

# Italy's constitutional reform is ill conceived and can safely be rejected

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2016/09/27/italys-constitutional-reform-is-ill-conceived/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2016/09/27/italys-constitutional-reform-is-ill-conceived/)

27/09/2016

*Italy will hold a referendum on constitutional reform before the end of the year, with the country's prime minister, Matteo Renzi, indicating that he will resign if the referendum fails. [Gianfranco Pasquino](#) and [Andrea Capussela](#) provide a comprehensive assessment of the proposed reforms, arguing that they would be unlikely to meaningfully improve Italian governance and could reduce levels of political accountability.*



**Interested in other points of view? Check out [EUROPP's full coverage](#) of Italy's constitutional referendum.**



On 4 December, Italians will vote on a vast revision of the constitution, approved by parliament in the spring. Opinion polls, initially favourable, suggest that opposition to the reform is ['gaining momentum'](#). The prospect that the electorate might reject it has raised concerns, especially [among foreign observers](#). Worried about the potential consequences for the Eurozone, [Joseph Stiglitz](#) has even called on Italy to cancel the referendum.

These concerns are unfounded, for three main reasons. First, the constitutional reform is, at best, irrelevant to the principal causes of Italy's politico-economic problems. Second, coupled with a parallel revision of the electoral law, it might well deepen them. Third, a rejection of the reform will not lead to political instability, which is the source of those concerns, and might impart fresh impetus to the country's reform programme.

Yet it is right – and inevitable, in an interdependent world – to include also foreign voices in the debate, so that Italians may base their choice on a more informed and less parochial assessment. This is especially true in the light of the current travails of the EU. If the Union is to move towards greater political integration, as we hope, opening important national debates to the public opinions of other member states can assist the emergence of a European public sphere, eventually a European demos, which seems a necessary ingredient of any genuinely democratic

form of political union.

## **The core of the reform**

In the interests of full disclosure, we ought to state at the outset that we are both intending to vote against the reform (and one of us, Gianfranco Pasquino, is actively campaigning for a No vote). Also for this reason, we have eschewed all arguments concerning the justice, political morality, or procedural regularity of the reform. We limit ourselves to its presumable effects, a question which lends itself to more dispassionate discussion and is probably of greater interest to foreign observers.

The reform changes 46 of the 138 articles of the constitution, touching many and disparate matters (the text, in Italian, is available [here](#)). As a detailed analysis would take too long we focus on its core, which concerns the functioning and composition of the parliament. Indeed, the main claim of its supporters, echoed by foreign observers, is that the reform simplifies decision-making.

Italy's parliament is composed of two chambers, the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. They have equal powers. All laws must be approved by both, in exactly the same text, which may require multiple readings of the same bill. And the formation of the government likewise requires a vote of confidence in both chambers, each of which can independently provoke their downfall by withdrawing its confidence (that has occurred only twice since 1948, however). This 'bicameral' arrangement has been criticized for decades. The reform abandons it, by drastically reducing the Senate's powers, and transforms both its composition and the method for selecting its members.

## **The reduction of the Senate's powers in the formation of governments**

The constitutional reform deprives the Senate of the prerogative to vote on confidence in the government. The solution is clear-cut: henceforth, the executive will depend solely on the confidence of the Chamber of Deputies. According to the supporters of the reform, this will make governments more stable.

Taken in general terms, the argument is unconvincing. It is true that since World War II the average duration of Italy's executives has been very short, less than twelve months. Yet, until 2005 Italy had electoral laws that almost invariably produced similar distributions of seats in the two chambers: governments fell for *political* reasons, not because of the bicameral arrangement. Abandoning it does not per se guarantee longer-lasting executives, therefore, let alone more productive ones, which is the real problem and is, again, a *political* one, rooted in the traditional polarisation and fragmentation of Italy's party system and, more recently, in the decline of the parties' political cultures, internal democracy, openness to society, transparency, and credibility.

