BROOKINGS
Center on the United States and Europe

US-EUROPE ANALYSIS SERIES Spring 2008

TOWARD A FULL-FLEDGED DEMOCRACY:
Why progressives should be happy about the Italian election results

Federiga Bindi

So Silvio Berlusconi won again. He not only won, he won with an overwhelming majority. Most opinion polls were expecting a hung parliament with a divided majority, but apparently many people who were afraid to express their support for Berlusconi voted for him anyway. The fourth Berlusconi government is thus scheduled to be sworn into office in early May, much to the delight of the international press who will be able once again to report on his highly entertaining gaffes, both past and future.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: *Federiga Bindi is a Visiting Fellow at the Center on the United States and Europe and Jean Monnet Chair at the University of Rome Tor Vergata.*

Yet, these elections deserve greater attention, because they could have a lasting impact on Italy's future. They could in fact close the cycle that opened with the end of the Cold War, concluding Italy's transformation into a full-fledged, functioning democracy. However, as was the case in the early 1990s when many had similar hopes for the country, the new government must act quickly and in accordance with the people's desire for change. Silvio Berlusconi, now 71, has a unique opportunity to fulfill his proclaimed dream of reforming the country. He has nothing to lose as he cannot expect -- if only because of his age -- to run again for Prime Minister. If he were to achieve the goal of changing Italy, he could then try for the Presidency of the Republic, a well-known desire of his.

The Italian party system has been a peculiar case among Western democracies. As Joseph Di Palma and Joe LaPalombara's classic arguments predicted, the fragmented party system has led to unstable governments. Between 1948 and the early 1990s, Italy had over 50 cabinets, supported for most of the post-war period by four- to five-party coalitions including the Christian Democrats, Liberals, Republicans, Social Democrats and Socialists. During this time, the sizable Communist party was prevented from entering the government because of the geopolitics of the Cold War and the resulting firm opposition to communist participation from the United States.

That was first challenged in the early 1990s. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Communist Party transformed itself into the Democratic Party of the Left. The end of the "communist threat" allowed for new political arrangements and, eventually, for a redistribution of power. Meanwhile, a huge network of corruption came to light. The investigations of rampant bribery known as *Tangentopoli* literally destroyed the old party system, leading to the creation of a new one. The March 1994 elections witnessed the debut of today's main political actors. On the center-right, Silvio Berlusconi, the Northern separatist Umberto Bossi, the conservative Gianfranco Fini and the post-Christian Democrat Pierferdinando Casini emerged as leaders. On the center-left, the former Christian Democrat Romano Prodi and his deputy, the post-communist Walter Veltroni came to the fore. Antonio Di Pietro, today Veltroni's only ally, was then the leading investigating judge in the *Tangentopoli* case.

Slowly, however, the Italian political system started to revert to its previous form. The political parties regained momentum and in particular the smaller ones gradually acquired a veto power that was

completely disproportionate to their votes in parliament.

During the same period, the country has been unable to shake off the economic crises of the 1990s, which became particularly acute due to the government's failure to effectively manage the introduction of the Euro. The appearance of the new currency was accompanied by sharp price increases and the middle class suffered a dramatic loss in buying power. According to the financial paper *Il Sole 24 Ore,* in the last two years almost 70% of the population either borrowed money or used their savings to make it to the end of the month. With an estimated growth rate of 0.6%, the country faces a gloomy future.

Last week's elections, however, may have created a new window of opportunity. Credit must be given to the new Democratic Party's leader Walter Veltroni, for his decision to run his campaign without allying his party with the small leftist parties. This initiative toward disaggregation was to a certain extent mirrored on the right. During the electoral campaign, both Veltroni and Berlusconi repeatedly appealed to the electorate to cast a "useful vote."

The Italian people overwhelmingly responded to the call, thereby simplifying the existing political system. It is an important call for change that must not go unacknowledged. In a country that, historically, is quite fragmented and polarized, the voters' choice to back away from the smaller parties is a remarkable one. The first immediate result was the winnowing of the number of parties in the parliament to six – 35 had contested the elections but most failed to pass the 4% popular vote threshold requirement. The parties in parliament include the progressive *Democratic Party* and its ally *Italia dei Valori*; the centrist *Union of Christian Democrats*; the centre-right *Freedom Party* and its allies *Northern League* and *Autonomy Movement*. Many long-serving deputies and senators will soon be out of office.

Now, to take advantage of this window of opportunity, action must be taken soon. Both the governing coalition and the opposition should agree on a number of important changes.

First, following a Constitutional Court decision, a referendum modifying the electoral law is due within a year, should the parliament fail to approve a new law. The referendum, however, does not solve the main problem with the current law--the fact that voters do not get to choose their own MPs, only the political party. It is thus the party leaders who *de facto* appoint MPs by choosing the candidates' position on the party lists. This system alienates the Italian population from the political system and from their leaders and should be promptly corrected.

The parliament's rules of procedure must also be changed in order to prevent the proliferation of new political parties. Such a change is called for in the Democratic Party's manifesto, and it should be embraced by the governing coalition. Parties that did not run independently in the election should not be allowed to form their own groupings in parliament. Otherwise, we will soon witness a new wave of political fragmentation, with small groups of deputies forming their own political groups with the aim of getting better funding and more posts. Similarly, those MPs who change party while in office - a recurrent event in Italian politics - should automatically lose their seats in parliament.

The possibility of accumulating different elected posts, for example local and national posts, should also be abolished. The losing parties must also resist the desire to bring back into politics those who were not elected. For example, the opposition must not be tempted to negotiate with the Government a number of positions for those who lost their seats (such as in the governing board of national agencies or quasi-state enterprises) in exchange for support for reforms.

A major cultural change is needed here. Italians that voted for the losing coalition must come to terms with the fact that their preferred party will not be in power until at least the next election. Those who win should govern for the whole legislature and then have the voters decide on their performance. The losers should stay in constructive opposition and build up their party for the next run. Likewise, those who lost their seats should do something else--Italian politicians should not expect to stay in politics for their entire life. It would also be advisable to reduce parliamentarians' wages and pensions, which are by far the highest in the world, as well as their numerous privileges. All these benefits only further deepen the unpopularity of politics.

In one year, there will be new elections in Italy--as elsewhere in the EU--for the European Parliament. According to political scientist Simon Hix, voters usually treat these elections as mid-term elections – an opportunity to judge the work of their national governments, rather than to vote on European issues. In Italy, such a vote will be critical one. The *desapparecidos* will try to get back into the political scene. If the current window of opportunity is used wisely, Italians will likely vote once again for the bigger parties. The historic transition will thus be concluded. If this does not happen and rapid proliferation of parties resumes, the remark of Prince Fabrizio di Salina's in *The Leopard* will once again apply to Italy: "everything must change here so that everything will remain the same".

Brookings Institution

Center on the United States and Europe

1775 Massachusetts Ave NW
Washington, DC 20036

www.brookings.edu