

Europe's Left Takes Another Blow

Rejection of Italian reforms marks latest defeat for established center-left parties

BY JEANNETTE NEUMANN

MADRID—Support is collapsing for Europe's mainstream leftist parties, long a pillar of the establishment in countries across the continent.

A voter revolt against Italy's leader marks the latest setback in a downward slide that began before recession hit Europe in 2008 and has accelerated since. Voters are chafing at austerity measures that center-left governments adopted to manage debt crises. Many who once supported Socialists and Social Democrats now reject their calls for a strengthened European Union and their welcoming stance on immigration.

Like Democrats absorbing defeat in the U.S., Europe's center-left leaders are debating whether the best way to bounce back is to stick with a centrist position or to veer further left.

Of Europe's five largest economies, the left governs two, France and Italy.

But last week, French President François Hollande said he wouldn't seek re-election in May after opinion polls showed neither he nor any other Socialist would make it past the first round of voting. French voters are likely to choose between candidates of two right-wing parties, the mainstream Republicans and the anti-immigrant National Front.

In Italy, Prime Minister Matteo Renzi resigned Monday after voters rejected a proposed constitutional overhaul. His campaign for the changes transformed Sunday's referendum into a vote of confidence in his center-left agenda focused on economic



People took to the streets of Rome early Monday after voters turned down constitutional changes.

tend to lose voters mainly to parties to their right, many of Europe's center-left parties are buffeted on all sides.

Spain's center-left Socialists, for example, lost votes to both Podemos and an upstart centrist party in this year's election, allowing Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy, a mainstream conservative, to win a second term. The Socialists got 22.7% of the vote, slightly more than half what they had polled in previous decades as one of Spain's two dominant parties.

Juanjo Barroso, a 38-year-old employed by Spain's telephone-assistance service for citizens, said he turned away from the Socialists for good in 2012. They have "a Social Democratic message," he said, "but they didn't undertake effective measures" while in government to stop creditors from evicting homeowners who had fallen behind on mortgage payments during the recession. Podemos, he said, "is filling the void" and now gets his vote.

Britain's Labour Party and the French Socialists have struggled to reconcile growing differences among their traditional voting bases, the working- and middle-classes, on issues such as immigration.

More British working-class voters have moved from Labour to the euroskeptic UK Independence Party, which lobbied for Britain's departure from the EU, while many of their peers in France have abandoned the Socialists and other left-wing parties for Marine Le Pen's right-wing National Front.

"I would expect that downward trajectory to continue," said Patrick Diamond, a professor at Queen Mary University of London and a former U.K. Labour Party adviser.

—Nektaria Stamouli in Athens contributed to this article.

growth. The "no" vote was a win for the euroskeptic 5 Star Movement, which has drained votes from Mr. Renzi's Democratic Party.

Siegfried Muresan, a spokesman for the European People's Party, a group of center-right parties in the European Parliament, jabbed at his down-and-out rivals in a tweet Monday: "What a bad week for European #Socialists: #Renzi down, #Hollande out. Add this to their weaknesses in #Spain, #Germany, #Poland, etc etc."

The continent's rising tide of populism has also challenged center-right parties, but they have resisted it betwixt. The setbacks for Europe's left, meanwhile, have plunged its leaders into soul-searching.

"There has been a move away from liberal democratic values in a number of countries in Europe and outside Europe," Greek Finance Minister Euclid Tsakalotos, whose far-left Syriza party rose to power last year, said recently. "That's partly the fault of the

center-left and the left. They haven't really articulated a program that addresses the concerns of voters—an agenda so that people can see their place in a more globalized world economy."

There are exceptions. Portugal's Socialists have seen their poll numbers strengthen after allying with three far-left parties to form a government last year. Malta's Labour Party leader, who modeled his campaign on President Barack Obama's, was elected prime minister in a landslide in 2013 after dropping his euroskeptic stance.

But in other countries where Social Democrats lead or form part of governing coalitions, their support is waning. That is true in Austria, where the populist, anti-immigrant Freedom Party remains the strongest political force despite its candidate's loss to a center-left independent in Sunday's race for the largely ceremonial post of president. The Social Democratic candidate failed to make Sunday's

runoff.

European leftists seeking to stave off or reverse electoral defeat are more limited than their peers in the U.S. in what they can offer voters. EU deficit targets make it more difficult to push state-spending programs traditionally championed by the left. The 19 eurozone governments are further constrained; unlike the U.S., they have no authority to stimulate their economies by printing money.

And whether these parties follow Portugal's Socialists and lean further left, or Malta's Labourites and move toward the center, their overall prospects are grimmer than for U.S. Democrats because of heightened competition in Europe for traditional left-of-center voters.

New or previously fringe parties on the far left, such as Spain's Podemos, and on the far right, such as Austria's Freedom Party, are capturing voters from the establishment center-left and center-right. But while center-right parties

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