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MARK BLYTH: Hello, and welcome to a special edition of *Trending Globally*. My name is Mark Blyth. Today, I'm interviewing David Kertzer.

David is the former provost here at Brown University. But perhaps more importantly, he knows more about Italy than practically anybody else we can find. Given that the elections have just happened in Italy and produced yet another kind of populist shock, we thought it was a good idea to bring him in and have a chat. Good afternoon, David.

DAVID KERTZER: Thanks for having me, Mark.

MARK BLYTH: OK, so let's try and put this in context for people. Italy's kicked off. Now, we could talk about what's happening right now today, but to try and get some context on this, I want to take us back a little bit.

This is not the first time the Italian political system-- indeed the whole Italian state-- has kind of blown up. I want to go back to 1994. That's the last time things really disintegrated. Start there, and then walk forward, so then we can talk more meaningfully about the election.

So I'm going to invite you to just take us back to 1994. Tell us about what was going on-- the post-war political compact, and then [BLOWS RASPBERRY] the whole thing fell apart.

DAVID KERTZER: Well, right after World War II, of course, it was a new political system-- the end of the monarchy. There is a republic. The Christian Democratic Party, very closely allied with the Catholic Church, basically dominated Italian politics for decades. It became a close second of the Italian Communist Party, which became the most important Communist Party outside the communist world.

And then in a remarkably short period of time, with the end of the Berlin Wall-- the late '80s-- you have the end of the Communist Party. It's transformed into a democratic party. It kept changing its name, but more or less a democratic party.

But after that, in the early '90s, there was this big corruption scandal-- Tangentopoli. And the result of that was the demise of the other major party. So the Communist Party had ended.

The Christian Democratic Party and the Socialist Party ended because of corruption scandals. And that's when they talk about the formation of the Second Republic. So the First Republic, forming right after World War II, being stable for some decades.

The Second Republic then saw the rise of this media tycoon, Berlusconi. Silvio Berlusconi, he forms his Forza Italia Party, although he'd never been in politics. And he, in 1994, wins the election. He wins it together with a small party, that was called the Northern League-- which had initially been a group of local, more or less secessionist parties in the northeast of Italy. And they soon gone to dispute, and that ended Berlusconi's first government.

So since that time the centre-right has been dominated, until this election of yesterday, by Berlusconi and his Forza Italia Party-- with the League, for example, its last election five years ago, only getting 4% of the vote.

So what's happened now, with both the League having a great triumph yesterday-- we can talk about-- but also this new Populist Party, that just came on the national scene five years ago with the election and shocked everyone-- the Cinque Stelle, or Five Star Movement, founded by the comedian Beppe Grillo, it got 25% of the vote in the last election five years ago. And this shook the system. But because of the electoral law at the time, the Democratic Party was able to put together a majority. And the Democratic Party essentially has run the government for the past five years.

MARK BLYTH: So let's go back to probably the one person that typifies Italian politics in the minds of many people-- Berlusconi. So if I'm hearing you right, he essentially walks into the vacuum that's left after the collapse of the mainstream parties in the mid-1990s, uses his own money, his own personal connections, his own television empire, to promote himself. He gets into power.

We talk a lot about populism today. Was he the first populist?

DAVID KERTZER: Well, populist in a way. He was certainly anti-system. But anti-system in a very strange way, because he was also the richest person in Italy. He owned not only half the television media in Italy, but also department stores, real estate. So he came into power in good part to protect his own economic interests. So in that sense, it's hard to see it as populist. And also, because if you look at the people he brought into power, they were basically people from his business-- various managers and so on. So in that sense, I think probably we wouldn't call it a populist party.

MARK BLYTH: So he comes out as being the big loser today. Walk us through the election results. Tell us what's happened-- what we know so far.

DAVID KERTZER: Well, the election results involved both the big victory of the Five Stars-- normally called the populist movement. They got over 32% of the vote. The centre-right coalition, which had three main components-- there's the Forza Italia, which is Berlusconi. There is the League-- this anti-immigrant party. And there's a party called Brothers of Italy, which essentially is the heir to the neo-fascists.

Together they got about 37%. But there the big surprise was Berlusconi was sure he was going to be number one. Within the coalition, he actually lost by probably 3.5% to the League. So now the League is the leading party of the centre-right. And the head of the league, Salvini, claims the right to be the candidate for prime minister of the centre-right coalition.

Then on the left, the Democratic Party was basically wiped out-- going from 25% of the vote last time to a little more than 18% this time. There was a kind of secessionist left movement called Free and Equal that did very poorly as well, with only 3%.

So the net result is we have no majority. And so this is the question, whether there can be any government in Italy now, given the election results. The centre-right, given the electoral law-- where one third of the seats were first past the post. Two thirds were proportional representation. centre-right looks like it has the most seats in parliament, roughly. In the lower house, which has around 630 seats, it has about 250. The Five Star comes very close-- probably around 235 seats. And then the centre-left well behind, but still with maybe 110, 120 seats.

