

The 'No' comeback is (not) possible

While making strides towards election day on 20-21 September, the latest news from Italian politics would now be the alleged comeback of the 'No' vote in the referendum to cut lawmakers by a third. After months of silence and substantial absence in the public debate of any truly election campaign on the amendment of the Constitution (thanks also to the tangible embarrassment of almost all protagonists of Italian politics vis-à-vis the M5S' flagship reform), several pollsters and analysts would now agree in believing that after all the match cannot be said to be completely decided yet and that the foretold popular plebiscite against "bad politics" could prove to be a little bit under-whelming than imagined. At this point it is difficult to make exact predictions, as well as to establish whether the 'No' comeback that was trumpeted with so much insistence by many media and social networks is nothing more than an attempt by a piece of the Italian establishment to question an outcome that seems already written, aiming to mobilize the many voters who have shown so far very little interest in the ballot. It is no coincidence that in the same hours the last minute debate on the referendum becomes increasingly political and above all distant from the purely institutional implications of a historical passage, such as the rewriting of a part of the Constitution. The ante that seem to be gaining ground now are in fact much more prosaic and sleazier: at stake there would be the idea that a rejection of the M5S-inspired reform could give the final blow to the Conte II Cabinet. Exactly as it happened with former Premier Renzi in

2016, who was overwhelmed by the personalization of the vote he himself called before being forced to raise the white flag at Palazzo Chigi and to give up the idea of becoming the 'demolition man' of Italian politics. Hence the painful rethinking of the PD despite three parliamentary votes against the reform, perhaps dictated by the idea of having to ensure stability to the ruling coalition on the eve of crucial months for the future of Italy. A forced change of course that clashes with the strong inclination of leftist electors to vote 'No'. Only time will tell if the price to be paid will be yet another split in the party, which already appears torn apart by the line dictated by secretary Zingaretti; or a worsening of the ongoing power struggle to replace Zingaretti himself, also in light of the results of the regional vote (polls suggest that PD risks losing three Italian regions it currently controls). But doubts have also crept into the opposition center-right, until yesterday lined up with the 'Yes' vote. If, as it seems logical, MPs cut will be approved, only the M5S will get the vote's benefits (even if it deludes itself that it can return to the carefree days of anti-politics); and while sniffing the chance to hit Prime Minister Conte and his administration by favoring a 'No' victory, the fear of positioning themselves on the wrong side of the fence at a time of persistent uncertainty is in fact freezing the official position of the League, Brothers of Italy and to a lesser extent even Forza Italia. Besides predictions and media trends, a basic question remains: how would it have ended if shyness, embarrassment and tactics had been immediately put aside for a transparent and sincere referendum campaign?