “civic lists” in coalition with more known parties): all instruments that M5S still lacks or willfully refuses⁷⁶.

The European parliamentary election may not be particularly indicative too, because of general lower turnout and “second-order elections” label attached to it⁷⁷, but still, it would at least prove, on a national level, whether or not the yellow-green government managed to convince voters of its ability to deliver on many issues, among which economic equality would still play an important role, especially in those southern regions where the call for a quick solution to income disparity and unemployment was (and still is) more urgent.

⁷⁵ Data found in <https://elezionistorico.interno.gov.it/index.php?tpel=R>.

⁷⁶ M5S has found itself in a sort of “local trap”: by declaring that it would have never make alliances with “old politics parties”, it basically self-excluded from every regional government, leaving most of them to the evergreen center-right coalition, with Lega as the main shareholder. Similarly, the party did not score well in municipality elections, managing to take Rome and Turin in 2016, but counting only 50 mayors in the entire country, while center-left mayors are 875, center-right mayors are 488 and purely left-wing mayors are 27. The remaining 6500 mayor were elected in civic lists, not directly affiliated with a political force, but generally sympathetic to the centre-left. Data from http://www.comuniverso.it/index.cfm?Sindaci_di_Movimento_5_stelle&menu=104.

⁷⁷ See “Voting behaviour: Second-order theory of European elections”, extract from “Political Parties in the European Union.” Simon Hix & Christopher Lord pg.87-90, quoting Reif and Schmitt, 1980, Marcus, 1995 and Held, 1987, summarizing the concept of second-order elections as follows: “This means that most electors consider the European political arena to be less important than the national one and that they, accordingly, use their votes in EP elections to express feelings of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with domestic parties or to bring about political change in their own country.”

Abstract: The paper aims at analyzing the effects of economic inequality on voters' behavior in elections cycles. First, it presents a survey of the current state of the art on the issue of correlation between inequality and electoral turnout/political preferences; secondly, the paper briefly describes the peculiar Italian socio-economic and political situation (also attempting to establish a sort of redistributive hierarchy among the different parties' manifestos), as well as its new electoral system. Using the results of the 4 March 2018 elections, the paper tries to verify which of the concurrent theories applies to the Italian case, by comparing inequality and turnout on a regional level. Finally, it provides a survey of the geographical distribution and the results of each of the six main political parties, in order to find a link between inequality and political preferences.

Keywords: inequality, elections, GINI, turnout, parties

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