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Italian Parties Have Their Final Say Before Parliamentary Elections

Many voters remain undecided before the poll on Sunday



Antiracist and antifascist movement supporters marched to protest against a meeting of the far-right CasaPound movement in Rome on Thursday. PHOTO: MASSIMO PERCOSSI/EPA/SHUTTERSTOCK

By *Giovanni Legorano* and *Pietro Lombardi*

March 1, 2018 5:00 p.m. ET

ROME—Italian political parties made their closing arguments ahead of national elections, pressing their case with the millions of citizens who remain undecided ahead of this weekend's parliamentary vote.

Former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and his center-right coalition sought to maintain recent momentum that could bring him within striking distance of winning a majority, while the antiestablishment 5 Star Movement offered a list of ministerial candidates [in an attempt to present the party as ready to govern Italy](#).

As an electoral campaign marked by facile promises and angry rhetoric enters its final stretch, mainstream parties are seeking to sway the large cohort of undecided voters. The latest polls, published almost two weeks before a black-out period, found that [one-third of the electorate, or more than 10 million people, were undecided](#).

"Dear friends, I understand your disgust, which I also share, for these politicians and this [kind of] politics," said Mr. Berlusconi, the 81-year-old media mogul who has staged an improbable political comeback in recent months at the head of Forza Italia. "But you must absolutely vote."

On Thursday, European Parliament President Antonio Tajani said he had accepted Mr. Berlusconi's invitation to be the party's candidate for prime minister.

Pollsters have said that parliamentary vote is among the most uncertain in decades. A battered economy, high taxation, immigration and fear of crime have been the central battlegrounds during the campaign, with opposition parties exploiting the general discontent with political incumbents.

The contest has come down to a three-way race.

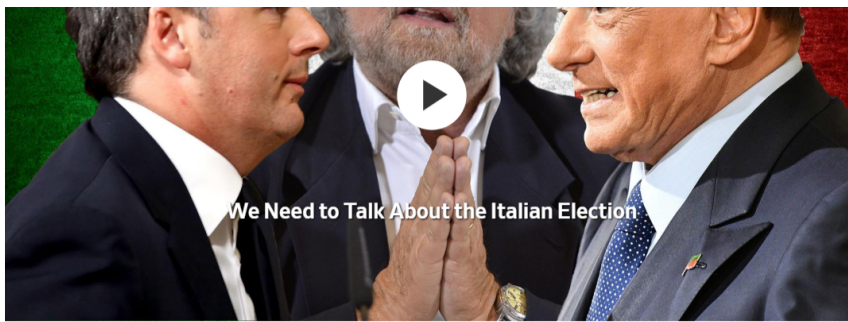


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According to the latest polls, the center-right coalition, which includes the anti-immigration League and two smaller parties, would get about 38% of the votes. According to some analysts, a new electoral law means 40% of the popular vote could translate into a majority in parliament.

The 5 Star Movement could emerge as the biggest single party with 28% of the votes. The ruling center-left Democratic Party trails behind both, with just under 23% of voting intentions.

If Mr. Berlusconi's coalition doesn't win a majority, many believe the election will produce a hung parliament. That could open the door to a cross-party grand coalition, or it could lead to fresh elections.

At a rally in central Rome, Mr. Berlusconi and his allies reiterated their promise to implement a flat tax and to soften the retirement criteria in a controversial pension reform approved in 2011 at the height of the sovereign crisis that raised the retirement age of millions of Italians.

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They also pledged to clamp down on illegal immigrants. Hundreds of thousands of African and Middle Eastern migrants have arrived in Italy over the past several years, most of them via rickety boats from Libya.

"There cannot be in Rome Italians who sleep in cars and immigrants in hotels [paid with public money and] doing nothing," said the League's leader, Matteo Salvini. "We'll have fewer of them disembarking [on our shores] and we'll expel more of them."

Meanwhile, 5 Star could be on the threshold of a new era—one in which it could finally emerge from its role as a protest party and possibly make a grab for power.

Its candidate for premier, Luigi Di Maio, has mooted the possibility of forming a minority government that could enjoy outside support from other parties to implement a program of reforms. In a convention center on the outskirts of Rome, 5 Star presented its ministerial candidates, mostly academics who haven't been affiliated with the party or politics in the past.

"We are doing something that never happened in the history of the republic," said Mr. Di Maio. "We are setting a new standard for these ministries. I challenge the others to do better."

Five Star has spent a large part of the electoral campaign trying to shed the image of an unprepared party with unorthodox ideas and present a more-moderate face that could appeal to supporters beyond its traditional core.

Mr. Di Maio said any government he formed would push for a boost in public investments to fuel more economic growth.

The Democratic Party is using the last days of the electoral campaign to defend its record, especially on the economy, positioning itself as the safe choice for a stable and effective government.

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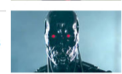
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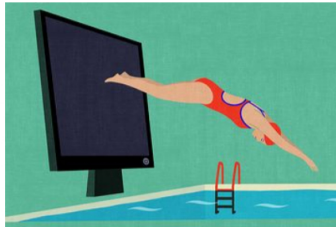
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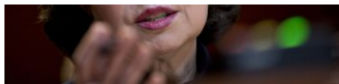
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