

ELECTION BRIEFING No.41

THE ITALIAN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION OF APRIL 2008

Simona Guerra
JOMEC, Cardiff University
guerras@Cardiff.ac.uk

Emanuele Massetti
Department of Politics and Contemporary European Studies, University of Sussex
E.Massetti@sussex.ac.uk

Key Points

- The Centre-Right coalition led by Silvio Berlusconi and formed by the People of Freedom, the Northern League and the Movement for Autonomy won the 2008 Italian election with a solid majority in both Houses of Parliament.
- The Centre-Left coalition led by Walter Veltroni and formed by the Democratic Party and Italy of Values lost the contest for the government. The Democratic Party maintained its ground but proved unable to make gains. The coalition as a whole slightly increased its vote share thanks to the good result for the Italy of Values party.
- The Left coalition (Rainbow Left), The Right (*La Destra*) and the Socialists (PS) were swept out of both Houses of Parliament.
- The Christian Democratic Centre coalition succeeded in gaining representation in both Houses of Parliament, with contained losses compared to the 2006 election.
- The Northern League almost doubled its vote share, reaching its early 1990s' levels of support.
- The party system resulting from the election is extremely simplified with six parliamentary groups, two of which, People of Freedom and Democratic Party, making up more than 75% of the Lower House and more than 80% of the Senate
- The European issue was never salient in the campaign, but presented in soft Eurosceptic tones in the People of Freedom's manifesto and Euroenthusiasm in the Democratic Party's programme.

On 10 and 11 June 2008, just two years after the previous general election, the Italians were called again to the ballot boxes to elect a new Parliament. In contrast with the previous election, the results were clear and the Centre-Right coalition led by Silvio Berlusconi won a solid majority of seats in both Houses of Parliament. This result confirmed the 'hand-over rule' established since the 1994 election: no government has ever been confirmed in office. The new Parliament was characterised by the presence of only six groups (including the mixed group)

and by the absence, for the first time since 1948, of the communists, the socialists and the neo-fascists. Silvio Berlusconi and the new twenty-one ministers sworn in at the Quirinale on the 8th of May.

Background

The troubles of the Centre-Left government during the two years in office can be attributed to two main factors. First, the parliamentary majority supporting the executive was very fragmented and ideologically heterogeneous - spanning the communists to the tiny Christian-democrats (UDEUR Popolars) and liberal parties (Dini List). Secondly, the Centre-Left coalition had only three seats majority in the Senate, making every single tiny party crucial for government survival and for passing laws. The core of the coalition – Democrats of the Left and *DI La Margherita*, an alliance of social liberals and Christian democrats – supported the government's initiatives rather consistently but the overall results were disappointing. The decision to concede an amnesty to nearly 80% of detainees turned out to be very irritating for wide sectors of the population. The proposals for welfare reforms and liberalisation met enraged reaction which obliged the government to “reconsider” (and to actually give up) such proposals, thus letting down those who had supported them. Similarly, the most conservative sections of the population were upset by a white paper for establishing civil unions, which would have attributed some basic rights to non-married couples, while the most progressive ones were frustrated by the inability of the government to get it through the two Houses of Parliament. Finally, foreign policy caused great embarrassment to the government, as it was often divisive and had to rely on the votes of part of the opposition to ensure continuity for the peace-keeping mission in Afghanistan. The only area in which the government succeeded was the vital (but deeply unpopular) task of bringing Italy back within the Maastricht criteria of the stability and growth pact, which was mainly achieved by increasing the burden of taxes and recovering a small fraction of tax evasion.

However, ideological heterogeneity and numerical fragility in the Senate do not go all the way to explaining the short life of the government. The creation of the Democratic Party from the merge of the Democrats of the Left and *DI La Margherita* posed two major problems for the government. First, the “majoritarian vocation” with which the party was born produced considerable anxiety among the other parties of the coalition both to the left (Communists, Greens and splinter groups of the Democrats of the Left which refused to merge within the Democratic Party) and to the centre (the Socialists and UDEUR Popolars). Secondly, the strongly legitimising investiture of the party leader, Walter Veltroni, chosen by an election opened to anyone willing to pay one euro, cast a shadow on the authority and role of the PM Romano Prodi, whose popularity was dropping. In addition, the issue of electoral reform, under the pressure of a proposed referendum, kept the relationships between big and small parties very tense. When in early 2008 the Constitutional Court allowed the referendum the leader of the tiny UDEUR Popolars, Clemente Mastella, declared his withdrawal from the government and his party determined the fall of the government through a no confidence vote in the Senate.

