

Italy's bitterness could blight Berlusconi

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Silvio Berlusconi may have won the elections held in Italy last Sunday and Monday, but he did not win the popular vote. His new centre-right coalition party - The People of Liberty - did better than any other in the contest, capturing 37.4 per cent of the popular vote against 33.2 per cent for the Democratic Party on the centre-left. But in absolute terms, Mr Berlusconi's coalition did much worse than the separate parties he cobbled together did when standing alone in 2006.

Just over 13.6m Italians voted for The People of Liberty this time; last time, Mr Berlusconi's Forza Italia got slightly more than 9m votes, his principal allies in the formerly fascist National Alliance got 4.7m, Alternativa Sociale, the more explicitly post-fascist movement headed by Mussolini's grand-daughter Alessandra, got 250,000 votes, and Clemente Mastella's Popular Party got 500,000 votes standing as part of the centre-left. In other words, the new Berlusconi came up almost 850,000

votes short. Italy's new Democratic Party did not do any better and may have done worse. The Democratic Party garnered just over 12m votes this time around and the Olive Tree coalition that preceded it managed to win just under 12m the last. But in the meantime, the Democratic Party has added the left-libertarian Radical Party to the Olive Tree, which means it should have added almost 1m votes as well. That did not happen. Moreover, there is no evidence that these voters have found some other home on the centre-left.

The Rainbow-Left coalition of greens and former communists lost more than 2m votes. The more exotic leftwing protest movements (of which there are too many to count, let alone try to name) failed to win many supporters either. And while it is true that turnout is about 3 per cent lower, that only accounts for about 1.5m of the votes that should have been cast.

So where can we find Italy's 2m missing voters? Almost two-thirds of them voted for a regional protest party called the Lega Nord (or Northern League). In fact, the Lega Nord is the only clear winner at the polls this time out, hav-

ing received slightly more than 3m votes compared with 1.7m in 2006. If Mr Berlusconi won the election, it is primarily because the Lega Nord is in an electoral alliance with The People of Liberty and his majority in both chambers of the Italian parliament will depend on the Lega Nord's support.

The Lega Nord has been around for more than a decade, but it has not been

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this popular since it made its breakthrough during Italy's political crisis of the early-to-mid 1990s. As its name would suggest, the party's stronghold is in the industrial heartland of Northern Italy and the most consistent part of its platform is a demand for greater autonomy from the south. This demand for autonomy is not the reason for its current success. The Lega Nord is also

as long on anti-immigrant rhetoric as it is short on patience with free trade. Moreover, the Lega Nord's leaders have a reputation for challenging the state when frustrated with the policies set in Rome. At one point during the campaign, Umberto Bossi, the party's leader, suggested he might have to take up arms over the design of the ballot papers leading to embarrassed mutterings in the Berlusconi camp and calls for a declaration of loyalty to the Republic from the centre-left.

The attraction of this anti-immigrant, anti-globalisation, anti-authority rhetoric is easy to see in the data. The number of Lega Nord supporters has doubled in the big northern cities such as Milan (140,000 to 280,000) and Turin (64,000 to 120,000). In Venice, the Lega Nord has become the city's largest political party, increasing from 222,000 to 523,000 votes. Moreover, even the more traditionally left-leaning cities in the centre of Italy are coming under the influence of the Lega Nord. While still less than 5 per cent of the electorate, the population of Lega Nord supporters in formerly communist heartlands such as Bologna and Florence has doubled as well - from 16,000 to

32,000 in Bologna; and from 27,000 to 48,000 in Florence.

Such sudden increases are more likely to be a sign of frustration and bitterness than any lasting affection for Italy's xenophobic far right. With the economy turning down, a series of law-and-order problems that people tend to associate with recent immigrants and a general insecurity about Italy's chances in the global economic competition, Italians have a lot of reasons to be frustrated that their politicians seem so unable to come up with solutions and to be bitter about how difficult it is to see any real changeover in the political ruling class. Mr Berlusconi comes to power riding this wave of bitterness and frustration and more beholden to the Lega Nord than ever before. Whatever the appearance that he has won a decisive victory, Mr Berlusconi should look for ways to work effectively with the opposition before this wave of bitterness engulfs his government just as thoroughly as it washed over the last.

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