

The Chaos After Trump

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What happens to American politics after Donald Trump? Do we snap back to normal or do things spin ever more widely out of control?

The best indicator we have so far is the example of Italy since the reign of Silvio Berlusconi. And the main lesson there is that once the norms of acceptable behavior are violated and once the institutions of government are weakened, it is very hard to re-establish them. Instead, you get this cycle of ever more extreme behavior, as politicians compete to be the most radical outsider. The political center collapses, the normal left/right political categories cease to apply and you see the rise of strange new political groups that are crazier than anything you could have imagined before.

If America follows the Italian example, by 2025 we'll look back at Trump nostalgically as some sort of beacon of relative normalcy. And by the way, if America follows the Italian example, Trump will never go away.

Silvio Berlusconi first came to power for the same reasons Trump and other populists have been coming to power around the world: Voters were disgusted by a governing elite that seemed corrupt and out of touch. They felt swamped by waves of immigrants, frustrated by economic stagnation and disgusted by the cultural values of the cosmopolitan urbanites.

In office, Berlusconi did nothing to address Italy's core problems, but he did degrade public discourse with his speech, weaken the structures of government with his corruption and offend basic decency with his Bunga Bunga sex parties and his general priapic lewdness.

In short, Berlusconi, like Trump, did nothing to address the sources of public anger, but he did erase any restraints on the way it could be expressed.

This past weekend's elections in Italy were dominated by parties that took many of Berlusconi's excesses and turned them up a notch.

The big winner is the populist Five Star Movement, which was started by a comedian and is now led by a 31-year-old who had never held a full-time job. Another winner is the League, led by Matteo Salvini, which declined to effectively distance itself from one of its former candidates who went on a shooting rampage against African immigrants. Berlusconi, who vowed to expel 600,000 immigrants, is back and is now considered a *moderating* influence. The respectable center-left party, like center-left parties across Europe, collapse.

Italy is now a poster child for the three big trends that are undermining democracies around the world:

First, the erasure of the informal norms of behavior. As Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt argue in "[How Democracies Die](#)," democracies depend not just on formal constitutions but also on informal codes. You treat your opponents like legitimate adversaries, not illegitimate enemies. You tell the truth as best you can. You don't make naked appeals to bigotry.

Berlusconi, like Trump, undermined those norms. And now Berlusconi's rivals across the political spectrum have waged a campaign that was rife with conspiracy theories, misinformation and naked appeals to race.

Second, the loss of faith in the democratic system. As Yascha Mounk writes in his book "[The People vs. Democracy](#)," faith in democratic regimes is declining with every new generation. Seventy-one percent of Europeans and North Americans born in the 1930s think it's essential to live in a democracy, but only 29 percent of people born in the 1980s think that. In the U.S., nearly a quarter of millennials think democracy is a bad way to run a country. Nearly half would like a strongman leader. One in six Americans of all ages supports military rule.

In the Italian campaign, we see the practical results of that kind of attitude. Voters are no longer particularly bothered if a politician shows dictatorial tendencies. As [one voter told Jason Horowitz](#) of The Times: "Salvini is a good man. I like him because he puts Italians first. And I guess he's a fascist, too. What can you do?"

Third, the deterioration of debate caused by social media. At the dawn of the internet, people hoped free communication would lead to an epoch of peace, understanding and democratic communication. Instead, we're seeing polarization, alternative information universes and the rise of autocracy.

In Italy, the Five Star Movement began not so much as a party but as an online decision-making platform. It pretends to use the internet to create unmediated democracy, but as La Stampa's journalist [Jacopo Jacoboni told David Broder](#) of Jacobin: "In reality, the members have no real power. In reality, there is not any real direct democracy within M5S, but a totally top-down orchestration of the movement."

In Italy, as with Trump and his Facebook campaign, the social media platform seems decentralizing, but it actually buttresses authoritarian ends.

The underlying message is clear. As Mounk has argued, the populist wave is still rising. The younger generations are more radical, on left and right. The rising political tendencies combine lavish spending from the left with racially charged immigrant restrictions from the right.

Vladimir Putin's admirers are surging. The center is still hollowing out. Nothing is inevitable in life, but liberal democracy clearly ain't going to automatically fix itself.