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The Long Road to the Italian National Elections

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On April 9-10 Italian voters will go to the polls to elect their national parliament. It will be a critical election for two reasons. First, if Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and his coalition *Casa delle Liberta'* get a second mandate, they will attempt to complete their very controversial blueprint for reforming the judiciary, revising the Constitution and implementing major changes in the tax system. Second, the victory of Berlusconi and his coalition will also mean that they will have enough votes to elect the new President of the Republic. The 1999 election of the outgoing President, eighty-six year-old Carlo Azeglio Ciampi was supported by Berlusconi, but since then Ciampi has often clashed with the Centre-Right government. Several important bills approved by the *Casa delle Liberta'* have been returned by the President to Parliament as unconstitutional. The President has also tried—to no avail—to influence the drafting of important laws concerning the conflicts of interests between Berlusconi's business empire and his political role and regulation of the mass media system. While Berlusconi claims to be in accord with the President, the Prime Minister has regularly persisted in the promoting the laws in question with only minor cosmetic adjustments. No doubt, however, that he has resented the not-so-veiled criticisms coming from the Presidency. Hence, the election of the next President will also be a significant event in the Italian electoral season.

The Long Government

Not since the premiership of Alcide de Gasperi (1948-1953) has a Prime Minister remained in office for an entire parliamentary term. Though Berlusconi was obliged by his own coalition partners to go through a painful governmental crisis, he has the distinction of having led the longest lasting postwar Italian government (June 2001-April 2005, over 1400 days—a second Berlusconi government has been in place since April 2005).

The comparison with the 1996-2001 Centre-Left experience is striking. The Centre-Left had promised the voters "one Prime minister, one government, one parliamentary majority"—that is absolute governmental stability. However, by the time of the 2001 elections, there had been three Prime Ministers and four governments: Romano Prodi (1996-1998); Massimo D'Alema (October 1998-December 1999); Massimo D'Alema again (December 1999-April 2000); and Giuliano Amato (April 2000-May 2001). The Centre-Left parliamentary majority had been significantly redefined with the self-exclusion of *Partito della Rifondazione Comunista*, after it supported a

vote of no confidence against Romano Prodi and the inclusion of about sixty parliamentarians that previously belonged to Centre-Right parties. Finally, in the 2001 election, the Centre-Left did not put forth the incumbent, Giuliano Amato, as a candidate for Prime Minister. At the insistence of the *Margherita* party (and Prodi's supporters), the coalition backed the candidacy of Francesco Rutelli, the Mayor of Rome.

Predictably, Rutelli lost. But the 2001 results were nonetheless generally hailed as a major event in Italian politics. For the first time since 1876 (when the Historical Left defeated the Historical Right after 15 years in office) the Italian political system experienced a peaceful alternation between coalitions. Led by Berlusconi, the Centre-Right replaced the, by now leaderless, Centre-Left.

Indeed, the Centre-Left was left adrift by its electoral defeat. Given his performance in the election campaign, the Center-Left's defeated candidate was unable to fill the role of official leader of the opposition. So the Centre-Left remained without a visible leader for several years. Once the most powerful politician within the main Center-Left party, the Democrats of the Left, and perhaps the most powerful politician in Italy, D'Alema had been tainted by his ineffective stint in government. The party secretary of the Democrats of the Left, Walter Veltroni, was elected to the office of Mayor of Rome, in effect stepping off the national stage. In November 2001, thanks to D'Alema's decisive support, Piero Fassino became party secretary of the Democrats of the Left. But the only Center-Left politician who had won a national election and the party's real leader, Romano Prodi, was absent from Italian politics, serving as President of the European Commission.

The right, on the other hand, prospered in the 2001 election. Italian electoral law at the time provided that three-fourths of the parliamentarians were elected by plurality from single-member constituencies ("first-past-the-post"), one-fourth by a proportional ("party-list") system. The heavy weight given to plurality voting turned a fairly slight lead in the popular vote for Berlusconi's *Casa delle Liberta'* coalition into a conspicuously large parliamentary majority. His coalition could count on 366 votes versus 252 for the opposition in the House of Deputies and 177 versus 128 in the Senate. Never in the history of the Italian Republic had a government enjoyed such a comfortable parliamentary majority.

Berlusconi was perfectly placed to implement his entire program and to completely reform, as he had promised, the Italian socio-political and economic system. At the end of his 2001 electoral campaign, with a spectacular *coup de théâtre* on Italy's most popular television talk show, Berlusconi signed the "Contract with the Italians" (modeled on Newt Gingrich's "Contract with America"). And he pledged to not run for re-election if he had not realized at least four out of the five points of the Contract.

