

Attempted reform of Italian electoral laws collapses

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The attempt to introduce a first-past-the-post electoral system in Italy through the mechanism of a popular referendum has failed due to insufficient voter participation. At least half of the potential electorate of 49 million had to vote in order to ensure a valid result. In the event, after voting, 150,000 votes or 0.4 percent were lacking. From those who voted, 91 percent were in favour of the reform.

The result is a major blow for the big parties who stood strongly behind the referendum. On Sunday evening they were already celebrating victory following the false declaration by opinion polls of a 51 to 52 percent electoral participation. Gianfranco Fini, president of the neo-fascist National Alliance, greeted the result as the first step towards an authoritarian presidential system. Romano Prodi, former prime minister and the newly proposed president of the European Commission, spoke of a convincing victory in favour of modernisation and government control over Italy. Then overnight, at 1:30 a.m., their hopes were dashed when the interior ministry announced that the referendum had failed.

Seven years previously a similar referendum had drawn 80 percent of the electorate into the voting booths who then voted, by a 95 percent majority, for the dissolution of the then existing proportional voting system in favour of a combined electoral vote. According to the latter system, three-quarters of the seats were awarded on a first-past-the-post basis to the strongest candidates in an electoral area, the remaining quarter was distributed between the various other parties on a proportional basis.

The massive majority for electoral reform at that time arose out of growing public concern over a number of corruption scandals which had rocked official life in Italy at the beginning of the 90s. With the departure

from a purely proportional electoral system the intention was to limit the number of parties represented in parliament. According to those arguing for the new form of voting law, the drive to construct a viable majority coalition from numerous parties called for backroom deals, corruption and nepotism and was the cause of the chronic instability in Italian government.

The electoral reform introduced at the beginning of the 90s did not, however, bring the promised result. Instead of the 30 national parties at that time there are now a total of 45. The wheeling and dealing in parliament intensified through deals and connections established in the course of elections. In this manner it was possible in 1994 for the fascists, together with media magnate Silvio Berlusconi, to temporarily take power. Today, for the first time in Italian history, government leadership lies in the hands of the Left Democrats, formerly the Italian Communist Party.

The coming to power of the Left Democrats has changed little in the situation for the broad population confronted with chronic unemployment and widespread poverty. The high level of participation for electoral reform in 1992 was bound up with vague hopes that the overcoming of the old political system would also lead to improvements in the social situation. Now, as one commentator pointedly remarked, the boycott of the present referendum is "an expression of the political disinterest of the people. They expect nothing from the parties, absolutely nothing". Electoral participation corresponded closely to social differences: in the more wealthy north of the country 54 percent voted, while just 42 percent voted in the impoverished south. The referendum was above all lost in this latter region.

In addition the introduction of a first-past-the-post voting system would have drastically limited the possibilities for popular intervention in political affairs

and favoured the fascists. The big parties would have obtained a political monopoly, while blocking entry to parliament for smaller parties. The collapse of the referendum must also be regarded as popular rejection of such plans.

Massimo D'Alema, the leader of the Left Democrats and current head of government, has for some time advocated a two-party system in which the Left Democrats would constitute one pole and the National Alliance the other. Both of these parties supported the referendum, while above all the smaller parties--including the neo-Communists, the Greens and the separatist Northern League--rejected the referendum.

Berlusconi's Forza Italia did not have a clear position. The party anticipated that it would have limited possibilities to establish itself in a two-party system. In elections up until now it has received more support than Fini's National Alliance, but the party lacks a clear party structure and is too wrapped up in the personal business operations of its founder.

The referendum was, however, energetically backed by Romano Prodi who only recently founded a new party--"The Democrats". The party includes a number of prominent city mayors and the former state attorney Di Pietro, who made a name for himself as a sort of "Mr. Clean" in the corruption trials in Milan. The Democrats, who hope to challenge the Left Democrats for the political middle ground in Italy, are estimated to have considerable chances of success in the coming European elections. But the collapse of the referendum indicates that the star of such "popular" figures is also rapidly waning.



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