

Evidence from Italy shows that electoral reforms can often have the opposite effect of what is intended.

Blog Admin

*The current Italian electoral law, passed in 2005, has been criticised on the basis that it is likely to produce an unstable government, with different parties in control of the two chambers of the Italian parliament. **Massimo Bordignon** and **Andrea Monticini** assess the effects of electoral reforms by studying a previous change to the Italian electoral system: the partial adoption of 'first past the post' voting in 1993. They write that while the reform was aimed at making governments more stable, and reducing the number of smaller parties, the new system largely had the opposite effect. It is important to recognise that the reality of electoral reform can often be very different from its original intention.*



Among political institutions, the most widely studied is certainly the electoral rule (or voting system). In political science, a large body of literature exists which attempts to connect the features of the electoral rule with the optimal number of parties and candidates. Economists have also developed several models explaining policy and economic outcomes as the result of the contrasting incentives generated by different electoral systems. This focus seems to be justified on empirical grounds. According to Torsten Persson and Guido Tabellini's [extensive empirical analysis](#), for example, the electoral rule is the "key" political institution: all other things being equal, a switch from proportional voting to plurality rule should generate an impressive decrease in public spending of 5 per cent of GDP.

This analysis, however, as with many others addressing similar relationships between the electoral system and economic outcomes, is based on comparisons across countries that differ along many other dimensions beyond the electoral rule. Whichever clever devices one can imagine for trying to identify a causal effect, there always remains the doubt that the relationship between the electoral rule and the outcome of interest may be generated by some other uncontrolled factor that "causes" both the electoral rule and the outcome. Besides, reforms of the electoral system are in reality rare events, so we generally lack the kind of variation that could help us in identifying causal effects.

This suggests that to get more convincing evidence one should instead try to concentrate on the few examples of electoral reform inside a single country, where other factors are likely to have less of an impact. On this basis, we discuss here the effects of an important reform introduced in Italy in 1993 (and then repealed again in 2005). This reform changed the electoral rule for the national parliament, moving it from a pure proportional system to a mixed electoral one, where 75 per cent of the seats were assigned through plurality rule in single candidate districts and the rest by proportional voting. The reform, somewhat imposed on the Italian parliament by the results of a national referendum, had, according to its



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advocates, several objectives. The first and foremost was to increase the accountability of parties and politicians, forcing them to form pre-electoral coalitions on well-defined policy platforms. But it was also expected that the reform would solve some long term problems of the Italian party system, such as the excessive fragmentation of the political landscape and the short duration of governments and legislatures. The majoritarian prize in the single district would force the different parties to merge together and eliminate the smaller and more extreme parties from the political arena. The stability of governments and legislatures would raise as the electoral cost for parties to dissolve existing coalitions (once they were formed) would increase.

Accordingly, we compare here before and after reform values for several variables capturing these expectations, such as the number of parties represented in Parliament, the number of parties in the ruling coalition, the duration of governments and of legislatures and the seats of the major party in the ruling coalition. We collect data for all Italian political elections between 1948 and 2001. Over this period, there were 14 general elections: 11 under proportional representation, and 3 under the mixed electoral system. In total, 55 governments were in office during the period: 47 before the 1993 electoral reform and 8 after the reform. In our analysis we compare the average value of the indicator under the proportional electoral rule with the (average) variation induced by switching to the plurality rule. The results are reported in table 1 below (a more detailed discussion of the findings is available [here](#)).

Table 1: Effect of the 1993 Italian Electoral Reform

	Value under proportional electoral rule	Increase or decrease due to 1993 plurality electoral rule
Number of parties	9.63	2.03
Number of seats won by majority party	256.54	-94.21***
Days Parliament in office	1503.45	-128.78
Days Government in office	322.42	216.82
Number of parties in coalition government	2.82	2.04***

(***) denotes statistical significance at 1 per cent

Only two indicators are statistically significant: the number of seats of the majority party and the number of parties in the coalition government. The number of seats of the majority party decreased by 94 (on average) seats and the number of parties in the coalition government increased by 2 after the reform. This means that, contrary to its main objectives, the reform did not affect either the stability of governments (legislatures) or the fragmentation of the political system. It had, however, the effect of making the ruling coalitions more unstable, increasing the number of parties inside it and reducing the role and the importance of the major party. This was again against expectations.

Our results may be interpreted in different ways. Possibly, the Italian reform was ill designed to reach its objectives, and possibly, Italian politicians and parties were smart enough to find ways to circumvent the constraints introduced by the reform. But it is still surprising that none of the expected and plausible effects of the reform did actually take place and what happened (if anything) was that results went in the opposite direction to expectations. It is also true that the reform had been in place only briefly. One could argue that the time period was indeed too short to affect the behaviour of voters, who did not have the time to learn and understand the new rules. But this argument is not entirely convincing. First, in a longer time span many other things also change, making it more difficult to identify the effect of a reform. Second, even in our limited time span, we could not find any tendency for our variables to move in the direction expected by the reform. Contrary to the main perspectives of the literature surveyed, the Italian experience suggests extreme caution in predicting the effects of a reform of the electoral rule, even on the political variables that should be more directly influenced by the electoral system.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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