Why immigration has the potential to upend the Italian election

*The failure of Marine Le Pen and Geert Wilders to cause an upset in 2017 has prompted some observers to argue that Europe's 'populist right' is now in retreat. But as **James Dennison**, **Andrew Geddes** and **Matthew Goodwin** highlight, the apparent fall in support for anti-immigration populism elsewhere in Europe has not been seen in Italy ahead of the country's general election in March. Immigration has risen from a non-issue to the second most important for Italian voters, and polls have shown growing support for the increasingly anti-immigration Forza Italia and Lega Nord.*

On 4 March Italy will head to the polls to elect a new parliament. For the European Union, the election will be the latest test of whether 'populists' really are in retreat. Last year was a mixed bag for the populist right. While Marine Le Pen and Geert Wilders failed to cause an upset, the Alternative for Germany broke through while the Freedom Party of Austria returned to a governing coalition. Across western Europe, populist right parties dipped slightly in the polls as concern over the migrant crisis and immigration waned. Italy, however, was – and still is – the one exception.

As shown in Figure 1, in the five years since the last general election, immigration has gone from a non-issue in Italian politics to the second most important. In May 2013 a mere 4% of Italians saw immigration as one of the two most important issues affecting their country; by November 2017 the figure was 33%. Similarly, fewer than 1% saw terrorism as an important issue at the time of the last election – today it is the joint third most important issue to Italians. Simultaneously, the home soil issues for the mainstream parties – economics and employment – are in decline in perceived importance. Incredibly, no social issues – such as education, health, social security or housing – currently make the top eight. This is bad news for the social democrats – the incumbent *Partito Democratico* (PD).

Figure 1: What do you think are the two most important issues facing Italy at the moment?
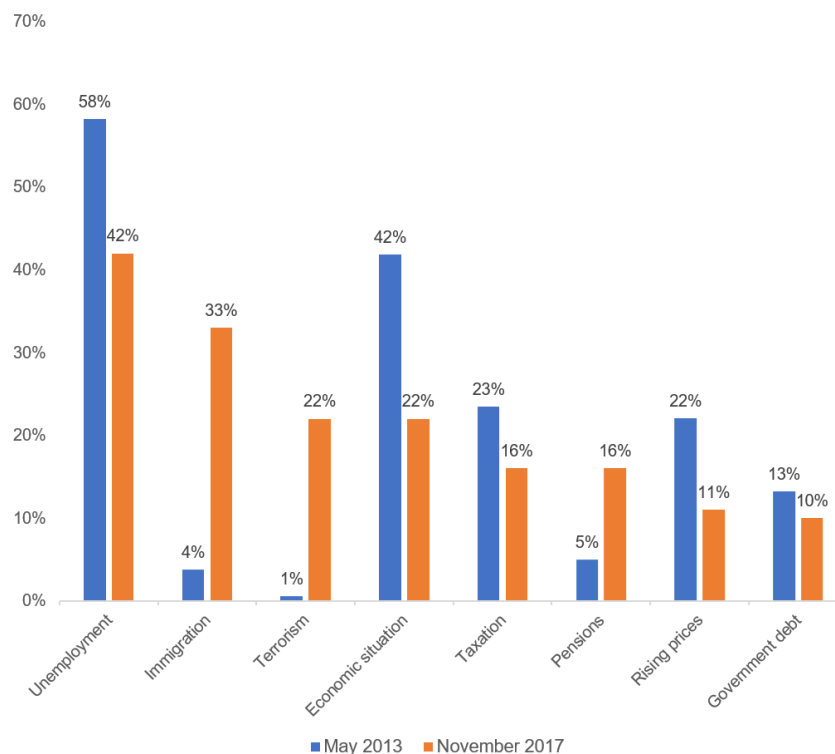
Source: **Eurobarometer, May 2013 and November 2017, top 8 issues only**

Figure 2 shows that the governing *PD* have been in continuous decline since their barnstorming performance at the 2014 European Parliament election. Previous Prime Minister, Matteo Renzi, placed all of his bets on economic and constitutional reform and the party now has little to show for either, alienating its left wing, who have gone on to form *Liberi e Uguali* (LeU), and losing Renzi himself as Prime Minister, replaced by the incumbent Paolo Gentiloni. The *PD*'s offer to voters is far more limited than in its 2014 heyday.

