Italian Democracy Under the Coronavirus

Can a global pandemic reconfigure politics?

By Alessandro Mulieri

Since Italy has been a laboratory of recent global political developments, it is important to keep a close eye on how anti-elite and souverainist tendencies fare in the Coronavirus crisis that has hit Italy hard and how party lines have been reshuffled in the current reconciliation with technocracy.

In a way much of what has been happening with this terrible crisis in Italy is about democracy, or as many scholars[1] like to put it, about the crisis or crises of democracy, especially in this Southern European country. In recent years, Italy has been an interesting laboratory to track the developments of three important political patterns that have been prevalent in other Western countries as well. First a technocratic government was appointed in the midst of one of the worst financial crises that the country and the EU had experienced: the Monti Cabinet that was in charge from November 2011 to April 2013. Second, Italy has seen the rise of a movement, the Five Star Movement, which transcends traditional party classifications and is also described by many as populist because of its opposition to traditional

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[1] Wolfgang Merkel, "Is there a crisis of democracy?", *Democratic Theory*, vol. 1, no. 2,2014, pp. 11-25; Adam Przeworski, A. *Crises of democracy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019.

representative democracy. Third, a particularly strong right-wing populist party, Matteo Salvini's League, which is probably among the most successful anti-EU and populist forces in Europe, has risen dramatically in the opinion polls. These two parties together, the League and the Five Star movement, formed a government, the Conte I, which lasted from June 2018 to September 2019. Afterwards, following a sudden shift by Salvini, the Five Star movement formed a new government. The latter is today's government, the Conte II, which is the result of an unusual alliance between the Five Star movement, the Democratic Party, which is the main centre-left and pro-EU party in the Italian system, and some other minor parties.

Before the Coronavirus crisis, the government was not performing particularly well in the polls and the parties in opposition with the League on top were scoring very well. The Coronavirus has changed everything, at least for now, and has once again made the situation fluid. What has been the impact of the Coronavirus crisis on Italian democracy so far and what will happen in the future?

Renewed Trust in Technocracy

Scholars are divided in their assessment of the role of technocracy in representative democracy. For some, a functioning and accountable technocracy is a necessary component of a healthy representative democracy.[2] For others, technocracy is always to be seen with suspicion because it aims to disempower the people and lower the input of participation and democratic discussion.[3] The Italian situation could be described as a less elaborate version of the latter view. The experience of the Monti Cabinet triggered considerable distrust towards experts and technocrats among Italians. In 2011, Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi resigned and a Bocconi professor and former EU Commissioner, Mario Monti, was appointed prime minister, forming a government of technocrats and experts.[4] His government delivered tough

[2] Michel Crozier, Samuel P. Huntington and Joji Watanuki, *The crisis of democracy*, New York: New York University Press, 1975, Pierre Rosanvallon, *La légitimité démocratique : impartialité, réflexivité, proximité*, Paris, Seuil, 2013.
[3] Among others, see Urbinati, *Me The People. How Populism Transform Democracy*, Harvard University Press, 2019, esp. chapter 4 XXX.
[4] Giulia, Pastorella, "Technocratic governments in Europe: getting the critique right." *Political Studies*, vol. 64, no. 4, 2016, pp. 948-965.

pension reform that raised the retirement age, included a balanced budget amendment within the Constitution and unsuccessfully tried to implement some budget cuts to the Italian civil service. An important part of the Italian debate since the end of the Monti era has been about distancing from the Monti Cabinet and trying to gain electoral consensus by overturning or openly criticizing its measures. Today more than ever, with some small exceptions, it is difficult to find Italian political parties or politicians who take responsibility for or defend Monti's measures. Nevertheless, the Monti government's measures were voted for by several parties that are still in parliament today.

The experience of the Monti Cabinet has left the bitter impression among many Italians that whatever technocrats or experts do is dangerous for the country. For example, many politicians have been, quite rightly, openly critical of technocratic bodies like the Bank of Italy for its mismanagement of the banking crisis in Italy. There have been attacks against some top civil servants and Italian ministers who have been accused of blocking political decisions that were against their interests. One example of this scepticism towards experts has been the debate on vaccines. Drawing on questionable scientific arguments, many politicians of the League and the Five Star movement have attacked leading scientists and physicians for holding pro-vaccine positions that, according to them, would curb freedom of choice. All of these things together have resulted in strong resentment against everyone who is considered to be an expert, and doctors and scientists are, of course, among them.