The argument is valid only with respect to the electoral law that was in force between 2005 and 2014, when the constitutional court declared it unconstitutional. Indeed, that law – imposed by then Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi just before elections he was certain to lose – was specifically aimed at preventing his opponents from gaining a majority of seats in both chambers. As such, writing an electoral law that produces similar distributions of seats in the two chambers would equally have solved the problem. Reducing the powers of the Senate, in other words, was not *necessary*, although it might of course have been advisable for other reasons discussed below.

## **The reduction of the Senate's powers in the legislative process**

The Senate's law-making powers are reduced, not abolished. The constitutional reform preserves the bicameral procedure – in which the two chambers have equal powers, as we said – for a few categories of important laws, such as those revising the constitution and the electoral system, those on the ratification of international treaties and the most important EU policies, and those concerning local and regional government. On all other matters, which comprise the bulk of legislative business, the Senate will be able to provide input, in various forms, but the Chamber of Deputies will have the last word. This, supporters argue, will make parliament better capable of responding timely to the country's needs.

The argument may seem plausible. But its implicit factual premise is simply wrong: despite the bicameral procedure, every year Italy's parliament makes more laws, on average, and makes them faster than Britain's, France's, Germany's, or the United States' respective parliaments (selected data are [here](#)). The productivity of parliament is not an issue in Italy. The country famously has too many laws, on the contrary, which change too frequently and are often difficult to interpret and coordinate.

A far more serious problem is the defective implementation of legislation, which is also due to the inefficiency of the public administration, the length of judicial proceedings, and the more general weakness of the rule of law. Reducing the powers of the Senate will have no bearing on any of these problems. It may well further increase the speed of law making, but this is not desirable in and of itself.

Besides addressing an irrelevant problem, the reform also gives rise to a rather complicated law-making process. It creates several distinct legislative procedures, besides the bicameral one, which differ on whether the Senate may or must participate in reviewing a bill, and on how and with what majority the Chamber may overcome a divergence with the Senate. The regulation is detailed, but not always clear. Controversies might arise as to which procedure is applicable in each case, which could lead to litigation before the constitutional court, legal uncertainty, and (paradoxically) delay.

The supporters of the reform downplay these fears. Yet the mere fact that there appears to be uncertainty even on exactly how many legislative procedures the reform has created – some say eight, some ten – suggests that the risk of controversies and litigation is not far-fetched. This may well remain within physiological levels, of course, but should the two chambers have different political majorities – which is quite possible, as we shall see – those in control of the Senate might use these legal uncertainties as a form of filibuster.

Caused by an ill-designed constitutional reform adopted in 2001, for instance, uncertainty on a similar question – whether certain matters fall in the jurisdiction of the national authorities or of regional government – has clogged the constitutional court. Should the same happen with this reform, the effect would be worse, for repeated litigation would inevitably drag the court into the political fights between government and opposition, which could dent its impartiality (which has thus far allowed the court to serve as an effective, respected, and sometimes crucial guarantor of civil liberties and the democratic process).

### **The new composition and method of election of the Senate**

Such complications would not have arisen had the Senate been abolished. This solution was eschewed because the reformers' intention was to transform it into a chamber representing regional and municipal authorities (even though, at the same time, the reform reduces the powers of the regions). They did not really achieve this objective, in our view, but we leave these questions aside and focus rather on the composition and method of election of the new Senate.

The Senate currently has 315 members, elected by direct popular vote, and a few life senators (former Presidents of the Republic, and personalities chosen by them). The new Senate will be composed of 100 members. Five will be chosen by the President of the Republic, which, incidentally, can hardly be reconciled with the Senate's desired transformation into a chamber representing regional interests. As to the other 95, the reform provides that each region will be represented by a number of senators proportional to its share in Italy's population, and that 74 of them will be members of the regions' legislative councils and 21 will be mayors.