Figure 2: Party opinion polling in Italy since the 2013 general election
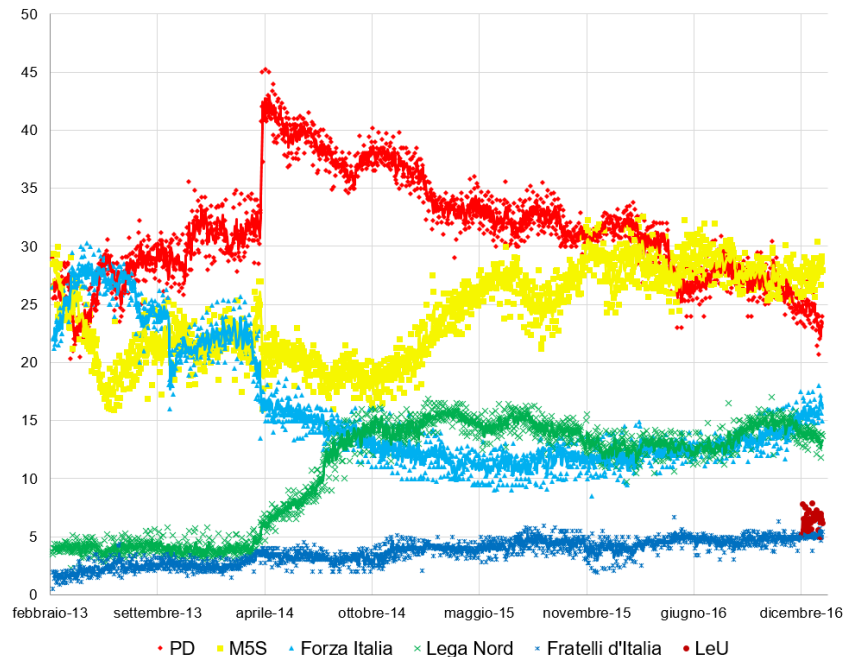
Source: **Elezioni.interno.it**

The last six months have seen the steady rise of the increasingly anti-immigration and Berlusconi-led conservatives, *Forza Italia*, and the populist right *Lega Nord*. The latter, led by Matteo Salvini, have thrown off their erstwhile regionalist trappings for a textbook and nationwide anti-immigration platform. It is these two parties that, alongside the far right *Fratelli d'Italia* and some minor centrists, together have formed the largest electoral coalition (pacts to optimise first-past-the-post seats), as shown in Figure 3. By contrast, the *PD* have found themselves stranded alone on the left.

Figure 3: Electoral list polling for the next general election
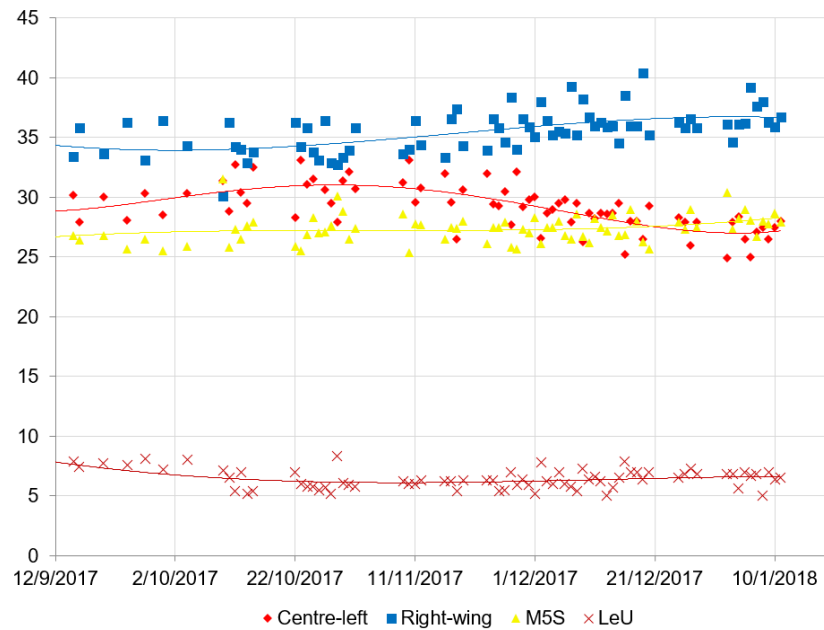
Source: **Elezioni.interno.it**