The impact of the Coronavirus has significantly softened these criticisms for now. As in many other countries, Italians have plunged into a situation in which only experts can provide some, although not always satisfactory, advice in the difficult situation that we are all experiencing. All of a sudden, Italian TV shows constantly feature virologists, doctors, epidemiologists as well as economists, financial experts, statisticians etc., who try to advise the people and the ruling class on how to handle the emergency. The government, like all other governments in the world, consults with experts daily, relies on what they say and, at the moment, is faithfully following the advice of the top Italian health authority, the ISS, Istituto superiore di Sanità. The feeling is that so far, the reaction of the Italian ruling class and of the Italian public to

the Coronavirus emergency has been one of a change of attitude towards experts. Currently everyone is listening to experts, wants to know what they have to say and remains accommodating towards scientific advice. The narrative of the national health care operators' heroism in Italian intensive care units has moved the country, further contributing to a reassessment of experts.

Of course there have been some exceptions, and fake news and conspiracy theories have not completely disappeared. On the web, conspiracy theorists have been circulating a report made by a scientific program on the national broadcast TV RAI five years ago, which documented a laboratory experiment in Wuhan where scientists created a respiratory virus in a laboratory to test possible antibodies. Many have taken this episode to foster conspiracy theories about the origin of the current Covid-19 virus. Despite some initial echoing of this report, the national media rushed to label it as fake news and gave a platform to experts who claimed that the Wuhan lab virus had nothing to do with the current virus, whose origin is in the animal world.[5] The spread of this fake news has rapidly faded away, something that would have been unusual in pre-Coronavirus times. A renewed trust in the experts has also been among the reasons why Italians' support for the current government is now strongly rising in the polls.[6] However, there are fears that this change of mentality may not last. Indeed, one could say that it is not a critique of the democratic accountability of experts that has pushed several Italians to criticize technocracy but a dogmatic ideological prejudice against experts and professional politicians, which almost all of the main parties have fostered in their electorates over these last few years. In fact, as a proof that many do not see this unusually positive trust towards technocracy to be lasting, at the beginning of April, the government felt the need to appoint a special committee to check fake news on the virus in the media[7].

[5] Margherita de Bac, «Il video Rai-Leonardo del 2015 sul virus creato in Cina in laboratorio. La comunità scientifica smentisce», Corriere della Sera, 25th March 2020; Elena Dusi, «Tgr Leonardo e l'esperimento cinese del 2015. Gli scienziati: "Nulla a che vedere col coronavirus"», Repubblica, 25th March 2020.
[6] Agi, «L'emergenza coronavirus fa crescere (ancora) la popolarità di Conte», 27th March 2020; Monica Rubino, «Sondaggi: aumenta la fiducia nel governo Conte, calano Renzi e la Lega», 2 aprile 2020.
[7] «Al via task force contro fake news sul Coronavirus», RAI press release, 31 March 2020.

The Five Star Movement and Its Critique of Technocracy

There is a relatively broad agreement among scholars that the most recent years have seen a dramatic rise in forms of plebiscitarianism.[8] The latter is a form of democratic politics that is based on an unmediated relationship between charismatic leaders and a passive understanding of the people, which is conceived more as an audience. The Internet and other recent technologies could certainly contribute to making plebiscitarian politics more efficient. The Five Star movement can also be seen as the quintessential representation of these new forms of plebiscitarian politics in the Italian system.

The rise of the Five Star movement has probably been among the most peculiar aspects of Italian politics in recent years. It presents itself as a movement and does not like to refer to itself as a party. From its foundation in 2009, when it began as an irreverent protest movement, the Five Star movement has slowly turned into a very controversial party with considerable power. The movement received almost 30% of the vote in the last national election of 2018. However the party has recently lost momentum and, before the Coronavirus crisis, it was performing poorly in the polls. This trend seems to be continuing at the moment. What is most interesting about this party is that it supports ideas that aim to challenge representative democracy. First, the party rejects representation or, at least, traditional elective representation and aims to substitute it with a form of direct democracy that relies on online voting platforms[9] (for many a renewed version of plebiscitarism;[10] the worst kind, one could add). The party has created an online platform that is called 'Rousseau' and allows all of its members to vote on whatever decision they make. Second, against the idea of free mandate, the Five Star movement wants to rehabilitate the idea of imperative mandate and overlap the will of the elected with the will of the electorate. This is why the party's MPs are not called representatives but spokespersons of the people. The party likes to portray itself as an anti-establishment force and it has always used strong anti-mainstream rhetoric to gain electoral consensus, especially against the EU, migration and globalization.

