

Constitutional and electoral reforms in Italy: will this time be different?



Bruegel, 20 November 2015 at 12:00pm

Participants:

Massimo Bordignon, Visiting Fellow, Bruegel

Roberto D'Alimonte, Professor of Political Science, Luiss-Guido Carli University

Chair: **Viktoria Dendrinou**, Reporter, The Wall Street Journal

Notes:

After a short introduction of the topic by **Victoria Dendrinou** a first presentation was made by **Roberto D'Alimonte**. He presented and discussed the recent constitutional and electoral reforms in Italy. **Massimo Bordignon** then assessed what these reforms could mean for Italy and Europe, and whether this time will be different from previous attempts to transform the Italian electoral system.

Roberto D'Alimonte highlighted the main features of the reforms: the new Italian electoral system was approved in May 2015, and it will partially enter into force in July 2016, before full implementation in late 2016, so long as Prime Minister Matteo Renzi gains full legitimacy from the upcoming referendum.

The main feature of the electoral and constitutional reforms is to break the current perfect bicameralism in the parliament, replacing the present proportional system in the Chamber of Deputies, but not in the Senate. The latter will become a second chamber with limited powers and no authority to consider motions of confidence.

The new electoral system, nicknamed Italicum, will be majority-assuring. A seat bonus guarantees an absolute majority to a list that takes at least 40% of the votes, leaving 278 (out of 618) seats to share among the losers. It will also be "minority friendly", as a sizable proportion of the seats is allocated to minorities, provided that they obtain more than 3% of votes. The system represents a balance between the objective of political stability and representation of minority. It is similar to the system introduced at regional and local levels in 1993, therefore the main question is whether it can also work at the national level.

Massimo Bordignon pointed out the main problems of the Italian political system: the short average duration of Italian governments, resulting in a lack of stability, and the fragmentation of the political system, characterised by a high number of small parties with great influence in policy decisions. He also highlighted that several previous reform attempts had turned out to be unsuccessful.

The Italicum seems to be different thanks to its seat bonus mechanism and for the apparently effective overcoming of perfect bicameralism. Both changes would make the government more stable and homogeneous. He also supported his ideas and findings with empirical evidence from through two earlier studies.

The conclusion is that this transformation of electoral system offers the features needed to positively impact the Italian and European context. Governments should be more “centrist” and faster to make and implement policy decisions. This would make Italy a more reliable partner for Europe.

However, some uncertainty on the outcome still remains. The political situation is far from being settled (e.g. there is a referendum on the reforms in 2016), and many details still have to be approved and implemented. We should not forget that Italy already has a history of failed attempts at political reform.

D’Alimonte and the participants in the audience discussion seemed to agree on this point.

Event notes by Elena Vaccarino, Research Assistant