The prospect of a new election gave vitality to the Centre-Right coalition which needed to match the renewal that had occurred in the opposite camp with the creation of the Democratic Party. After the President of the Republic dissolved the Parliament and called a new election, Berlusconi (*Forza Italia*) agreed with Fini (National Alliance) to create a unitary list under the banner of People of Freedom with the explicit objective to create a unitary party after the election. The People of Freedom formed a coalition with the Northern League and with a kind of southern league called Movement for Autonomy, while it refused to let the Christian Democrats UDC and the radical right The Right (a splinter party from National Alliance) become part of the coalition. On the Centre-Left, the Democratic Party maintained its

majoritarian vocation by announcing it would run alone. Eventually, it accepted the chance to enter a coalition with Italy of Values, the party led by the former prosecutor Antonio Di Pietro, but refused to let the radical left and the socialists (PS) become part of the coalition. The parties of the radical left created a cartel called Rainbow Left (SA) - formed by the communists, the greens and other left parties – while the socialists took the suicidal decision to run alone.

The 2008 election represented therefore a two-fold challenge. First, it was a contest for government between the Democratic Party (and its ally Italy of the Values) and the People of Freedom (and its allies Northern League and Movement for Autonomy). This was definitely the most important challenge in the short term. However, there was also a more subtle challenge between the political cultures of the second Republic, represented by the biggest parties and coalitions, against the four major political cultures of the first Republic – communist, socialist, Christian-democrat and neo-fascist – represented respectively by Rainbow Left, Socialist Party, Christian Democratic Centre and The Right. This challenge played on the capability of the former to achieve a convincing result and the capability of the latter to survive (i.e. to overcome the threshold for representation). Although less important in the short term, the contest between the first and the second Republic was important for the development of the future party system.

The Campaign

When the electoral campaign started, it was clear that Italy was not going to witness the raw debates usually occurring between Silvio Berlusconi and Romano Prodi. Walter Veltroni used calm tones and never addressed or named his main political rival. As a consequence Berlusconi was constrained in a mild attitude by the new Centre-Left younger political leader and could not heap opprobrium on Walter Veltroni. The two electoral programmes tended to converge – which partly explains why Veltroni did not gain so much over Berlusconi. Two main events attracted the attention of the electorate in the latest part of the campaign: the Naples rubbish emergency and the *Alitalia* case.

Both events involved the two main opponents' sides in the electoral campaign and presented the only occasion for fierce debates. In the former case the chronic rubbish emergency in the streets of Naples impacted on important political figures of the Centre-Left, whose political success was strictly connected to that territory. Even though Walter Veltroni called for a formal austerity in the political duel, the Centre-Right did not miss the opportunity to point to the years of bad governance of the Centre-Left, in power in the region Campania since April 2000. Similarly, when Air France-KLM made an offer to save the Italian flagship company *Alitalia* from bankruptcy, Silvio Berlusconi intervened addressing the 'arrogance' of the French offer and counterpoising a possible Italian offer coming from a group of important Italian businessmen with headquarters in Milan. Without names or details of the offer, the confrontational side of the Centre-Left (Antonio Di Pietro and Italy of Values) did not miss the occasion to stress Berlusconi's opaque ways of conducting his affairs.

The Party of Freedom's manifesto addressed seven themes (named, '*seven missions*'): (i) re-launching development; (ii) supporting families; (iii) more security and justice; (iv) services to citizens; (iv) the South; (v) federalism; and (vii) extraordinary plans for public finance. After accepting the offer to join the People of Freedom, Gianfranco Fini launched the campaign under the banner '*More security: there is Alliance*' in a speech in Florence on the 2nd of March. Ethical values, security and legality made up the main points of his speech. He gathered more consensuses on nationalist and law and order themes: particularly on security, punishments for offences linked to drug, and the crucifix as a symbol of Italian national identity, presenting at

least three main issues of the Centre-Right programme – families, security and justice. The South and its numerous problems were common themes both for Fini's and Berlusconi's election campaigns, while the latter also dealt with the issues of national economic development and public finance. In contrast, federalism was a theme that just belonged to the Northern League's policies. In fact, the Northern League's campaign revolved around federalism and immigration, and the most famous electoral poster was the Lega's one portraying a Native American Indian with the statement: *'They could not pose limits to immigration, now they live in reservations'*.