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[8] Jeffrey Edward Green, *The eyes of the people: democracy in an age of spectatorship*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010; Bernard Manin, *Principes du gouvernement représentatif*, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 2012.

[9] Bickerton, Christopher J., and Carlo Invernizzi Accetti. "'Techno-populism'as a new party family: the case of the Five Star Movement and Podemos." *Contemporary Italian Politics*10, no. 2 (2018): 132-150.

[10] Nadia Urbinati, *Democracy disfigured*, Harvard University Press, 2014. Damiano Palano, "Democracy and the demise of «the public». Mistrust, fragmentation, polarisation: towards a bubble democracy?", *Governare la paura. Journal of interdisciplinary studies*, vol. 35, 2019. .

The Coronavirus emergency has temporarily suffocated all of the anti-system energies of the party, pushing it to align with the mainstream positions of the scientific committees that are advising the government. This is unusual for the Five Star movement, which has championed anti-technocratic and anti-scientific views more than any other party since its very foundation. Several democratic theorists of course rightly warn against the possible anti-democratic dangers of technocracies because of their lack of accountability or transparency.[11] However the Five Star movement's criticism of technocracy could be more rightly described as a bad caricature of these views. If there is one thing that this crisis appears to have taught the Five Star movement so far, it is that their critique of Italian technocracy and administration should be re-absorbed within the boundaries of democratic conflict. Whether this will last or not, however, remains an open question.

There are two ways to criticize technocracies and bureaucracies: one is on the grounds of legitimacy and the other is on the grounds of effectiveness. So far, the Five Star movement has heavily resorted to criticizing technocracies based on legitimacy claims. Attacks on the anti-democratic nature of scientific authorities and of the civil service have been the rule among Grillo's movement. However, given the crucial role that doctors and health experts on one hand and economists on the other will have to play in reintroducing normality following the emergency, it would be a foolish strategy to continue attacking the experts exclusively on the grounds of legitimacy.

A different critique against technocrats, experts and civil servants can be levelled on the grounds of effectiveness. Historically, Italy has a chronic problem with the efficiency of its civil service. Italian bureaucracy has sometimes been slow or dysfunctional in delivering social security services to the population and this is especially true in some regions of the South. In addition, Italy struggles to implement its laws and policies effectively and to transform political decisions into concrete practices. Very often, promising policy measures have been dramatically slowed because of useless bureaucratic complexities or unclear administrative guidelines. Criticizing bureaucrats and technocrats on the grounds of effectiveness seems to be the only way that an anti-establishment party like the Five Star movement can navigate the next weeks and months without fully rejecting its anti-system nature. Anything else could contribute to its complete disappearance from the Italian political system,

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[11] On this issue see Carlo I. Accetti, Alessandro Mulieri, Hubertus Buchstein, Dario Castiglione, Lisa Disch, Jason Frank, Yves Sintomer, Y., Nadia Urbinati, Debating representative democracy, *Contemporary Political Theory*, vol. *15*, no. 2, 2016, pp. 205-242.

which was already occurring before this emergency. Should the Five Star movement again only resort to criticisms of legitimacy, this would only create an additional problem in Italy's effort to recover out of the awful crisis that will ensue from the Coronavirus emergency.

Populism, Italian style

Scholars are divided on the definition of populism and, above all, on its relationship to representative democracy. For some, regardless of whether it is a right-wing or left-wing ideology, populism is the worst enemy of representative democracy.[12] For others, it could be a new political resource to fight the structural inequalities of representative democracy. [13] If we characterize populism as a degeneration of representative democracy, few would doubt that, from the beginning of the Second Republic in 1994, populism has played an important role in Italian politics. For many, Berlusconi's performances for 3 terms as the prime minister of from 1994 to 2011 and his personalised party, Forza Italia, were clear examples of populist politics. However, the symbol of the uncontroversial triumph of Italian populism is definitely the rise of the League from 2013 onwards. Few scholars and opinion-makers would doubt that Matteo Salvini's party is probably among the best examples of a successful right-wing populist party in Western Europe.