These 95 senators will be elected by each region's council 'in conformity with the choices made by the voters' *and* 'in accordance with the votes and composition of each council'. The two criteria appear contradictory, and the reform in fact leaves it to a subsequent law (not yet drafted) to establish exactly how they should be combined. Whatever solution will be chosen, at any rate, the new senators will not be 'directly elected by the people' in the usual sense of the expression: because they must be chosen among each region's councillors and mayors, and because their selection will not depend solely on the voters' preferences.

Besides other objections that could be made to this choice, it entails a risk. Abandoning the direct popular vote weakens the political accountability of the Senate, and of the political authorities taken as a whole, in circumstances in which trust in them is already very low. In the latest [Eurobarometer](#) survey, only 17 and 16 per cent of the population has confidence in the parliament and the government, compared to EU-28 averages, for both institutions, of 31 per cent. According to a respected [Italian research centre](#) these percentages are even lower, and only 5 per cent of Italians trusts political parties. Should the new Senate not be perceived as well functioning, the gap that already separates the political institutions from their constituents would further widen.

In a political climate marked by vocal populism, widespread unemployment, and economic stagnation, the risk is considerable. It appears reckless to run it, because the only justification offered for the choice of abandoning the direct popular vote – and the most widely advertised rationale for the whole reform – is that the new senators will not receive a salary (they already receive one as councillors and mayors). This is a sop to populist calls for ‘reducing the cost of politics’, which could easily backfire.

There are three specific reasons for this risk, besides the more general one indicated above. First, these 95 senators will be part-time ones, as they will serve also as councillors or mayors, which has raised well-founded perplexities. Second, regional councillors are perhaps the least trusted segment of Italy’s political class, and tend to be perceived as more corrupt and less competent than national politicians. Third, they will enjoy parliamentary immunity, which was a wholly unnecessary and very unpopular choice. Should one of them invoke this immunity in a blatant corruption case, in the eyes of public opinion the whole edifice of the reform might crumble.

### **Some preliminary conclusions**

To sum up, the core of the reform is unnecessary, is irrelevant to Italy’s main problems, and risks lowering the nation’s confidence in the political institutions and raising popular discontent.

As to the rest of the reform, some revisions are certainly useful, such as the abolition of an unnecessary advisory body called CNEL (National Council of Economy and Labour). In other cases, reasonable people may disagree. The reduction of the regions’ powers might be excessive, for instance, and will not necessarily bring greater fiscal responsibility, which often is the main problem. The changes to the regulation of popular referendums are equally ambivalent, for they make it more difficult to call them (more signatures are needed), but lower the quorum for the validity of the result, which caused many referendums to [fail](#). The different legislative procedures established by the reform may entail conflicts between the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate, as we said, and lead to litigation before the Constitutional Court.

To assess it properly, however, the reform must be viewed together with the new law, adopted in 2015, that determines how the henceforth dominant Chamber of Deputies will be elected. The two must be viewed together because, as we said, they were presented by the governing majority as two parts of one and the same package of institutional reforms, as well as because the new electoral law does not apply to the Senate. Should the voters reject the constitutional reform, therefore, they would de facto force a revision of this law too.

### **The electoral law that accompanies the constitutional reform**

The new electoral law is very idiosyncratic and quite complicated. It uses a proportional-representation system, in short, but corrects it by awarding a bonus of seats to the party list that obtains more votes. The bonus is awarded either right away, if the winning list receives more than 40 per cent of the votes cast, or after a (national) run-off vote between the two most voted lists.

The bonus is not a fixed quantity of seats, but grants to the winning list 340 seats, almost 55 per cent of the Chamber. In Italy’s republican history no party has ever come close to 50 per cent of the popular vote, and only on two occasions have they exceeded the 40 per cent threshold in national elections (1948 and 1953). This bonus will therefore transform the largest electoral minority into a parliamentary majority. In the current situation, moreover, the

bonus is likely to be very large.

Before we explain why, it may be useful to point out that no electoral system in the world uses a mechanism of this kind. Only Greece's law awards a bonus, but under more restrictive conditions. The closest precedent is the (unconstitutional) law imposed by Berlusconi in 2005: it contemplated exactly the same bonus, but no run-off vote.