In the People of Freedom's manifesto, it was also stressed that their projects could have been carried out successfully only at the end of the five-year office time, whereas they would be restricted by three main 'external' constraints: (i) the economic crisis in Italy and Europe, that *'Prodi's government ignored and undervalued'*; (ii) the bonds of the European Treaties – the reference was mainly to the Stability and Growth Pact; and (iii) the precarious Italian economy. At the end of the page, in bold red letters the programme reported that the Centre-Right *'[I]n any case ... [would] never put [its] hands in the citizens' pockets'*. The image of politicians putting their hands in the citizens' pockets was used in the mid 1940s by Guglielmo Giannini, and his movement and party, emerging from the weekly magazine *'L'Uomo Qualunque'* ('The Ordinary Man'). The man squeezed by a press as the symbol of the citizens oppressed by the state was a populist image close to Berlusconi's populism. Rejuvenated within the People of Freedom, Berlusconi moved further to the right of the political spectrum, accepting figures who have never acknowledged the problematic nature of the Fascist regime (Alessandra Mussolini and Giuseppe Ciarrapico) within the People of Freedom.

The Democratic Party's manifesto had the image of its leader, Walter Veltroni. In the opening speech of the electoral campaign, Veltroni presented the party's vision of Italy, linking past and future. Close to Berlusconi's words and ideas, the Democratic Party leader also suggested that he was supporting the idea of paying 'less tax'. Everyone had to pay, and the Prodi's government successful fight against high rates of tax evasion could enable the new government to implement reforms and the plan for lower tax. The stress was also on the choice of running the election as (in his words) *'free, more than on our own'*. If the Left had caused internal debates more than once (first and second Prodi governments), this time the Centre-Left took the choice of running without the alliance with the left political parties. Finally, he emphasised the successes of Italy, the Euro and the need to bring together North and South, left and right, Italians and immigrants, fathers and sons, atheists and Catholic believers, and reminded the Centre-Right leader, *'Italy does not need to get up, Italy is standing, Italians are standing, It is politics that needs to get up'*.

The basic idea of the Centre-Left programme was that 'a new Italy was possible' and the Barack Obama's 'yes, we can', was translated into the Veltroni's Italian version *'si può fare'*. If Berlusconi presented seven main points, Veltroni had twelve (named, *'twelve actions'*), a slimmer programme compared to the 281-page 2001 Centre-Left manifesto. It brought together issues that were also stressed by Berlusconi and stressed themes that were usually closer to the Centre-Left electorate: (i) the state, spending better and less; (ii) taxes close to development, women and the South; (iii) more security for citizens and businessmen; (iv) justice; (v) environmentalism; (vi) welfare being closely related to families; (vii) culture, school, university, and research; (viii) a competitive business for entrepreneurs; (ix) competition for more economic growth; (x) the South and the Mediterranean; (xi) a governing democracy that reduces the costs of politics; (xii) reforms for the Italian public broadcast (RAI).

Looking more closely at both manifestos, they revolved around seven main issues: taxes and families, development and jobs, housing, energy and infrastructures, health service and schools, security and immigration, and justice. The Centre-Right supported a gradual decrease of taxes and a bonus for a new-born baby, while large families with more children would have to pay less tax. Similarly, the Centre-Left supported less tax, particularly for families with a lower income. Families with a new-born baby were to receive € 2,500 yearly, and that would have increased after the first baby. Differences slightly emerged on jobs, as Berlusconi proposed to de-tax the work overtime, while Veltroni proposed a minimum salary at € 1,000-1,100. Similarly, on the housing sector, the Democratic Party proposed less tax for those who did not have their own house and who rented one, while the Centre-Right re-proposed the catch-all issue of cancelling the house property tax. On the energy and infrastructure issues, the two political sides presented diverse positions, with the Centre-Left pointing to renewable sources of energy and competition for bus and train services. In contrast, the Centre-Right focused on an old theme, the one of the ‘great works’ (*Grandi Opere*), re-launching the project of a bridge between Calabria and Sicily, in the South of Italy, and the Italian involvement on projects based on nuclear energy (Italy voted against it in a referendum on 8 and 9 November 1987). Both main parties promised to tackle the issue of the long waiting lists in the national health service. On immigration the Centre-Left proposed revisions of the Bossi-Fini law and the right to vote for immigrants in local elections. The Centre-Right planned new centres for the reception of illegal immigrants and closer co-operation with the governments of their countries of origin. The security chapter for both parties addressed paedophilia and criminal violence against women. On justice, the Democratic Party proposed shorter trials and a manager dealing with that. The People of Freedom stressed the importance of the protection for those who are under investigation and reforms for the civil, criminal and disciplinary levels for magistrates, Berlusconi’s great enemies.