Yet, using the interpretive lens of 'populism' is perhaps not the best way to understand how Italian Opposition Parties have reacted to the Coronavirus crisis. Not yet at least. At the moment, it is much better to describe the Italian parties' reactions to the present crisis by drawing on a binary opposition between souverainism and anti-souverainism.

The Opposition and the Challenge of Souverainism

The opposition to the government that is currently in charge in Italy mainly consists of three different parties, Silvio Berlusconi's party, Forza Italia, which before

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[12] Nadia Urbinati, *Democracy disfigured*, Harvard University Press, 2014.

[13] Ernesto Laclau, *On populist reason*, London, Verso, 2005; John McCormick, "Machiavellian democracy: controlling elites with ferocious populism", *American Political Science Review*, vol. 95, no. 2 , 2001, pp. 297-313.

the crisis was already struggling to survive, Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia, a right-wing party that before the crisis was surging in the polls, and Matteo Salvini's League, which is one of the most successful right-wing populist parties in Europe. Salvini has succeeded in turning a regional and, at times, secessionist party that was defending the interests of Northern Italy into a national populist party that aims to foster many anti-globalization and souverainist ideas against migration and the EU.

Divisions among these three parties has been quite strong especially between moderate and pro-EU parties like Forza Italia and the other two parties, the League and Fratelli d'Italia, that are much more extreme in their anti-EU and anti-migration views. The initial reaction of all the three parties has been to collaborate with the government in handling the crisis. Unusually for the Italian system, which is endemically characterized by strong conflict, the government has gathered the opposition parties together to hold talks about how to manage the crisis. However, two problems have, not surprisingly, curbed the pattern of this dialogue. First, from the beginning of the crisis there have been disagreements between the central government and certain regions, especially those that are governed by opposition parties. Lombardy by far the most heavily stricken region in the whole country in terms of the numbers of cases and deaths, has made several public criticisms[14] of the government's handling of the crisis. Lombardy's governor, Attilio Fontana, has repeatedly attacked the government for failing to provide enough equipment for health care operators and for acting too late to put the country into lockdown[15]. The government has tried to soften their rhetoric but, since the region is governed by the three opposition parties, the latter have stood for Lombardy's critiques of the central government.

Second, on 11th April, Conte held a press conference on national TV in which he denounced both Giorgia Meloni, the leader of Fratelli d'Italia, and Matteo Salvini, the leader of the League, for lying to the people because, in the aftermath of the first EU Council negotiations, they had said that Italy would subscribe to the ESM (European Stability Mechanism) credit line.[16] Perhaps in the wrong way, Conte rightly said that the opposition leaders' accusations that Italy had decided to use the ESM were utterly groundless, and he accused both Meloni and Salvini of spreading fake news. Some people could see the opposition's strong stances against the ESM as an attempt to rise again in the polls and break their consensus in the midst of this crisis. Indeed, support

[14] Maria Teresa Meli, «coronavirus nuova lite tra Lombardia e governo», Corriere della Sera, 3rd April 2020.
[15] Massimo Lorello, «Coronavirus, l'attacco di Fontana al governo. "A febbraio disse: nessuna emergenza"», 31st March 2020.
[16] Corriere della Sera, «Mes, Conte contro Salvini e Meloni e le loro reazioni», 11th April 2020.

for a government that was not particularly popular before the crisis has dramatically surged in the midst of Conte's management of the situation. The reaction to Conte's angry move has been one of fury, once again plunging Italy into strong conflict and fights between the government and opposition parties. At the moment, then, the situation has gone back to business as usual with most parties again using the harsh tones that were prominent before the emergency started.