How can we explain the growth and strength of this coalition of right-wing populists? One factor is immigration. *Lega Nord* were polling at just 4% in 2014. Since then, Italy has witnessed a sharp rise in the numbers of migrants and refugees. In 2016, around 170,000 migrants and refugees arrived in Italy by sea while last year just over 117,000 did so, following a deal with Libya to intercept and return migrants. While this deal initially was successful in stemming flows, in recent months arrivals have returned to their previous levels and the deal was said to be on the verge of collapse.

Lega have sought to capitalise on concern about irregular migration by turning away from northern regionalism – dropping the *Nord* in campaign literature – and focussing solely on anti-immigration rhetoric. Their Euroscepticism, at one time aimed squarely at opposition to the euro, has been reframed in terms of migration, both as a way to play to their strengths and to allay voters' fears of economic mismanagement. Salvini's Euroscepticism is increasingly in the abstract rather than in policy terms (see Figure 4). This is a similar move to that made by Le Pen and one designed to keep all eyes on the divisive immigration issue and, as in the recent Austrian election, the perceived threat of Islam.

Figure 4: *Lega* poster: 'Slaves of Europe? No, thanks!'

Credit: **leganord.org**

Anti-European rhetoric plays better with Italians than at any point in the past and the reason is again partly immigration. Nearly 80 per cent of Italians reject the suggestion that the EU has handled the migration crisis well. This leaves Italians as the most negative of the nine European countries in our data, behind even the Hungarians. Italians are also the only country in which sentiment towards the EU's handling of the crisis worsened throughout 2017. They are more sympathetic to their own government's management of the situation: a majority of voters from all four major parties think the government's deal with Libya was right.

**Figure 5:** *Lega Nord* **polling and immigration's issue salience**
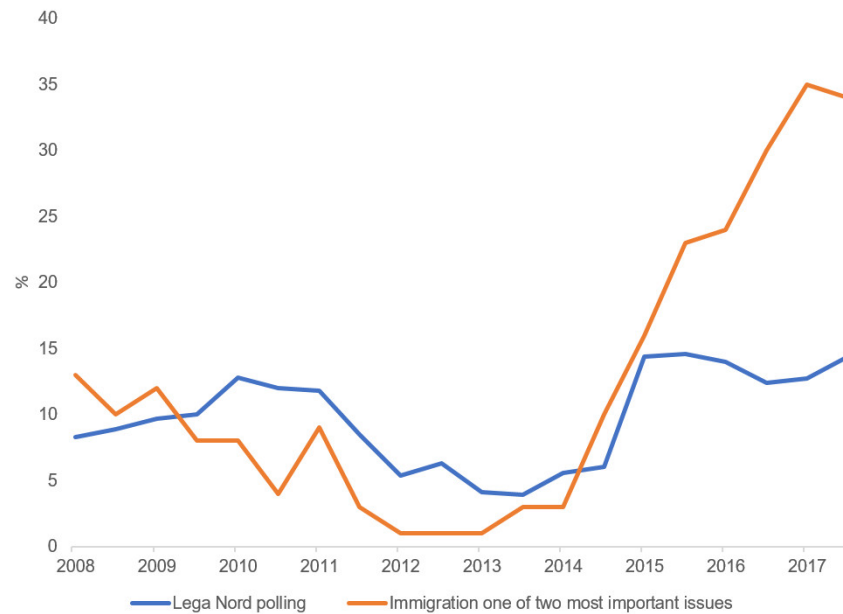
Source: **Ipsos Italia**