The current set-up of Italian politics is roughly tri-polar, according to the results of the most recent elections and the opinion polls of the last year or so. The PD and the Five Star Movement both hover between 27 and 32 per cent. The centre-right, which used to be relatively united under Berlusconi, is split into three or four parties, which together could represent another 30 per cent. They seem inclined to re-group, but the largest formation (the Northern League: around 10 per cent) might choose to compete alone.

The rest of the political spectrum is occupied by much smaller formations. In this setting, the new electoral law is likely to produce the following results. The PD, the Five Star Movement, and a probable centre-right grouping (with or without the Northern League) will compete to participate in the run-off. None will gain much more than 30 per cent of the vote. The winner of the run-off will obtain 55 per cent of the seats, nearly doubling its parliamentary representation. The other lists, representing some 70 per cent of the voters, will share the remaining 45 per cent.

Once the bonus is assigned, the Chamber's 630 seats are allocated through a combination of the closed-list system and the open-list one. The law divides Italy into 100 constituencies, each of which will elect six and sometimes seven deputies. In each constituency, the first candidate of each of the lists that has obtained enough votes will automatically win a seat: in a six-seat constituency, therefore, the automatically elected deputies are often likely to be four (the first candidate of the winning list, and the first candidates of three other lists).

If a list obtains more than one seat, the second, third, and sometimes fourth seat are allocated according to the preferences expressed by voters (they can indicate one or two names: in the latter case, admirably, the law requires voters to choose candidates of different gender): de facto, this will apply only to the winning list, which will always win three seats in each constituency, and sometimes four. So, a majority of the Chamber's deputies – probably around 60 per cent (up to 66, if the Northern League runs alone and becomes a fourth large list) – will be directly chosen by the political parties. Only a minority will be truly chosen by voters.

Both the bonus and this method for selecting deputies visibly distort parliamentary representation. For these and other reasons, this law too has been challenged before the constitutional court (which is expected to issue its decision shortly after the referendum), and many voices have called on parliament to revise it. In mid-September, this pressure led the same majority that has elaborated this law to pass a parliamentary motion declaring its readiness to [revisit](#) it. Yet how, when, and whether this law will actually be amended remains unclear.

### **The combined effects: unbalanced distribution of power and a loss of flexibility**

Viewed together, the constitutional reform and the existing electoral law will grant to the winning list an impregnable majority in the dominant chamber, which will typically guarantee legislature-long (five-year) governments. Indeed, the overall aim of this package of institutional reforms was to ensure stability of government and strengthen the executive's capacity to implement a programme for the full duration of the parliamentary term.

The aim is commendable, of course, but the manner in which the two reforms pursue it has serious drawbacks. The effect on the stability of the executive is akin to that assured by the US-style of presidential government and by the Westminster-style parliamentary form of government. Compared to both, however, the idiosyncratic model created by Italy's reforms appears markedly suboptimal.

Compared to the Westminster model, in the Italian one the parliamentary majority will not be the result of hundreds of first-past-the-post electoral competitions, but of one single nation-wide run-off vote, dominated by the (officially declared) candidates to the post of prime minister. Such an electoral system, much closer to the presidential system, lacks the flexibility of the Westminster model, therefore, which allows prime ministers to be replaced if between

elections they lose the confidence of the nation. Indeed, having to face a first-past-the-post election in single-member constituencies, MPs tend to have a strong incentive to enforce the political accountability of – and, in extremity, turn against – a prime minister and party leader who proves inadequate or strays too far from the electoral manifesto.

In the Italian model, the prime minister will be far harder to replace, and therefore less politically accountable, for two obvious reasons. First, because he or she will have won that office in what is, in effect, a direct popular vote on the prime ministerial candidates (the national run-off). Second, because as party leader he or she controls the formation of the party list at the next election, and can therefore determine, or at least heavily influence, the re-election prospects of the party's deputies (especially if they have reason to fear losing the run-off vote). The parliamentary majority and the governing party are therefore unlikely to be able to hold their leader to account.

