

POLITICO

Death of the dinosaurs

Alberto Mingardi

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MILAN — Italy's election results are being hailed as a victory for the populists. But more than anything, the vote is the failure of the country's establishment.

Matteo Renzi's ability to destroy political capital has been astonishing. The former prime minister compounded one mistake after another, and became odious to most Italians, only 19 percent of whom voted for his Democratic Party on Sunday. Moreover, as he abandons his party's leadership, it's not improbably that it will end up somehow supporting a government led by the Euroskeptic 5Stars Movement.

Renzi left office after the constitutional reform he promoted was rejected in a referendum. That ballot became less about the proposed constitutional changes — hardly a subject that excites the masses — than about his persona and his tenure. A vast majority of Italians didn't like either, as a result of a long series of tactical mistakes.

Renzi consistently adopted an electoral rhetoric that appeared like a water-down version of his opponents' populism. He longed for budget deficits (though, smaller ones than those promised by his opponents), chastised the European Union (though with far more sober words than his opponents), and forgot all the supply-side reforms he himself had promised.

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Meanwhile, his opponent on the center right, former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi fought his last electoral campaign with gallant enthusiasm. He used all his repertoire of tax reforms and televised charm.

In a mad, sometimes violent campaign, he stood out as being calm and wise, and smoothed the edges of his coalition partners' most anti-European proposals. But for all his charisma, Sunday's vote showed his legendary ability to charm millions is gone. He was never a genuine orchestra conductor, but virtuoso too eager to play all the instruments by himself.

Berlusconi's failure is not a failure of execution: It is a failure of longer term vision. In 24 years in politics, Berlusconi did not father a single potential successor. His candidates were only fragile ornaments of his larger-than-life persona.

Confronted with younger, telegenic opponents — such as League leader Matteo Salvini or the 5Stars' soft spoken and well-mannered Luigi Di Maio — Berlusconi, for the truly first time, appeared an old man.

His greatest accomplishment, since 1994, was his ability to win both in the north and south of the country. That, too, is gone. This election showed a stark polarization: The north turned to the right, while the south voted overwhelmingly for the 5Stars.

Both Renzi's and Berlusconi's failures were failures of character.

Renzi had poor political judgment and could never correct his many tactical mistakes, which compounded in his spectacular defeat. A genuine businessman, Berlusconi spent his entire life despising politicians and never invested in a true political successor, leaving him with little to show voters.

The rise of the 5Star Movement, or Salvini's League, is not unconnected to these failures. At the ballot, people can choose within a limited supply of options. Some look palatable, because some others no longer are.

Intellectuals look for great narratives to explain the turnings tides of history. And yet, sometimes the real answer is the simplest.

The Italian election will need to be poured over and pondered, not least because of the tremendous political divide that has emerged between the north and the south, which reflects a deep-rooted divergence in economic development and civic culture.

But let's take a moment to think before we describe the Italian vote as liberal democracy's Waterloo. Political defeats sometimes are just that — political defeats.

Alberto Mingardi is the director general of Istituto Bruno Leoni, Italy's free-market think tank, and an adjunct scholar at the Cato Institute.