The Christian Democratic Centre (UDC), presenting itself as the party of the Centre, tried to attract voters from the right and the left, particularly among the disaffected electorate and the Catholic citizens. Even though the party represented the heir of the former Christian Democrats, their electorate was mainly driven by Casini’s campaign towards disaffected politics and against his former coalition ally, Silvio Berlusconi. That channelled the potential votes of young people (up to 24 years), those with a high level of education, and from big urban centres. Further, the Christian Democratic Centre always had more votes from the electorate of the South of Italy, which gave the party more chances in the Senate, because of the regional basis of the allocation of the votes. To the left of the Democratic Party, Fausto Bertinotti led the coalition Rainbow Left. They stressed socio-economic and foreign policy themes, re-stating their strong opposition to reforming the pension schemes and to the military involvement of Italian troops in Afghanistan. They were particularly successful among the young electorate (18-20 years old), and most of their potential voters (60 per cent) overlapped with the potential electorate of the Democratic Party.

Already in February 2008 74 per cent of Italians indicated Berlusconi as the likely ‘winner’ of the election. Although Veltroni’s campaign was the most appreciated, the perceived shortcomings of the Centre-Left government had a crucial importance for voters’ choices. Pensions, salaries, and taxes seemed likely to decide the 2008 Italian electoral campaign particularly among citizens disaffected with politics.

The Results

Italians voted on Sunday 13th (8am-10pm) and Monday 14th April (7am-3pm), as in 2006. Turnout dropped to 80.5 per cent (81.2 with the votes of the Italians living abroad, -3.1 per cent compared to the 2006 election, reflecting a decreasing trend since Italy abandoned the

compulsory voting in 1993). From the first electoral analyses, it appears that the decrease in turnout penalised primarily the left and, to lesser extent, the Centre-Left coalitions, thus favouring the victory of the Centre-Right. The vote of the Italians living abroad did not make the difference as it happened in 2006.

Berlusconi's coalition won the election with 46.8 per cent of votes in the Lower House. Because of the plurality bonus accorded by the Italian voting system to the winning coalition, they secured a solid majority (55% of seats) (see Table 1 below). Veltroni's Centre-Left and Casini's centre coalitions gathered respectively 37.6 and 5.6 per cent of the votes, sharing the remaining seats proportionally (38% and 6%). No other national party or coalition managed to overcome the thresholds for gaining representation in the Lower House. In this respect, the radical left coalition, Rainbow Left, represented the main loser of the 2008 Italian election. They lost 71.2 of their votes compared to the 2006 election. Many preferred to vote for the Democratic Party, a few for Di Pietro's Italy of Values, and almost half opted for abstention. In contrast to the Rainbow Left, the exclusion from Parliament of the Right and the Socialists was to a great extent expected.

As expected the People of Freedom emerged as the biggest party within the Centre-Right and as a whole (4.5 % and more than 3 million votes more than the Democratic Party). The People of Freedom won thanks to its performance in the south and in the islands, while it lost some votes in the north, though to the advantage of its main ally, the Northern League. The latter attained 8.3 of the votes nationally, reaching a similar level of support of the early Nineties. Compared to 2006, the Northern League was particularly successful in its stronghold regions, Lombardia (with 28.1 per cent, + 12 per cent) and Veneto (28.5 per cent, + 16.9 per cent), but also in Liguria (6.8 per cent, +3.1 per cent) and Piedmont (16.7 per cent, +8.2 per cent). The third minor partner of the Centre-Right coalition, the Movement for Autonomy scored well in Sicily but its national result was contained.

Within the Centre-Left coalition the results were rather disappointing for the Democratic Party, with a -0.7% compared to the 2006 election. The party, which was inevitably identified as the main heir of the Prodi government, was unable to attract voters from the centre ground of the political spectrum. It also remained territorially contained within the traditional 'red regions', despite the (mainly mediatic) efforts of Veltroni to reconcile his party with the northern electorate. The coalition as a whole slightly increased its vote share, thanks to the good performance of its minor partner, Italy of Values. The latter, led by the former magistrate Di Pietro, was probably rewarded for its confrontational attitudes towards the opponents, and especially for its continuous attacks to Berlusconi.