What this means is that the centre-right by itself can't form a government. The Five Stars by itself can form a government. And then you have, obviously, the centre-left can't form a government. So the big question is, what kind of government is possible?

MARK BLYTH: So let me put my cynical Brit hat on for a moment. I grew up with comedians telling jokes of Italian governments falling-- which was akin to saying buses are going past. They tend to have a very short lifespan. I remember it was something like there'd been 54 governments in Italy by 1979, or something like this. So is this really a big deal?

DAVID KERTZER: Well, I think it is. Because although you had, I think, one new government on average every 11 months in the post-war period-- but for many, many years this was just a shuffling of chairs

among the main parties, particularly the Christian Democrats. And for the last five years there really has been quite a bit of stability. There have been three different prime ministers, but all with the same centre-left coalition.

This really is an earthquake. They're talking about this is the Third Republic, potentially. And the old parties of centre-left and centre-right look like they're either gone or very badly mauled. And it's unclear-- the Cinque Stelle movement, which by far got the most votes of any single party, in the past it said it wouldn't align with any of the old parties.

Its whole schtick was that they were anti-corruption-- that all the powers in the old system were corrupt, and they were going to bring new, clean government to Italy. On the one hand now they're saying that they're the major party, they should form the government. But that implies they have to find partners.

MARK BLYTH: So let's talk about some of the key people that have popped out of the woodwork here, or the surprises. So Salvini-- you mentioned it was the Lega Lombarda, which was a small party which appeared in the '90s, which supported Berlusconi-- if I'm correct. And that's morphed now into the Northern League.

Who's Salvini? What does he want? Well, it's actually the Northern League has morphed into the League, which is the other development here. So the League was initially formed back in the '80s. There was a separate Lombard League and a Veneto League.

So these various regions in northeastern Italy, they came together to form the Northern League, under the charismatic, rather odd personality, Umberto Bossi. They ran against the corruption of and the parasitical nature of southern Italy-- Rome and southern Italy. So their big slogan was, Rome the thief, and referred to the southern Italians as basically dirty and lazy.

But now, more recently, they figured they've got a better target to turn their ire and the people's anger against-- namely immigrants from other countries, especially African. And so they changed their name to League from Northern League, in a bid to get national vote-- to get votes in the south.

And they have gotten some votes in the south. But one of the important things about this election result is, if you look at the electoral map, there is a sharp divide between northern Italy, which went for the centre-right, and southern Italy, which went for the Five Stars populist

movement.

MARK BLYTH: So if we called the Five Star left, they're probably not. But if we said, is it really a left-right geographic split? Because that's reminiscing Gramsci's notebooks for me, in some way.

DAVID KERTZER: Right. Although what it looks like, the first examinations that we've seen of the electoral flux, show that the big victory of Five Star in the south is due to former voters of the right turning instead away from, like, Forza Italia and Berlusconi to Cinque Stelle. So it's not a vote, for the most part, that came out of the left-- even though the left did extremely poorly in the south.

And this has been one of the big advantages that the Five Star Movement has had, that it's been opaque enough about its program and changing often enough that it can draw support both from the left and from the right.

MARK BLYTH: Do we know what Five Star actually wants? Tell us about their leader, who appears out of nowhere, is 31 years old. These tend to dislike the euro. They tend to dislike vaccines. What's going on?

DAVID KERTZER: Well, it is a very strange group. First of all, they don't refer to themselves as a party, but a movement. And one of the things that's unclear is whether they can make the transition from a movement to an actual party in power without losing all their appeal.

Di Maio, the 31-year-old head of the party, has very little experience. He was elected five years ago in this big wave for Five Stars. He had no previous job to speak of. He had not graduated from college. He knows very little about the rest of the world, as far as one can tell. So the notion that he is leader of the far and away largest party in Italy is a little bit frightening, I think.

MARK BLYTH: I can't think of any other country that has leaders who perhaps know less than we'd like.

DAVID KERTZER: Right. No, we don't know anything about ignorant leaders here. But yeah, so we can't perhaps vaunt our situation compared to the Italians. But we really, I think, know less about what we're dealing with even than we knew about Trump in the US.

I mean, the Five Stars-- as you mentioned, they came out more or less against inoculations. They've been all over the place in respect to Europe. Migration-- they've been largely an anti-immigrant party. They prevented the law that would give citizenship to individuals born of legal-immigrant parents born in Italy on becoming age 21. There was a centre-left proposal.

And it didn't pass because the Five Stars wouldn't support it.

MARK BLYTH: Does the opacity of Five Star, in your opinion, make a coalition with perhaps the League-- the populist, overarching coalition-- more or less possible?

DAVID KERTZER: Well, it would seem at the moment there's only two possibilities for a government in Italy, both of which would involve Five Star making an alliance, either on the left or on the right. So on the one hand, they could reach out to the centre-left, to the Democratic Party, and together they would have a majority in both houses of parliament. Or they could reach out to the League.