Compared to the presidential system, conversely, the Italian model lacks its tight separation between legislative and executive power. Unlike in the 'divided government' model exemplified by the United States, in fact, Italy's reforms will generate a very tight nexus between the executive and the parliamentary majority supporting it (which is typical of the Westminster model), because both will be dominated by the same political party and by its leader.

It is true that other checks and balances will remain, such as an independent judiciary and the Constitutional Court (incidentally, we disagree with the argument that these reforms expose Italy to the risk of an authoritarian turn). Yet the reciprocal autonomy of the legislative and executive power is not just a critical component of the checks-and-balances system, to counterbalance the executive's dominance and hold it politically accountable, but also a necessary condition for a healthy dialectic to develop between the two powers, which is generally viewed as favouring good and responsive government.

The Italian model, in short, combines the worst of both worlds. It produces a legislature-long mandate to rule, shorn of any real political constraint, and grants it to one person, in effect, the leader of the winning party. This ensures neither the flexibility of the Westminster model, nor the dialectic of the US one. Put simply, between elections the Italian model allows for only a very weak degree of political accountability.

Philosopher kings aside, lower political accountability is generally associated with less responsive government. According to the World Bank's [Worldwide Governance Indicators](#) and a wealth of anecdotal evidence, political accountability is already low in Italy, compared to most mature democracies. It does not seem advisable to lower it further.

### **The combined effects: unpredictability and the further personalisation of politics**

That mandate will be granted through an electoral system that, in Italy's current tri-polar setting, is very unpredictable. The selection of who will govern the country for five years will be up to slightly more than a handful of votes. Such unpredictability is generally undesirable. Considering the probable size of the majority bonus (about 25 per cent of the seats), it could also be destabilising.

It is true that in all single-member constituency systems – the first-past-the-post one and the French two-round model – each electoral competition can equally turn on very few votes. And it is also true that, at the national level, they can produce rather large distortions relative to the nation's political preferences. Yet having five or six hundred separate competitive elections is radically different from having one nation-wide Russian roulette. This will harm the legitimacy of the election results and potentially produce other undesirable consequences (discussed in the next section).

In electoral systems relying on single-member constituencies, moreover, the quality of candidates counts, as well as their direct accountability to their constituents and the political parties' mobilisation and grassroots capacity (all factors that attenuate and compensate the distortion). In the Italian model, conversely, the national run-off will be determined more by the personal qualities of the prime ministerial candidates and by the stance of the mass media

(which are not particularly independent in Italy: [Freedom House](#) judges them as only 'partly free', unlike those of all other EU member states bar Croatia). This will further increase the already acute personalisation and mediatisation of politics, which are generally not recipes for good government.

### **The combined effects: The Italian context**

This model, finally, must be set against the context we outlined earlier, that is, the very low trust that political parties and political authorities elicit among Italy's electorate. And it must be viewed together with the choice of abandoning the direct popular election of the Senate.

In sum, these institutional reforms reveal an essentially defensive strategy. Instead of opening itself to greater accountability, to regain the nation's confidence, Italy's political class seems to have opted for retrenching inside the institutions, to insulate itself from the pressures and demands of society: it chose to distort the nation's electoral preferences, so as to assure itself the protection of a safe majority, and now it wants to close one of the main windows through which the voters' voice can reach it, namely the election of the Senate.

With these reforms, the parliament might increasingly resemble a fortress, whose gates open only once in five years. In effect, the governing parties are proposing this to the electorate: 'Give one of us the mandate to rule for five years, during which a few people will take all main decisions, and you will evaluate the results.' Results, however, that will be assessed in another highly personalised and mediatised electoral campaign, which will lead to yet another five-year mandate.