The Centre-Right had the vote of the housewives, of businessmen, and young working citizens. The Centre-Left was successful among women (54.7 per cent), pensioners and public employees. In the Senate, the electoral results reflected rather faithfully the results of the Lower House. The political forces which gained access were the same as for the Lower House, in spite of a different voting system. The red belt of Italy (Emilia Romagna, Toscana, Umbria and Marche) remained with the Democratic Party, but Berlusconi conquered Liguria, Abruzzo, Sardegna, Campania (after the scandals of Naples garbage emergency) and Molise that joined the northern and southern regions that already gave their vote to the Centre-Right in 2006 (with the exception of Valle d'Aosta, Trentino Alto Adige and Friuli Venezia Giulia). The People of Freedom gained sixty-seven provinces, the Democratic Party thirty-five and the Northern League six.

Table 1 Electoral results for the Lower House

| Political parties | Votes | % | Seats | 2006 (%) | Change (%) |
|--|-------------------|------------------------------|------------|--------------------------|---------------|
| People of Freedom (<i>Il popolo della libertà</i>) | 13,629,069 | 37.4 | 272 | 36.0 ^a | +1.4 |
| Northern League (<i>Lega Nord</i>) | 3,024,758 | 8.3 | 60 | 4.6 | +3.7 |
| Movement for Autonomy (<i>Movimento per l'autonomia</i>) | 410,487 | 1.1 | 8 | ^b | |
| <i>Votes from the Italians abroad</i> | / | / | 4 | / | / |
| Total (CR) | 17,064,314 | 46.8 | 344 | 49.7 | - 2.9 |
| Democratic Party (<i>Partito democratico</i>) | 12,092,969 | 33.2 | 211 | 33.9 ^c | - 0.7 |
| Italy of Values (<i>Di Pietro Italia dei Valori</i>) | 1,593,532 | 4.4 | 28 | 2.3 | + 2.1 |
| <i>Votes from the Italians abroad</i> | / | / | 7 | / | / |
| Total (CL) | 13,686,501 | 37.6 | 239 | 49.8 | - 12.3 |
| Christian Democratic Centre (<i>UDC-Casini</i>) | 2,050,309 | 5.6 | 36 | 6.8 | -1.2 |
| Rainbow Left (<i>La Sinistra – L'Arcobaleno</i>) | 1,124,428 | 3.1 | / | 10.2 ^d | - 6.9 |
| The Right (<i>La Destra</i>) | 885,226 | 2.4 | / | / | / |
| Socialist Party (<i>Partito Socialista</i>) | 355,575 | 1.0 | / | 2.6 ^e | -1.6 |
| South Tyrolean People's Party (<i>South Tirol Volksparteien</i>) | 147,666 | 0.4 | 2 | 0.5 | - 0.1 |
| Autonomie Liberté Democratie (Val d'Aosta) ^f | 29,311 | | 1 | (plural votes) 34,167 | / |
| <i>Votes from the Italians abroad</i> | | | 1 | | |
| Others | | | 4 | | |
| Total | | | 630 | | |
| Turnout | | 80.5 (81.2) | | 83.6 | -3.1 |

Source: Italian Home Office web site, Ministero dell'Interno,
<http://politiche.interno.it/politiche/camera080413/C000000000.htm> and
<http://politiche.interno.it/politiche/camera080413/CX0000.htm> (last consulted: 12 June 2008)

Legend: *a* Electoral result for Forza Italia and National Alliance

b In 2001 the votes for the Movement for Autonomy was negligible at the national level, but in alliance with the Northern League it gained 4.5 per cent of the votes in Sicily and 3 seats

c Electoral result for the Olive Tree (Democrats of the Left and DI Margherita)

d Votes for Communist Refoundation, Italian Communists and the Greens

e The 2001 percentage reports the votes for the Rose in the Fist, when the Socialist Party fought the election together with the Radicals that in 2006 joined the Democratic Party

f Val d'Aosta is an Italian region with a special statute electing one deputy (the figures refers to the plurality of the votes in the region, corresponding to 39.1 per cent of the votes casted in Val d'Aosta)

