

Sunday referendum in Italy to decide on voting system

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Sunday April 18 will witness the latest in a series of moves toward a more business-friendly political system in Italy. A referendum will be held on the question of replacing the current mixed electoral system with one that features only single-member districts.

Under the current system, which has been in place since 1993, each voter is presented with two ballots, one with a list of the candidates who are running in one's home district, and one with a list of political parties and the candidates chosen by those parties. Each voter chooses both a candidate and a party. In addition to the winners of the single seats in each district, there are a number of seats (25 percent of the total) that are allocated based on the percentage of the vote received by each party. This is calculated in a way that favors the parties which do not win single seat contests, and therefore increases the number of parties represented in the Chamber of Deputies (the lower house of the Italian parliament).

If the referendum were to pass, then the 25 percent of seats not won via the single seat system (the one used in the United States and Great Britain) would go to the best second-place finishers in these contests. The elimination of proportional representation favors a two-party system because it would require a much higher number of votes to gain representation in parliament.

Not surprisingly, the main proponents of this change are the political and economic groups with the most to gain. In parliament, the major parties of the left (Democrats of the Left, and the group led by former Prime Minister Romano Prodi) and right (media tycoon and former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, and the neo-fascist National Alliance) are all pushing for a "yes" vote. And in the private sector, Confindustria, the largest private organization representing big capital, has been a major proponent of the change.

Prominent groups opposing the change are smaller parties, including Communist Refoundation, Democratic Italian Communists, the Green Party and the right-wing Northern League. Due to the proportional electoral system and the coalition-type government that it usually produces, all of these parties have been able to secure a place in governments, although they have sometimes won less than 5 percent of the popular vote.

A number of systems could replace the current one, and would still have to be agreed upon even if the referendum were to pass. Options include a two-ballot system such as is used in France, where a candidate must win an outright majority of votes (51 percent) or voters must return to the polls and revote, and a single-ballot system which would require only one trip to the polls. Several variations on both of these systems have been proposed.

If the referendum fails there are numerous options, the most important of which being that ex-Stalinist Prime Minister Massimo D'Alema could simply sign into law any proposal for which he can muster parliamentary support. In addition to the above-mentioned proposals, there are several other proportional and mixed systems which are being argued for in the Chamber of Deputies.

A necessary condition of referenda in Italy is that, for the vote to be valid, 51 percent of the eligible population must turn out on Sunday. This fact has prompted some opponents of the measure--notably Umberto Bossi of the Northern League--to urge voters to stay away from the polls altogether.

This may materialize without the advice of the minor parties, however, because voter turnout in Italy has been plummeting from an average of greater than 90 percent before 1993, when an nearly completely

proportional system was replaced by the current mixed-system. Recent elections saw voter turnout fall below 65 percent. The 1993 change was put in place as the result of a referendum organized by Mario Segni (who has also organized the current measure) that passed by a wide margin. The referendum's passage was mostly due to the wave of outrage in response to numerous indictments on bribery charges of leaders of the Christian Democratic and Socialist parties.

The aim of many voters in this earlier referendum had been to get rid of the "partyocracy." But the longer term result of the shift toward a two-party system has contributed to a rise in abstentionism and a general alienation on the part of the electorate.

Unfazed by this change, the defenders of bourgeois interests have been attempting to use this reformist attitude of the populace to reshape the Italian state along the lines of either American, French or German states. Some of the immediate plans include the creation of a popularly-elected presidency, the abolition of all references to political parties on ballot sheets (to be replaced by coalition symbols, the two most prominent of which are the donkey and the elephant), and some sort of devolution of power to a subnational level.

None of the political parties in Italy represent the interests of the working class. The Democrats of the Left, the Communist Refoundation and Democratic Italian Communists have all supported the austerity measures and privatization of state-run industries introduced as part of the conditions for Italy to participate in the European single currency, the euro. However, the move towards a two-party system is designed to hinder the emergence of a genuine party of the working class.



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