

# The army of candidates: Aspiring councillors during Italy's municipal elections

*Municipal elections were held in Italy on 3-4 October, with a further ballot being held in 65 municipalities on 17-18 October. Marino De Luca assesses what lessons can be learned from participation rates in the elections.*

On 3 and 4 October 2021, votes were cast in Italy for the direct election of mayors and municipal councils. This involved 1,191 municipalities (1,153 in the 15 regions with ordinary statutes and 38 in the region with a special statute, Friuli Venezia Giulia) for 12,147,040 voters distributed over 14,505 sections.

In particular, there were elections in 19 provincial capitals, of which six were also regional capitals: Bologna, Milan, Naples, Rome, Turin and Trieste. In 65 municipalities there will be a ballot on 17 and 18 October. The ballot, in the Italian legal system, goes ahead in two cases. First, in all municipalities that are called “superiors” – with a population greater than 15,000 inhabitants (in the autonomous province of Trento, this threshold is lowered to 3,000) – if no candidate for mayor has managed to obtain 50%+1 of the valid votes in the first round; and second, in municipalities with fewer than 15,000 inhabitants (3,000 in the autonomous province of Trento), if the first round ended with a tie between two candidates.

## Turnout rates

On average the turnout was below the 55% threshold in the municipalities where the vote was taken, almost seven percentage points lower than in the 2016 administrative elections. The aggregate data in Table 1 for the Italian regions shows that the decline is more sustained in the north, while in the south it is more contained.

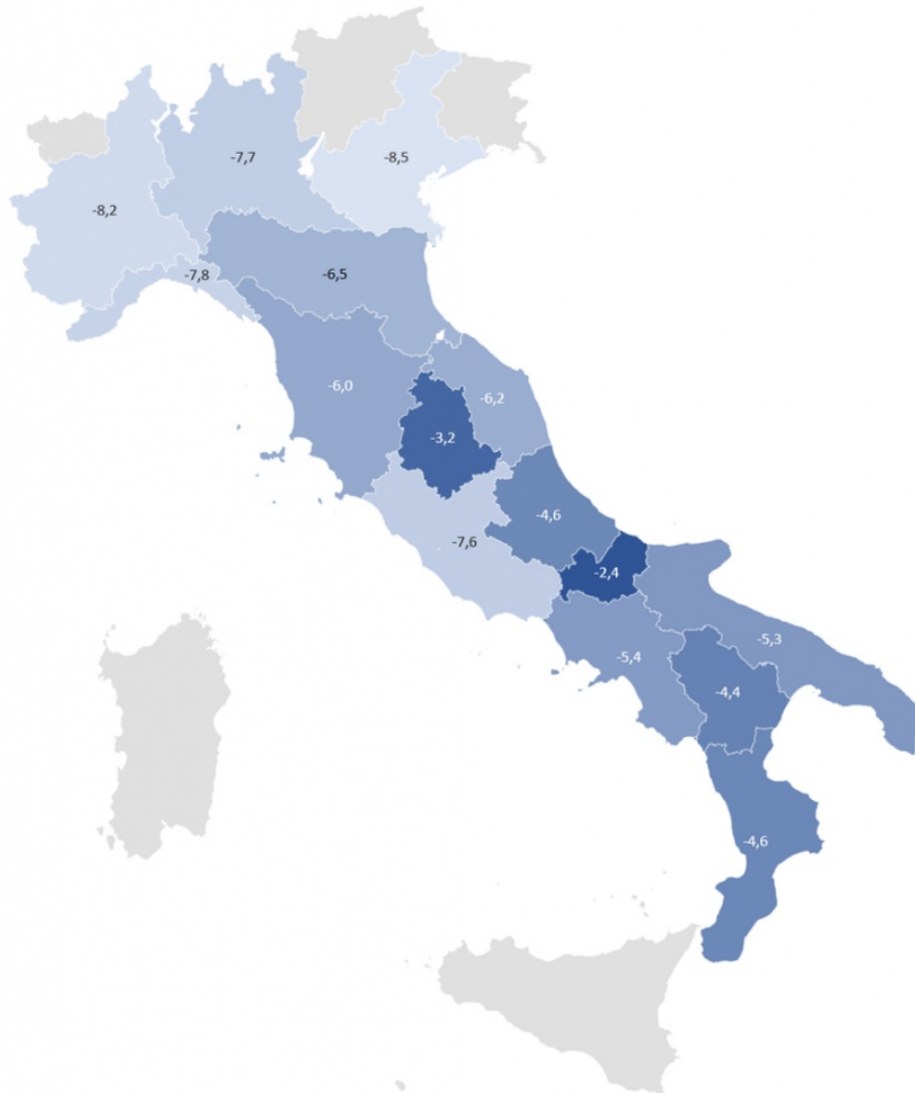
**Table 1: Turnout during the elections held on 3-4 October 2021 (regions with ordinary statute)**