Table 2. Electoral results for the Senate

| Political parties | Votes | % | Seats | 2006 (%) | Change (%) |
|---|-------------------|-------------|--------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| People of Freedom (<i>Il popolo della libertà</i>) | 12,510,306 | 38.2 | 141 | 35.8 ^g | +2.4 |
| Northern League (<i>Lega Nord</i>) | 2,642,166 | 8.1 | 25 | 4.4 | +3.7 |
| Movement for Autonomy (<i>Movimento per l'autonomia</i>) | 355,076 | 1.1 | 2 | 0.8 ^h | +0.3 |
| <i>Votes from the Italians abroad</i> | | | 6 | 1 (seats) | |
| Total (CR) | 15,507,548 | 47.3 | 174 | 49.9 | -2.6 |
| Democratic Party (<i>Partito democratico</i>) | 11,042,326 | 33.7 | 116 | 27.7 | +6 |
| Italy of Values (<i>Di Pietro Italia dei Valori</i>) | 1,414,118 | 4.3 | 14 | 2.8 | +1.5 |
| <i>Votes from the Italians abroad</i> | | | 2 | 4 (seats) | |
| Total (CL) | 12,456,444 | 38.0 | 132 | 49.2 | -11.2 |
| Christian Democratic Centre (<i>UDC-Casini</i>) | 1,866,338 | 5.7 | 3 | 6.6 | -0.9 |
| Rainbow Left (<i>La Sinistra – L'Arcobaleno</i>) | 1,053,154 | 3.2 | 0 | 11.3 | -8.1 |
| The Right (<i>La Destra</i>) | 687,211 | 2.1 | / | / | / |
| Socialist party (Partito Socialista) | 284,428 | 0.9 | / | | |
| South Tyrolean People's Party (<i>South Tirol Volksparteien, SVP</i>) | | | 2 | 2 (seats) | |
| SvP Together for Autonomy – (Insieme per le autonomie) | | | 2 | | |
| Vallee D' Aoste | | | 1 | 1 | |
| <i>Votes from the Italians abroad</i> | | | 1 | 4 (seats) | |
| | | | 315 | | |

Source: Italian Home Office web site, Ministero dell'Interno,

<http://politiche.interno.it/politiche/senato080413/SX0000.htm> and (last consulted: 12 June 2008)

Legend: see the Lower House (but b = in 2001 in the Senate, the Movement for Autonomy had 1 seat - gaining 4.1 per cent of the votes in Sicily).

The European Issue

European integration was never a salient issue in the campaign. The only open reference was done by Walter Veltroni in his open speech in Spello, particularly recalling Altiero Spinelli and the European vocation of Italy. In the Democratic Party's manifesto Europe was the second main point raised in the first page. Italy was seen in its foreign dimension, supporting a strong Europe. Veltroni's Italy was sustaining good relations within the Mediterranean, where it could play a major role, and with Europe and the US, both fundamental allies of the Democratic Party vision of Italy's external relations. However, Europe returned only on the university chapter. The Democratic Party sustained Erasmus grants that could be really available to everyone (without, however, explaining how that was possible), after domestic debates on the low amount of the grants that did not allow all students to study abroad.

In the People of Freedom's manifesto Europe emerged in the first page, when it was underlined that Italy was *'tied by the commitment of the European treaty'*. As in 2001, inflation was clearly the effect of *'Prodi's Euro'*. Therefore, during the Berlusconi's third office as Prime Minister, possible economic problems could surface because of Europe. At page 7, the People of Freedom asserted *'the safeguard'* of the *'made in Italy'* products *'by interventions within the EU in order to reduce its regulation'*. The 2001 Berlusconi government was the most Eurosceptic Italian government in the history, and the 2008 one will probably be similar. Europe, and the EU were never quoted in positive ways and the first steps of the new government did not receive positive reviews from some of the EU member states and the institutions. Berlusconi's comments on the gender-balanced Zapatero's government generated some negative coverage in European media. Further criticisms came from Spain when tensions between Italian citizens and the Roma minority community in Naples led the government to announce plans to tackle immigration by tightening up immigration policies. Just after a month from the election, a group of Italian citizens set fire with molotov cocktails to a camp in Ponticelli, Naples, where the small Roma community lived, after an alleged failed attempt to kidnap a baby. The Roma people had already left during the night, but Italy appeared to discover its xenophobia. Romano Prodi had already urged the EU to help countries to cope with immigration, particularly of Roma citizens. The lack of a positive response heightened Italian citizens' response. The new government with a strong Northern League controlling the Home Affairs Ministry would certainly respond to the worries of part of the Italian population. It seems that Berlusconi's third government did not waste its time in cultivating links among its EU partners and is returning to unusual soft Eurosceptic positions. Italian citizens are also decreasingly thinking that EU membership brings benefits to Italy, 49 per cent in 2003 and 47 per cent in 2007, and supporting the EU, 58 per cent in 2003 and 50 per cent in 2007 (EB60, 2004; EB68, 2007).

