

As campaigning ahead of Italy's national election enters its final weeks, researchers in the country fear that budget cuts and declining interest in science will only continue — whatever the outcome of the vote on 4 March. A complex coalition government is likely to emerge. The country's traditional centre-left and centre-right parties have splintered, and myriad small parties make up the ballot sheet, as well as the populist Five Star Movement. Topics such as immigration, the refugee influx and eurozone membership have dominated mainstream debates. But, apart from a battle over the nation's compulsory vaccination programme, which was introduced last year, science has featured little in the campaigning — even as economists warn that Italy's research system is in a precarious state. "We are on the verge of collapse," says Mario Pianta, an economist at the University of Rome Tre, who helps to prepare Italy's statistics on research and development (R&D) for the European Commission. Italy has hotspots of scientific excellence, such as in particle physics and biomedicine. But, unlike many other European countries, it has failed to modernize its science system in the past few decades. Budgets have constantly been low. Academic hiring practices can be complicated, and bureaucracy crippling, many scientists say. Research organizations have had little power politically, and have been unable to stem the rising influence of those who have demonized vaccinations and promoted charlatan cure-alls. The gap in scientific achievement and investment between the country's wealthy north and poorer south is widening, helping to fuel regionalist and populist politics, says Raffaella Rumiati, vice-president of Italy's national research-evaluation agency. (Fonte: I. Romano, Nature 554, 411-412, 2018)