The Government's Results

There are essentially no independent think tanks in Italy. Even the idea of identifying sound criteria for evaluating what a government has done, not done, or done badly, seems to be largely alien to the Italian political culture, to Italian media and, with very few exceptions, to Italian intellectuals. As a consequence, any assessment of the Berlusconi government's successes and failures has so far remained on the sidelines of the election campaign. Much to its credit, the

most important financial daily, *Il Sole 24 Ore,* (incidentally, owned by Confindustria, the National Association of Entrepreneurs) published a series of investigative reports concerning the implementation of the "Contract." In brief, the *crime rate* has not been reduced; *taxes* have only been trimmed with most of the benefits going to the wealthiest members of society; there has been a significant increase in the monthly *retirement allowance* for many, though by no means all, of the most disadvantaged retirees; no more than one fourth of the promised public works have been launched; but many *new jobs* have been created and the unemployment rate has gone down.

Incumbents are usually better placed than the challengers because they can point to their performance while the challengers must ask the voters to believe their promises. However, the challenge being mounted by the centre-left has been additionally complicated by the differences among its many parties on several important issues: the Iraq War, taxation, Civil Unions, Public Works, the relationship between Church and State, and education. The 281-page manifesto of the Center-Left prepared by Romano Prodi's own think tank has made things even more difficult, exacerbating intra-alliance controversies.

While it is true that the large majority of Italian voters rarely make up their minds by evaluating performances and promises, it is also true that in an election as close as the 2006 one, the small percentage of undecided voters that look at the programs and search for numbers that do add up, may decisively affect the outcome. At the time of this writing and, in fact, for several months, the Centre-Left has been leading by four or five points in the polls. This advantage accurately captures the situation because one of the last acts of Berlusconi's coalition was to reform the electoral law to make such polls more relevant. In order to limit the dimensions of the likely victory of the Centre-Left and, at the same time, to contain the size of the defeat of the Centre-Right, Berlusconi and his allies, above all the former Christian Democrats, drafted and approved a proportional electoral law. The bipolar competition between coalitions will survive because the law attributes a significant majority bonus to the coalition winning more votes. But the limited amount of power the voters had acquired to choose their parliamentary representatives through single-member constituencies is definitively gone.

Partitocrazia ("rule by the parties") has fully returned because the establishment of a rank order for candidates in large constituencies will practically determine who will be elected. Party leaders have happily used their newly reacquired power to establish the preeminence of their preferred candidates. The consequence will be that those who are elected as parliamentarians will feel no obligation to be accountable to the voters. Their loyalty will go to the party leaders who have and retain the power to re-select or deselect them.

The controversy over the rules of the game and over the reform of the institutions and the Constitution clearly indicates that the Italian political and institutional transition is by no means over. The centre-left is itself very divided on the solutions to offer to the many institutional problems still affecting Italy: the functions and powers of a symmetric bicameralism that must be reformed; the role and powers of the Prime Minister vis-à-vis Parliament and the President of the Republic; and the relationship between the central government and the periphery, so-called "devolution." The next parliamentary session is bound to witness several institutional clashes,

both within the Center-Left and across the coalitions. Italy's institutional transition will not come to an end.

So what?

The 2006 election is particularly important because two different views of the Italian political, economic, and constitutional system are being offered to the voters. On the whole, the Centre-Right and, especially Berlusconi, have been making the case for less politics and a smaller State as well as fewer taxes and greater reliance on civil associations. They have also approved a major constitutional reform providing for devolution and an increase in the powers of the Prime Minister. On the whole, in the socio-economic field, their ambitions have not been matched with significant achievements. In this sense, Berlusconi is neither Margaret Thatcher nor Ronald Reagan.

Made up of professional politicians, the Centre-Left believes that the State is a fundamental instrument to be used to contain and, possibly, to reduce the inequalities produced by the market (and by globalization). Centre-left leaders, probably faithfully representing the preferences of their voters, are "constitutional" conservatives. They are certainly more pro-European Union than the Euro-skeptic Berlusconi, although within his coalition one finds both pro-EU figures, such as the former Christian Democrats and Gianfranco Fini, the leader of National Alliance, and opponents of the EU, such as the Northern League. The centre-left will also have more problems in (re)shaping its relationship with the United States.

In the end, what is really peculiar about the 2006 Italian election is not that the two competing coalitions are more or less the same as those of 2001, but that their leaders are the same as in 1996. Ten years after the election won by Prodi's Olive Tree coalition (largely because at the time the Northern League ran alone), two men in their late sixties vie for the leadership of Italy. Nowhere else in democratic Europe has the political environment been so incapable of producing change among political elites. Neither leader, however, for separate reasons, represents the best hope for the renewal of Italy.