

Will Italy's constitutional referendum mark the beginning of a 'Third Republic'?

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*On 4 December, Italy will hold a referendum on constitutional reform that has come to be viewed as a vote of confidence in Matteo Renzi's government. **Fabio Bordignon** writes that Italy now has two very different paths in front of it: a Yes vote will potentially lead to a more presidential form of politics, while a No vote could generate substantial uncertainty over the country's political trajectory. He argues that the victory of Renzi's camp would lead to a majoritarian – and de facto presidential – democracy, inaugurating Italy's 'Third Republic'.*



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Once again, Europe and the wider world are watching Italy. A package of economic and institutional reforms promoted by Matteo Renzi's centre-left government has gained the approval, in recent months, of the US Government and Italy's major EU partners. Along the way, however, many unknowns still weigh heavily. The Constitutional Referendum, scheduled for 4 December 2016, will be a crucial moment not only for the political course of the current government and its leader, but also for the political system as a whole, which, twenty years after the crisis of the early 1990s, is experiencing a new turning point. A victory for either side could change the institutional configuration and the mechanics of Italy's political system, but in very different directions.

Voters will be asked for their views on a proposed reform, approved by Parliament in April this year, of the second part of the Italian Constitution. It is a complex text, in which two main themes can be identified: First, an effort to overcome redundant bicameralism, through the transformation of Italy's Senate into a representative chamber of local institutions, with reduced powers and a (significantly) reduced number of members (100 rather than 315). Second, the reform aims to reorganise the territorial structure of the State, through a redefinition of the division of powers between local and central institutions (in favour of the latter).

The reform bears the name of Renzi, and that of the Minister for Reforms, Maria Elena Boschi, thus emphasising that it is a government initiative. It was initially supported by a "large" majority, thanks to the convergence of the

major parties of the centre-left and centre-right: respectively, the Democratic Party (PD), led by Matteo Renzi, and Forza Italy (FI), led by Silvio Berlusconi. However, Berlusconi broke this pact before the final approval of the bill in Parliament. Moreover, even in the PD, a growing internal minority of dissenters has emerged. Meanwhile, the “third party” of the Italian tri-polar political scene, the Five-Star Movement (M5S), led by former comedian Beppe Grillo, has been opposed to the reforms from the outset.

Observers and scholars have been divided on the merits of the reforms, presenting diametrically [opposing views](#) that recall the traditional trade-off between representation and governability. Supporters see the government-backed project as a final end to the infinite Italian transition: an unrepeatable opportunity, after so many failed attempts, to steer the country towards a “deciding” democracy, overcoming the inefficiency of two chambers sharing the same powers, which has long been recognised as a dead weight for Italy’s institutional system.

The critics, by contrast, speak of a botched and dangerous package of reforms. They point the finger at its internal inconsistencies and the institutional conflicts which they consider would result from a Yes vote in the referendum. Above all, the public discourse in favour of the No vote has focused on the excess of powers that the government and its head would gain if the reform were approved, with the consequent risk of authoritarian developments.

Undoubtedly, a proper assessment of the reforms cannot be made without taking into account the second part of the government’s proposed project. Since July 2016, a new electoral law, the so-called Italicum law, has come into effect. This is an electoral law that establishes a substantially proportional system, but with a majority prize for any party that exceeds 40% in the first round of voting, or which prevails in a run-off between the two leading parties.

This is in effect a majority-assuring election law that would allow citizens to know the winner as soon as the election is over: a topic that is highly salient for public opinion, given the traditional instability of Italian governments and the uncertain outcome of the [2013 general election](#) (due, precisely, to the absence of a clear majority in the Senate). This objective would be missed, however, if the referendum fails, as the Italicum law applies only to the lower chamber (the Chamber of Deputies).

For these reasons, the referendum has taken on even greater importance. Renzi initially linked the outcome of the vote to the fate not only of his government, but also of his own political career, announcing that if No prevailed, he would “change jobs”. Moreover, the Prime Minister identified it as a crucial step in the consolidation of his leadership, aiming to present himself as the founding father of a “New Republic”.

Taking advantage of the simple Yes/No format of the referendum, Renzi has thus insisted on a dichotomous representation of the country: reformers vs conservatives; the Italy of the Yes and the Italy of the No. The government’s campaign itself has focused on a number of different elements. These include the simplification of the political system and the speeding up of Italy’s institutional machinery; the idea of returning to the citizens the right to choose their government directly (not indirectly, via party bargaining in parliament); the merits of a reduction in the number of MPs and, hence, reducing the cost of politics; and the abolition of “useless bodies” such as the National Council of Economy and Labour (CNEL).

However, the prospect of a pro-Renzi plebiscite is made doubtful by the progressive decline in support for the Florentine leader, his party and his government. From the 40.8% obtained in the 2014 European Elections, the Democratic Party is now down about ten percentage points in the polls, while the approval rating of the work of the government and its leader has shrunk from almost 70% to about 40%. Finally, the new rules – regarded by many as “made to measure” for the prime minister and his ambitions – would seem to open the door to success for the Five Star Movement (which polls indicate could be competitive in a run off). It has been notable that Renzi, who is accused of having politicised and personalised the referendum, has made no further mention, in recent months, of potential resignations.

From a systemic standpoint, the main effect of the reforms would undoubtedly be to strengthen the initiative of the executive, leading to a new balance of power in relations with the parliament. In the event of a Yes victory, indeed,

the government would stand on the confidence of the lower house alone, where, thanks to Italicum, the largest party and its leader could rely on a clear majority. Within an accelerated legislative process, moreover, government-proposed initiatives would have the possibility of a “fast track”, with an obligation of approval within 70 days.

Taken together, these changes would trigger a further, decisive step towards the presidentialisation of the system (which would remain parliamentary *de jure*, however). The Third Republic generated by the reform could therefore be seen as the continuation (and partial institutionalisation) of the route to a majoritarian (and *de facto* presidential) democracy, already inaugurated in the 1990s with the birth of the Second Republic.

In contrast, the failure of the referendum would prolong a period of uncertainty and instability that could mark a huge deviation from the trend of the last twenty years. Not surprisingly, even before the vote, debates over the electoral law have reopened, and there are those who support the possible return to a purely proportional system. If so, the nascent Third Republic might look a lot like the First Republic.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics. Featured image: Italy’s PM Matteo Renzi. Credits: SPO (CC BY-SA 2.0)

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