

## The electoral law which will be used in the 2013 Italian elections is radically different from any other electoral system in Europe.

Blog Admin

Parliamentary elections are due to be held in Italy on 24-25 February. As part of EUROPPE's series of articles previewing the election, [Matteo Garavoglia](#) outlines Italy's electoral law, and its likely impact on the final results. He notes that the country's electoral system contains a number of peculiarities that mark it out as being significantly different from any other system used in Europe. Among the most important is the use of 'electoral prizes' to artificially create majorities in both houses of Parliament.



The Italian legislative elections of February 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> will be held under Electoral Law 270 of December 21<sup>st</sup>, 2005. This law was introduced under the rule of Silvio Berlusconi's government and its key architect was Roberto Calderoli, an MP from the [Lega Nord](#) (Northern League) party: a key ally of what used to be Silvio Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* (Go Italy!) party. The law was approved by Forza Italia, the Northern League and its allies of the *Alleanza Nazionale* (National Alliance) and the *Unione dei Democratici Cristiani* (Christian Democratic Union) against the combined votes of the opposition parties. The current electoral law is characterised by a variety of peculiarities which, when combined, mark it as radically different from any other electoral law in Europe. Indeed, the law has been characterised by Mr. Calderoli himself as a *porcata* (loosely and politely translatable as "a piece of rubbish"). The electoral law will have a number of consequences for February's elections.

To begin with, the electoral law provides for "electoral prizes" (*premi di maggioranza*) to form artificial majorities in both chambers of Parliament. As a result of these 'prizes', the coalition that obtains a majority of the votes on a national basis is automatically guaranteed an absolute majority of 340 seats (out of 630) in the lower chamber of Parliament (*Camera dei Deputati*). However, in the upper chamber of Parliament (*the Senate – Senato Della Repubblica*), this mechanism is applied on a regional basis. The coalition which wins a majority of votes within an individual region is guaranteed 55 per cent of the seats that region is entitled to in the Senate.



Maurizio Lupi Credit: (Creative Commons BY)

A second feature of the current electoral law is the fact that electoral lists are "blocked". When going to the ballot box, citizens do not have the chance to express their preference for a candidate but, rather, can only cast a vote for a party. It is therefore completely up to each individual political party to select the order in which their candidates are placed on the electoral list: essentially deciding in advance which of its candidates will be elected to Parliament and which ones will not be elected.

A third characteristic of the current electoral law is the minimum threshold that each party or coalition is

required to reach in order to enter Parliament. In the lower chamber of Parliament, the threshold is calculated on a national basis and is set at 4 per cent for an individual party and at 10 per cent for an electoral coalition. However in the Senate, the threshold is calculated on a regional basis and is put at 8 per cent for a single political party and at 20 per cent for an electoral coalition. Within this context, special provisions are in place in order to guarantee enhanced representation and access to Parliament for linguistic minorities.

A fourth innovation introduced by the current electoral law consists of the fact that Italian citizens living outside of the country are entitled to elect their own MPs in newly created electoral districts abroad. Europe elects six deputies and two senators, South America three deputies and two senators, North America two deputies and one senator and the rest of the world combined one deputy and one senator. As a result of this innovation, Italian citizens resident abroad get to elect twelve deputies for the lower chamber of Parliament and six senators for the upper chamber of Parliament.

Last but not least, the current electoral law introduces the possibility for political parties, should they wish to do so, to contest the elections as electoral coalitions of alliances of two or more parties. Whether parties choose to present themselves grouped together in a coalition or not, they must always clearly state their political leader and their electoral manifesto. Therefore a political manifesto and a leader for each party or, alternatively, a common political manifesto and a political leader for an electoral coalition, should always be stated in the run up to the vote.

The electoral law that emerged as the result of these provisions gives rise to a number of outcomes that drew heavy criticism from Italian political scientists, the Italian Supreme Court and a variety of public commentators. Some of the main criticisms concentrate on the fact that the electoral law can determine an election result whereby different parties or coalitions might have different relative or absolute majorities in the two chambers of Parliament; that citizens are *de facto* deprived of their right to vote for individual MPs; and that the number of seats assigned to the winning coalition in any of the two chambers is disproportionately greater than the actual proportion of the votes it obtained. These factors will have a significant impact on the final result when Italy goes to the polls later this month.

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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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