The declared aim of this strategy is well meaning, of course, and we accept it as genuine. But the strategy is retrograde and unlikely to work. It is likely neither to regain the confidence of the nation, for trust tends to go together with accountability, nor to deliver better and more responsive government, which benefits from exposure to society's pressures and ideas.

By reason of the distortion produced by the majority bonus, moreover, the country will be ruled by a party that represents a rather small minority, that is, some 30 per cent of the 75 per cent of Italian voters that nowadays go to the polls. The rest of the electorate may well come to the view that this artificial parliamentary majority is illegitimate, with damaging consequences.

It is well established that to govern a country – especially a large and complex one, whose economy essentially stopped growing two decades ago – an arithmetical majority in parliament is not sufficient. Without a measure of solid consensus in the electorate, governments tend to face serious difficulties in implementing their programmes and persuading society to respond positively to the reforms they enact.

In fact, this strategy is predicated on the assumption that Italy's future governments will gain the consensus they need through their good deeds. Neither recent Italian history nor the broader European context suggest much optimism, however, particularly when the forces of populism and discontent are likely to remain strong in the medium term. Should the governments produced by these reforms disappoint, the popular backlash could be serious.

### **Conclusions, on both reforms**

Drawing on all of these elements, we can present a cost-benefit analysis with regard to the proposed reforms. The only real benefit is that future governments are likely to last for five years. For the rest, as we saw, the core of the constitutional reform is neither necessary nor useful. Yet the capacity of future governments to use their mandate effectively depends on variables other than those controlled by the two reforms, and it is precisely in these variables that we have identified those risks. So the benefit is elusive, and might well turn into a cost.

The main cost of the reforms is that the political accountability of these governments will be even lower than it is today. This cost is far less elusive, because it is uncertain only in the measure of its effects, for we know that lower

accountability typically leads to less responsive government. Less responsive government could lead to lower trust, in turn, and therefore also diminished capacity to govern, in a potential self-reinforcing circle. Hence the risks mentioned above.

Should they materialise, the card of overcoming the crisis of confidence through further institutional reforms would largely have been spoiled. For a political class cannot spend years telling its electorate that reforming the institutions will solve the country's problems, and expect to be believed when, one major reform having failed, a second one is proposed.

So, ratifying this reform entails also an opportunity cost. Its supporters use a similar argument, in the opposite sense: they argue that if the referendum fails, it will for long be impossible to reform the institutions. This prediction is unfounded (as we explain in the next section). In contrast, our version of the opportunity-cost argument has a rather obvious basis: if the reform is ratified but does not work, the discredit will extend to the very idea of making institutional reforms.

It follows that before this reform is put to the test it ought to be compared with the reasonably available alternatives. At least four well-tested superior models exist, which ensure comparatively stable and accountable government. These are the US and the Westminster models, already mentioned, and the French and German ones (the latter two seem better suited to Italy's party system, which is unlikely to become bipolar, and the German model seems also relatively easy to adopt). So all things considered, it would seem imprudent for Italians to ratify these reforms.

### **The short-term risks: why rejecting the reforms will not lead to instability**

There is a second argument often made for the reforms, which turns on the immediate consequences of a negative vote. The basis for this reasoning is the fact that as soon as the referendum was called, Matteo Renzi [staked](#) his government's survival and his own political career on it. This has led to fears that should Renzi lose the vote and resign, early elections might have to be called and the Five Star Movement could win them. The Movement has no governmental experience and has made a case for a referendum on the euro. Pressure on Italy's huge debt could rise, therefore, threatening the survival of both the euro and the EU.

The sequence may look plausible, but the trigger is entirely avoidable. Renzi effectively sought to turn the referendum into a plebiscite on himself. This, he has belatedly [recognised](#), was inappropriate. More recently, he has adamantly refused to link the government's survival to the outcome of the vote. And although a popular rejection of the reform would nonetheless be a political defeat for Renzi and his government, they would have no political or constitutional obligation to resign.

