

Grillo Crows, Renzi Troubled by Big City Election Results

Judith Harris (June 07, 2016)



Elections for city mayors are never pure reflections of national trends, but are warning shots across the bow, in this case, of Premier Matteo Renzi's ship of state. As Renzi puzzles over the results, Beppe Grillo, leader of the Movimento Cinque Stelle, exults.

ROME -- Elections for city mayors are never pure reflections of national trends, but are at the very least a warning shot across the bow, in this case, the bow of Premier Matteo Renzi's ship of state. The stakes were high in local administrative elections held Sunday in many dozens of small towns and in seven large cities: Rome, Milan, Turin, Bologna, Naples, Trieste and Cagliari. In the background lay the divisive referendum slated for October, when Italians must choose between accepting or rejecting the proposed constitutional reform on which Renzi has staked his premiership.

If any party surged ahead, it was Beppe Grillo's seven-year-old Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S). In six of the seven big cities, no single candidate won 50% or more of the vote, making a run-off between the two leading candidates mandatory. In Rome, where Italy's most important single election was



held, Virginia Raggi clabbered the opposition by claiming 35.6% of the vote. Raggi was the anti-establishment candidate for mayor on the ticket of the M5S. By contrast, her runner-up, Roberto Giachetti, whose center-left ticket represented Renzi's Partito Democratico (PD), won a mere 25% of the vote. A tough-talking center-right candidate, Giorgia Meloni, walked off with 20.6% of the vote in Rome.

In two weeks Raggi faces a run-off against Giachetti, but her success is already a triumph for Grillo, whose M5S picked up 10% more than it had earned (25%) in 2013 in national general elections for the Chamber of Deputies and, in city administrative elections that same year, under 13%. The M5S has thus tripled its consensus in Rome, where the outgoing city administration has been plagued by a stormcloud of scandals dubbed "Mafia Capital," which have cast long shadows over the reputation of the PD as well as the more conservative traditional parties.

But the fact is that Italy no longer has such a thing as traditional political parties. In Turin the formerly popular, old school center-left sitting mayor Piero Fassino overturned pre-election predictions of victory by claiming only 29.77%. Topping him with 30.1% was Grillo candidate Chiara Appendino. The fact that the M5S could win the support of almost one voter out of three in Turin, with its once staunch leftist tradition, was a stunning achievement for Grillo. Here too there will be a run-off, Appendino against Fassino, with the parties of the losing candidates throwing their support to one or the other.

Among the seven big cities where elections were held, Cagliari was the only one in which a candidate for mayor obtained over half the votes, eliminating the need for a run-off contest. Massio Zedda, representing the center-left, won a clear 50.9% of the vote versus the relatively modest 32.1% won by the center-right represented by Piergiorgio Massidda. Even in Naples, where Luigi De Magistris achieved almost 43% of the vote, the run-off will pit his "Civica di Sinistra" (Left Civic party, long since an antagonist of Renzi's PD), against runner-up Gianni Lettieri, whose comparatively modest showing was of 24%.

The picture in Bologna was interesting. The city with a long, and now long-lost, tradition of Communist and Socialist parties fielded center-left candidate Virginio Merola, who won almost 40% against right-winger Lucia Borgonzoni, who won only 22.3%. However, Grillo candidate Massimo Bugani won 16.6%.

In the gathering storm, some critics in Renzi's party are urging that he discontinue heading both government and the PD, as he does now. So far Renzi is not resigning party leadership, but has limited himself to urging his splintered PD to work harder. Nevertheless, speaking at a press conference Monday evening in Rome, he said rather lamely that, "It is not a debacle." Perhaps not just yet, he might have added.

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