We've seen a certain amount of commentary which refers to Five Stars and the League together-- two populist, anti-system parties. So in some sense that might be more obvious.

On the other hand, so much of the Five Stars' support has come from the left, that for them to enter into an agreement with the League-- and it's clearly a right-wing, anti-immigrant party-- would risk, for Di Maio, alienating a good part of his base.

MARK BLYTH: Well, let's put the Italian left, such as it is, in a comparative perspective. The German SPD is basically down in the teens. We can go to France. They disappeared at the last election, with Macron as a kind of centrist-populist figure taking away that vote.

Right across the developed world, we see two things-- the shrinking of the centre, but particularly the collapse the centre-left. Does not make it impossible for Five Star to also go along with the centre-left in Italy-- with Renzi's old party? Because in a sense they are the enemy, right?

DAVID KERTZER: That's right. So Five Stars has been against the establishment, and for the last five years the establishment has largely been the Democratic Party. So it becomes difficult for them to ally for that reason.

There are also-- I think you're hinting at economic-plan differences between the centre-left, the Democratic Party-- and Five Stars. Five stars, but also the Lega-- and this perhaps unites them more-- has been involved in various, you might say, anti-austerity promises-- of lowering taxes, and giving more public expenditures for employment, and for all sorts of other things. So that also makes it difficult.

The centre-left, although occasionally criticizing EU austerity, has largely gone along with those measures, and expresses concern about a public debt that's already quite large-- one of

Europe's largest.

MARK BLYTH: Turning to sort of the European reaction to this-- the last thing the Germans want, and the last thing that Brussels wants, is an unstable Italy-- particularly with the size of the public debt, the condition of the banking system, and the fact that they haven't grown in over 20 years in any significant way.

Regardless of who ends up running Italy, are they going to be able to do anything about it? Because they seem to have gotten to a point where talking about decline has become a national pastime.

DAVID KERTZER: Well, certainly one thing that didn't help the centre-left was various discussions by European leaders about what a disaster it would be if the League or the Five Star Movement did well. This obviously only helped--

MARK BLYTH: That's going to go down well now.

DAVID KERTZER: Right, exactly. So this did not play out well. What one hears from these European leaders is, well, given this kind of result, maybe some kind of national unity government would be best. It's a little difficult to see how that could possibly happen. I mean, for the centre-left to enter into any kind of government with the League, for, example-- which is the leading party of the centre-right-- seems almost unimaginable. And so right now it's very difficult to see why the European leaders shouldn't be quite concerned, given their perspective on this.

MARK BLYTH: So the Germans just managed to form a government. And that's probably the death knell for the SPD over the long run, for doing so. France's Macron, the [FRENCH], who seems to have an agenda which is very popular, but he needs the cooperation of the Germans to do it. I know the Italians have imploded. Should we be worried about the future of Europe again, just when it seemed to be on the mend?

DAVID KERTZER: Well, I think so. A good friend of mine is a former member of parliament in Italy, and former minister of defense. And he actually compares Italy not to the France and Britain in that situation, but really to Central Europe and the former communist countries-- where a nativist right-wing is taking over from what had been a more middle of the road, centre-right-- along with the crash collapse of the centre-left. So I think there is grounds for worry.

And of course, migration-- the League went from 4% only five years ago to 17 or 18% now. It's going to be the second-largest party, I think, in parliament. This is almost all entirely due to

anti-immigration feeling in Italy, and nervousness about migration-- and the fact that the centre-left has not been able to deal with this issue. It's still a kind of taboo issue. This explains a certain part of their collapse, I think.

MARK BLYTH: It might be the case that Britain is not the only one who's worried about Schengen and other such things, which allow freedom of movement through the Union, and the security of the Union's borders.

DAVID KERTZER: Right. And of course, unlike Britain, Italy feels very vulnerable, in terms of being so close to North Africa-- with this large number of boat people coming over. And they've taken the position that it shouldn't just be an Italian responsibility to deal with these hundreds of thousands of people, who've come the last few years in often desperate circumstances, but a European Union problem.

But the other countries of the European Union haven't been particularly responsive to that. And so this too has led to a lot of anti-European feeling in Italy, with these electoral results.

MARK BLYTH: So you have anti-immigration, anti-Europe, and you have a country that hasn't grown for 20 years, with a population on stagnant wages. It doesn't sound too good.

DAVID KERTZER: Right. The economic situation has been bad. I mean, the centre-left government tries to make a lot of the fact that this past year, they've had something like 1.5% growth-- which is perhaps the first time in a decade they've had any growth at all. But just the prospects-- the unemployment is very high in Italy, especially youth unemployment. So the economic mood there is very bleak.

MARK BLYTH: And unfortunately, we're going to have to leave it there. Thanks for the explainer, for the update-- the clarification on the renewed pessimism.

DAVID KERTZER: Thanks, Mark.

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