However, as concern over immigration went up, *Lega* were the primary beneficiaries, as shown in Figure 5. Indeed, last month, our data revealed that 63 per cent of *Lega* voters see immigration as one of the two most important issues facing Italy – compared to 26 per cent of those who plan to vote for the *PD*, 28 per cent of *M5S* voters, 46 per cent of *FI* voters, and 48 per cent of those supporting the smaller, far right *Fratelli d'Italia* party. Interestingly, younger Italians are far more concerned by immigration than their older counterparts – 37 per cent of the under-50s see immigration as a top issue compared to just 31 per cent of Italian pensioners. This should be seen alongside Marine Le Pen's appeal to the under-40s last year and Alternative for Germany's strong support among 30-59 year olds as evidence that the populist right in Europe has more gas in the tank than might be assumed.

The alliance of *Lega* and *Forza Italia* appears shrewd in light of the new, more majoritarian electoral system. Electorally, *Lega* can concentrate in the north while *FI* concentrates elsewhere. Ideologically, hesitant voters of either can turn for reassurance to their likely electoral partners, respectively, for a hard-line on immigration or relative economic competence, a scenario akin to *Leave*'s twin campaigning in the UK's 2016 EU referendum. However, the right-wing electoral list is still unlikely to gain a majority in either chamber of the Italian Parliament, nor would its constituent parties necessarily enter into government together.

Figure 6: Trust in political institutions
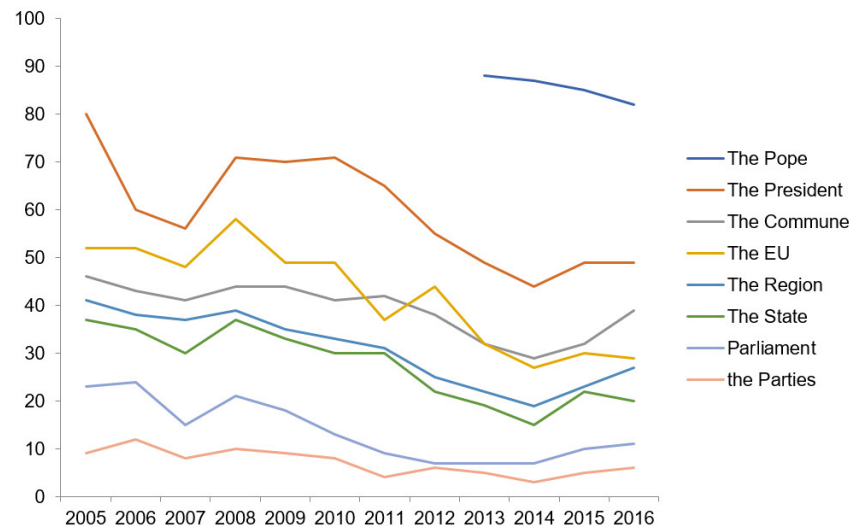
Source: **Demos**

The right's most obvious governing partners, in terms of attitudes to immigration, are the *Movimento 5 Stelle* (M5S), who have led in the last 30 consecutive polls. The ideologically ambiguous populists rose to prominence during the Eurozone debt crisis, as Italians' trust in their political institutions crumbled (see Figure 6). Their Prime Ministerial candidate, Luigi Di Maio, (founder Beppe Grillo, like Berlusconi, is banned from running for office) has called for an 'immediate stop to the sea-taxi service' in reference to the role of NGOs in Mediterranean 'search and rescue' missions for migrants at sea. However, a governing coalition, increasingly mooted by the *M5S* leadership, would risk either alienating their left-wing base or getting into bed with the establishment, incumbent *PD*.

Despite a bewildering party system and in the shadow of a centre-left government proactively clamping down on irregular migration, it seems safe to say that those hoping for 2018 to bring an end to anti-immigration populism in the West should turn away on 4 March.

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