Understanding the role of immigration in the Italian election result

Much of the response to the 2018 Italian election result has focused on the role of immigration in boosting support for the Five Star Movement and Lega. **James L. Newell** *writes that the immigration issue is unlikely to diminish in importance over the coming years. The country's ageing population and a 'brain drain' from many Italian regions could make attracting foreign citizens vital for Italy's economy, but this will have to be balanced against the hostility many Italians now feel toward immigration.*

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The issue of immigration had a very high profile in Italy's election campaign. This was especially true from 3 February when a 28-year-old, Luca Traini, with evident far-right sympathies, went on the rampage in the city of Macerata, wounding with a shotgun six people, all of sub-Saharan African origin.

Both the League and the Five Star Movement, among others, exploited the event to frame immigration as a significant problem: while condemning violence, the League's Matteo Salvini declared that the incident was evidence that what he called 'uncontrolled immigration' led to social conflict. The Five Star Movement's Alessandro di Battista, meanwhile, responded to condemnation by spokespersons for the mainstream parties by demanding silence on the part of those who had 'political responsibilities' for what had happened. So what role did immigration play in the election outcome and what impact will it have on Italy's relations with Europe?

Let us begin by considering the phenomenon of migration itself. It is not new, but one with which Italians have become increasingly familiar since the 1980s, and there are now about five million foreign nationals legally resident in Italy representing about 8.3% of the population. The so-called refugee crisis began around 2013, with thousands trying to reach Italy by boat across the Mediterranean and thousands dying in the process. Conflict in countries such as Syria and Libya has often been suggested as a key driver, though more general factors – such as climate change and global social networks – have also played a role. What might be better labelled a humanitarian emergency has given rise to public controversy thanks to the strain it has put on hosting and integration policies, as well as the tensions it has created between the Italian government and the EU over the scale of Italian involvement in patrolling and rescue operations, leading to demands for common EU crisis management.

The situation has triggered public discussion of other relevant issues such as Italy's nationality law and Europeanisation. For instance, 2017 saw intense controversy over (ultimately unsuccessful) attempts to persuade Parliament to replace *ius sanguinis* with *ius soli* as the basic principle underlying the nationality laws in order to address the issue of increasing numbers of people who have been born in Italy but who do not hold Italian citizenship. There has been considerable tension between Italy and other EU member states arising over the conflict between the Schengen free-movement principles and the so-called Dublin principle placing responsibility for assessing asylum claims on the government of the first country of arrival (enabling other states to reject claims and send migrants back to Italy).

All of this has raised the temperature of citizens' socio-economic, cultural and security concerns. This in turn has provided fertile ground for political entrepreneurs, especially those on the populist right who have sought to exploit the growing divide between the better educated in secure employment – comfortable with the economic and cultural consequences of globalisation – and the less well educated who are culturally conservative and whose employment globalisation renders relatively insecure. Once the bedrock of support for parties of the left and centre left, these voters have essentially been abandoned by parties whose traditional narratives of internationalism and solidarity have long been in cultural retreat and which, in endorsing the assumptions of the neo-liberal consensus, have taken over the narratives of their adversaries on the right.

The right's success in exploiting immigration as an issue was revealed by the results of a poll carried out by the private research institute, Tecnè, in early February. This showed that besides considerably overestimating the scale of the migration phenomenon (the proportion of foreigners among the population was perceived as being 21% on average) the sample believed, in 63% of cases, that immigration was responsible for an increase in crime. Some 64% expressed a negative judgement of the Government's immigration policies, while 56% of those intending to vote for the centre-right perceived immigration as one of the principal problems facing the country.

Analyses since the election have suggested that support for the League – the party making the largest advance as well as the party giving most space to immigration in its campaign – was not linked with the size of the immigrant population. At the national level, it performed better in provinces with higher proportions of foreign-born residents but this was due to the fact that it performed better in the more prosperous North where migrants tend to concentrate. Within the North, there were no significant differences in League performance between provinces with higher and lower proportions of migrants.

On the other hand, an analysis carried out for the Italian Centre for Electoral Studies shows that controlling for other variables, including geographical area, support for the League was highest in those provinces where rates of *growth* in the proportions of migrants had been highest. This is interesting in that it is consistent with findings for other European countries showing a lack of any apparent relationship between levels of net migration and expressions of hostility/public concern about the issue; if anything, the relationship is between *recent* immigration and hostility – suggesting that opinions are malleable.

On 7 March, the European Commission published its 2018 Country Report on Italy, noting that the old age dependency ratio stood at 34.3% and was forecast to exceed 60% by 2045 as the country's fertility rate was set to remain low. Meanwhile, thanks to the 'brain drain', net immigration had been declining and in the poorer southern regions was negative. Many argue, therefore, that immigration is essential to helping Italy overcome its economic problems, especially to ensure the sustainability of the pensions system, since immigrants are on average younger than Italians and have a higher fertility rate.

It is therefore unlikely (given Brussels' keen interest in decisions relating to the Italian economy as well as in management of the refugee crisis), that the anti-immigrant rhetoric of parties like the League will find expression in any major items of legislation without opposition from the EU. In that event we might see a further decline in the EU's legitimacy, and a further undermining of the European project as we have come to know it.

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