	Region	Municipalities / Total	Turnout %	Previous Turnout %	Diff. %
Northern Italy	Emilia-Romagna	48 / 330	54.8	61.3	-6.5
	Liguria	52 / 234	55.5	63.3	-7.8
	Lombardy	236 / 1,506	51.1	58.8	-7.7
	Piedmont	152 / 1,181	51.4	59.6	-8.2
	Veneto	84 / 563	55.7	64.2	-8.5
Central Italy	Lazio	106 / 378	52.5	60.1	-7.6
	Marche	28 / 225	57.1	63.3	-6.2
	Tuscany	31 / 273	59	65	-6.0
	Umbria	12 / 92	65.1	68.3	-3.2
Southern and insular Italy	Abruzzo	72 / 305	62.3	66.9	-4.6
	Apulia	54 / 257	63.2	68.5	-5.3
	Basilicata	26 / 131	58.5	62.9	-4.4
	Calabria	81 / 404	57.8	62.4	-4.6
	Campania	141 / 550	58.1	63.5	-5.4
	Molise	30 / 136	58.4	60.8	-2.4
	<i>Italy</i>	<i>1,153 / 6942</i>	<i>54.7</i>	<i>61.6</i>	<i>-6.9</i>

*Note: \*Election day 10–11 October. Source: Ministry of the Interior*

Abstentionism in these elections revolved around three leading causes. First, the tendency to participate only in the elections considered most important: generally, the turnout is much higher in political elections than in administrative ones. Second, the substantial similarity between the proposals of the various candidates and different coalitions, with the consequence that the victory of one or the other would have little impact on the lives of citizens. And third, the crisis of the parties, which are no longer able to mobilise voters and bring them to the polls.

**Figure 1: Difference in turnout between the 2016 and 2021 elections (regions with ordinary statute)**



Source: Ministry of the Interior

The data concerning the relationship between the number of aspiring councillors and voters is interesting. Table 2 shows the number of aspiring municipal councillors in the 19 provincial capitals (six regional capitals) and other demographic variables.

**Table 2: Councillor candidates during the elections held on 3-4 October 2021 in 19 provincial capitals (regions with ordinary statute)**

	Municipality	Region	Mayoral candidates	Lists and/or parties	Councillor candidates	Population	Voters	Voting	Turnout %	Candidates / Voters
Northern Italy	Bologna*	Emilia-Romagna	8	19	641	371,337	306,240	156,742	51.2	478
	Milan*	Lombardy	13	28	1,186	1,242,123	1,029,232	491,141	47.7	868
	Novara	Piedmont	5	10	306	101,952	78,773	41,825	53.1	257
	Ravenna	Emilia-Romagna	11	30	832	153,740	124,763	67,472	54.1	150
	Rimini	Emilia-Romagna	6	21	586	139,601	120,330	66,897	55.6	205
	Savona	Liguria	5	13	382	60,661	49,658	26,035	52.4	130
	Turin*	Piedmont	13	30	1,098	872,367	489,684	331,566	67.7	446
	Varese	Lombardy	7	18	525	79,793	65,851	33,537	50.9	125
Central Italy	Grosseto	Tuscany	8	15	426	78,630	65,673	38,936	59.3	154
	Latina	Lazio	9	21	604	117,892	106,808	65,350	61.2	177
	Rome*	Lazio	22	38	1,659	2,617,175	2,359,250	1,152,022	48.8	1,422
Southern Italy	Benevento	Campania	4	20	598	61,489	50,328	36,808	73.1	84
	Caserta	Campania	7	31	951	75,640	62,687	42,051	67.1	66
	Cosenza	Calabria	8	29	872	69,484	57,158	37,077	64.9	66
	Isernia	Molise	3	16	458	22,025	19,389	12,986	67.0	42
	Naples*	Campania	7	32	1,202	962,003	776,751	366,374	47.2	646
	Salerno	Campania	9	31	955	132,608	112,319	70,979	63.2	118

**Note:** \*Regional capital. **Source:** Ministry of the Interior

In the municipalities of the southern capitals, the turnout rate is higher – with the sole exception of Naples, which seems to conform to the pattern of the other two large Italian metropolises – but the ratio between the number of candidates and voters is very low. In fact, for example, in Caserta and Cosenza – respectively, the cities of Campania and Calabria – there are very low ratios: one candidate for every 66 voters. Isernia has one candidate for every 42 voters. In contrast, northern towns have variable relationships that go from one candidate for 125 voters in Varese to one candidate for 868 voters in Milan. This capillarity of the vote in South Italy somehow seems to have made the turnout figures resistant to collapse, as happened in the northern regions with fewer aspiring councillors.

### Preference and participation

This shows how, beyond the increase or decrease in the probability of victory of mayoral candidates or the obtaining of a position in the city council, the high number of aspiring councillors entails more significant pressure on the “forced” voters in some contexts to express a preference for a councillor who they surely know personally. There is almost always a clear correlation between preference (choice of a candidate for city councillor) and electoral participation, which can be explained by the fact that the voter is interested in voting to express a preference for the “close” candidate.

For many southern citizens, interest in this electoral occasion was undoubtedly aroused by the desire to contribute, through their vote, to the election of a candidate for councillor. And it is precisely participation in the poll, for the reasons that can enlarge or restrict it, that is perhaps the most characterising element of the diversity of behaviours determined by the system for the election of mayors.

Participation also underlines how important electoral consultation is. The greater the participation, the greater the significance citizens attach to the election. From this data, we could affirm that municipal elections are more critical than political elections in the south, subverting the recognised order attributed by political theory and practice: political elections first, and then all the others.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [Niccolò Chiamori](#) on [Unsplash](#)*

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