In a way, Italy is not dramatically different from most other countries in terms of how his political conflict has been reshaped in recent years. A good way to understand conflict in democracies can be to distinguish conflict that takes place within common democratic rules, what many theorists call agonism, from conflict that challenges the common rules of the game in any democracy, antagonism[17], which is a term freely borrowed from Carl Schmitt's theory of conflict[18]. While agonism can absorb conflict within the standard procedures of democratic politics, antagonism may challenge the very fundamental grounds that are necessary in any democratic discussion[19]. In many European and non-European countries in recent years, conflict has increasingly taken the form of antagonism. Now more than ever, government and opposition parties are quite often seen as mainstream and anti-system parties, for example with regard to their views on the EU. Should Marine le Pen win in France or Matteo Salvini get a substantial percentage of votes in Italy, the issue of leaving the EU will become a primary point of discussion and we could even imagine Frexit or Italexit as following Brexit. In Italy, antagonism has been a rather typical pattern of the system since the end of WWII because harsh political struggles and strong sensationalism to accompany them are the norm. However this situation cannot hold in the next phase of the Coronavirus emergency because the damage of antagonistic politics to democracy in the next step of the crisis would be unsustainable. It is useless to discuss completely renovating your home if you live with a family that has no food. If government and opposition parties do not understand that for once they have to put their differences aside and, for the first time, collaborate in a climate of reciprocal constructive criticisms, it will be hard to find a common response to the terrible crisis that the country is now facing.

[17] Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political*, Psychology Press, 2005.
[18] Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2008.
[19] Chantal Mouffe, op. cit.

The Challenge ahead: the Relationship with the EU

I suggested that the souverainism/anti-souverainism opposition is, perhaps more than populism, helpful to understand how Italian democracy is dealing with the Coronavirus emergency and what can happen in the future. The crucial issue for assessing how Italian democracy will evolve during the slow recovery to follow the 'heat' of the Coronavirus emergency is the country's relationship with the EU. Italy's relationship with the EU has been particularly turbulent in recent years. A major issue in the present crisis concerns how the EU is portrayed in the Italian media. The confusing term 'Europa' - Europe –, which is often used by the Italian press, does not always help the public understand who decides what in the EU and its consequences for the Italian situation. The average Italian citizen has the impression that 'Europe' is just represented by a lot of nasty and incredibly tough Northern-European politicians and bureaucrats who portray the Italians as lazy and unreliable. In many ways, the Coronavirus debate has confirmed this feeling. In the very initial phase of the crisis, following Lagarde's infelicitous statements which infuriated Italians, the president of the EU Commission Von der Leyen has been giving reassurance and sending messages of solidarity to the Italians. However these messages were afforded relatively little importance in the Italian media.

Following the media coverage of the EU role in the Coronavirus emergency, one got the impression that a considerable part of the Italian press failed to outline the distinction between the supranational and the international components of the Union, whose reactions in this crisis have been remarkably different. For example, in mid-March there was a lot of criticism of how Europe was blocking health equipment and material to Italy and how bad Europe was doing in helping Italy. This is true: some countries in Europe were blocking health materials and equipment to Italy, the country with the worst Coronavirus case rate on the Continent at the time. However this debate entirely obfuscated the fact that against these countries, supranational institutions like the EU Commission and the EU Parliament were doing their best to unblock those equipment and material resources that Italy so badly needed. Likewise, the Italian press also did not sufficiently emphasize the civil society initiatives that local authorities, especially in Germany, were undertaking to allow this material to safely travel to Italy and to take patients into their intensive care units.

In the Italian public debate of recent years, the role of the EU in the current crisis has been portrayed in terms of a staunch opposition between souverainist and anti-

souverainist choices. However, the Commission, the Parliament or any civil society actor in the Union have no say on the ESM, Eurobonds and the main financial measures that can be decided upon to manage this crisis. It is the Council, an interstate body in which EU member states very often aim to protect and foster their selfish interests, which remains the only main decision-making actor on these matters. If there is one lesson that the Italian public debate can learn from this crisis, it is about the importance of more carefully communicating the subtleties and complexities of an EU system that, with so many supranational and transnational layers, can in fact provide some benefits to the country, despite the selfish choices of many European governments.

What will happen in the coming months could be disastrous for the Italian economy. Of course, the crisis is global but Italy has a huge public debt and, as many economic analysts keep saying, this adds complications to the country's autonomy in handling the crisis. How is the Italian ruling class going to deal with the economic crisis? Better communication about the EU, clear choices and foregoing useless polemics can indeed be helpful. If we want to stay pragmatic, there should be little space for considering the souverainist option under these circumstances. The country needs to team up with other European countries. At the moment, several commentators are saying that the Coronavirus emergency is likely to reverse globalization. If this is the case, a possible alternative to globalization could be some form of regionalism. This of course would mean that Italy must, as a unified country, actively advocate for greater integration into the EU. Would souverainism die out in this scenario? It is difficult to predict but one thing is for certain. At this stage imagining an alternative to greater European integration is frightening to say the least.