The Domestic Context and General Perspectives

The post-electoral situation leaves several questions open: first, the executive's capability to administer the numerous emergencies and to stop the Italian social and economic decline; secondly, the nature of the government-opposition relationship, taking into consideration the absolute necessity to reach wide agreements on constitutional reforms; thirdly, the development of the party system in the next years; finally, the impact of Berlusconi's government on Italian democracy.

As far as the first question is concerned about executive capacity, the strong majority in both Houses of the Parliament should favour the government in its capability to intervene on the most urgent crises, such as refuse collection and recycling in Campania, and to carry out the promises in the election manifesto. Obviously political disagreement remains on the

effectiveness of the Centre-Right's attempt to drag Italy out of economic stagnation but this issue cannot be discussed here. On the second point, there has been a certain degree of fair play between the government and the main opposition party, the Democratic Party. Both have declared their willingness to co-operate in order to agree on constitutional reforms which should decrease the number of veto points, thus enhancing the efficiency of the political machine. However, should contrasts on other policy areas become sour, it will be extremely difficult to maintain co-operation on the constitutional reforms. In addition, the issue of 'Federalism', the flagship of the League's political project, could become very divisive not only for the opposition but also for the government majority.

As far as the development of the party system is concerned, the election results seem to have given a clear picture: out of the political cultures of the first Republic, only the Christian Democratic Centre gained representation in Parliament. The communists, greens, socialists and neo-fascists were excluded, leaving the ground open to the two great actors of the second Republic: on the one side, the People of Freedom (flanked by the regionalist Northern League), a national-conservative electoral union (would be party) centred on Berlusconi's leadership; on the other side, the Democratic Party (flanked by Italy of Values), a new party which is still searching a clear ideological identity (at the time of writing they still do not know which European Parliament party group they will be part of) and which is trying to experiment, with some internal resistance, with more democratic forms of organisation and leadership selection. Whether the People of Freedom will be able to become a unified party and whether the Democratic Party will be able to survive this electoral defeat and persist are still interesting questions. However, the current party system seems to be characterised by the presence of two main opponent parties converging on many programmatic issues. The only fundamental distinction lies in the 'republican' vocation of the Democratic Party vs. the 'populist' vocation of the People of Freedom.

This leads to the final point about the impact of a populist government on the quality of democracy. Berlusconi's personal media power and his substantial conflict of interests are serious problems *per se*. In addition, if we look at the experience of the last government the perspectives appear rather gloomy. Indeed, that period was characterised by violations of human rights during the demonstrations at the G8 meeting in Genoa in 2001, strong control on public TV (firing journalists considered to be hostile, censoring and shutting down satirical programmes, even delaying the distribution of the electoral results in the regional elections 2005), unorthodox use of intelligence (including the option of conducting 'traumatic actions' against the "enemies of the Prime Minister"), and the most ambiguous election (2006) since the establishment of the Italian Republic. Some commentators have pointed out that Berlusconi's ultimate political ambition is to become the President of the Republic and that such ambition will lead him to be more respectful of the principles and institutions of the Italian Constitution and of the EU. However, his unfinished problems with justice at home are already leading his government to propose controversial decrees for the suspension of trials for high constitutional figures, such as the Prime Minister.

Publication Date: June 2008

This is the latest in a series of election and referendum briefings produced by the European Parties Elections and Referendums Network (EPERN). Based in the Sussex European Institute, EPERN is an international network of scholars that was originally established as the Opposing Europe Research Network (OERN) in June 2000 to chart the divisions over Europe that exist within party systems. In August 2003 it was re-launched as EPERN to reflect a widening of its objectives to consider the

broader impact of the European issue on the domestic politics of EU member and candidate states. The Network retains an independent stance on the issues under consideration. For more information and copies of all our publications visit our website at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/1-4-2.html>