Should they do so, a transition phase would follow, to which Italy's institutions, public opinion, and foreign partners are well accustomed because the country has had on average one such crisis per year since World War II. The President of the Republic would appoint a fresh prime minister, and the institutional duty of all players – including Renzi, as outgoing premier and leader of the PD – would be to favour the rapid formation of the new executive and an orderly succession. Assuming a minimum degree of rationality in the relevant players, without which that sequence would have already started, there will be no prolonged political instability but just a short transition phase.

### **What next after a negative vote? Are ambitious reforms possible?**

These institutional reforms are a missed opportunity. But they are not the last opportunity, as their supporters assert. They are ill conceived because they are the product of an ideological, acrimonious, and constrained parliamentary debate, often distant from the most plausible analyses of Italy's problems. Yet the debate seems to have strengthened the already wide consensus that Italy's institutions ought to be reformed. The rejection of these reforms would hardly amount to a defeat of the reformist ideas, therefore.

The process of designing fresh, better constitutional and electoral reforms could begin in earnest, and would not start from scratch. Outside of parliament, in fact, the debate has stimulated valuable analyses of Italy's institutional



problems and their possible solutions. And the referendum campaign is exposing all players – politicians, commentators, public opinion – to a wealth of arguments, which will remain available after the vote. The parliamentary process for designing better reforms could proceed rapidly, therefore, and is likely to be sustained by more reasoned and inclusive debate – because parliament will have a far stronger incentive to listen to public opinion – and therefore also wider consensus.

Whether the current government remains in office or not, moreover, a negative vote may well also provide impetus to Italy's programme of structural reforms, as a response to the parliamentary majority's defeat. For instance, one reason why corruption is so [widespread](#) in Italy is that it is rarely punished, even when it is detected. And the main reason for impunity, as several analyses attest, is the disproportionately short time limit within which a final conviction must be issued: when the time limit is passed, the crime is no longer punishable.

This problem is one legacy of a Berlusconi government's law of the early 2000s, which halved the previously applicable time limit without any plausible justification. To return to the arguments discussed above, this measure and parliament's decade-long failure to reverse it, despite repeated pledges to do so, are both clear signs of low political accountability.

In 2013, when the current legislature began, members of the PD proposed a bill that extends the time limit considerably. The bill was endorsed by the PD-led coalition government, but has proceeded very slowly. Not by reason of the bicameral procedure, but due to a lack of political will. The bill is opposed by a junior partner of the governing coalition, in fact, a splinter of Berlusconi's erstwhile centre-right party. The government has also employed the confidence vote to have the new electoral law passed in the text it desired, which was highly unusual and very controversial. Perplexingly, however, neither the government nor the PD have spent much political capital on this bill.

Yet it is hard to imagine an easier, more useful, and more popular 'structural' reform than this one, which removes a wholly unjustified guarantee of impunity for corruption with a stroke of the pen. This would be an apt response to a negative (or, indeed, a positive) vote in the referendum, and create momentum and popular goodwill for further structural reforms and better institutional ones. There will be life, even a better life, not a deluge, after the defeat of these reforms.

*Please read our comments policy before commenting.*

*Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics. Featured image: Sala del Tricolore, Reggio Emilia, Italy. Credits: [Sailko](#) CC BY 2.5.*

Shortened URL for this post: <http://bit.ly/2doJTYC>

---

## About the authors

**Gianfranco Pasquino** – *University of Bologna*

Gianfranco Pasquino is Emeritus Professor of political science at the University of Bologna and member of the Accademia dei Lincei. He has published a number of books on Italian politics and is co-editor of the [Oxford Handbook of Italian Politics](#). He tweets [@GP\\_ArieteRosso](#)



**Andrea Lorenzo Capussela**

Andrea Lorenzo Capussela is writing a book on the political economy of Italy's decline for Oxford University Press, and is the author of a book on the political economy of the international intervention in Kosovo (*State-Building in Kosovo: Democracy, EU Interests and US Influence in the Balkans*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2015). He tweets [@AndreaCapussela](#)

