

## Whoever wins this week's Italian elections, it is unlikely that they will put an end to the 'telecracy' begun by Silvio Berlusconi.

Blog Admin

*Parliamentary elections are due to be held in Italy on 24-25 February. As part of EUOPP's series previewing the election, [Valentino Larcinese](#) writes on former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. Despite Berlusconi's party lagging behind the centre-left coalition in the polls, his control over the country's media continues to have a substantial impact on the campaign. There is also little sign that the other major parties will break this hold over the Italian media, even if they are successful in the upcoming election.*



Italy votes in less than a week. A new wave of "nominated" MPs will soon take their seats in the Chamber and Senate. Thanks to the [electoral reform](#) passed by Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi in 2005, Italians do not choose their MPs. Italian elections are based on a "closed list" system: you can only vote for a party and who gets elected is determined on the basis of candidates' ranking on the list. With the exceptions of the centre-left Democratic Party (PD) and the [5 Star Movement](#) (5SM), which held primaries to select their candidates, the incoming MPs will have therefore been once again "nominated" by party leaders, usually for their loyalty rather than their competence. Berlusconi reformed the electoral law in 2005 precisely in order to be able to nominate his lawyers and close allies into parliament, to avoid rebellions and to reward "[bunga bunga](#)" friends. Although other parties may have used different criteria to co-opt MPs, the lack of individual accountability will remain a feature of Italian politics in the next parliament, too.

But this is not the only drawback of this electoral law. In 2005 Berlusconi had another problem: he was facing a likely defeat at the upcoming 2006 elections and was trying to achieve two objectives: 1) to shift all the campaign attention away from individual candidates and on to party leaders (thanks to the closed list system), hence fully capitalising on his amazing campaigning skills; and 2) to give a hard time to winners by using two different electoral rules for the lower and the upper chambers, rules that can potentially generate two different majorities and therefore a stalemate (since the confidence of both chambers is required to form a government). This electoral law, devised for the 2006 election, is proving very useful again for Mr Berlusconi.



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In the lower chamber there is a majority premium: the party (or coalition of parties) which gets a plurality of votes at the national level receives 54 per cent of seats. To put things in comparison, if the centre-left coalition with, say, 35 per cent of votes, obtained 54 per cent of seats in the lower chamber then that would not be very different from what happened in the recent UK elections with single member districts. In the upper chamber, however, the majority premium is given on a region-by-region basis: this

particular feature makes any predictions of the outcome very difficult. Although the centre-left coalition is estimated to have an overall advantage of about 5 per cent over Berlusconi nationally, the distribution of votes across regions leaves a lot of uncertainty over the final outcome. Berlusconi and Pier Luigi Bersani, the leader of the PD, are neck and neck in some key large regions: Lombardy, Sicily and Campania. They are all too close to call.

To complicate things further, there are five contenders likely to be above the minimum threshold required to gain seats in the Senate and one of these contenders, Rivoluzione Civile, is estimated to be just at the threshold, which creates a further uncertainty and possible discontinuity. If Rivoluzione Civile does not reach the threshold then more seats are available for the other parties. The problem is, again, that in the upper chamber the threshold applies on a region-by-region basis. This system, nicknamed *porcellum* (a kind of piglet) whether intentionally or not, seems to have been invented to create as much uncertainty and random variation as possible.

Many commentators have noticed similarities with the elections in 2006. In reality there are some important differences to note, primarily the fact that in 2006 there were basically two broad coalitions, while in this election there are at least five players (excluding various parties which are not likely to meet the thresholds). This creates more uncertainty and makes a deadlock more likely. In the two weeks preceding an election the publication of opinion polls is forbidden by Italian law. Based on previous trends, it is clear that Berlusconi has managed once again to come back during the last weeks of the campaign. He remains, however, unlikely to win.

This was entirely predictable, as I [wrote almost two months ago](#) when Berlusconi announced he would run again, even though Berlusconi's allure is regularly underrated by his opponents. Apart from the undeniable qualities of Berlusconi as a campaigner, his comeback is also due to the electoral law, as explained, and to his control of the media machinery. He owns large parts of private free-to-air television networks and has powerful insiders in the public television stations that he controlled indirectly for many years as Prime Minister. Television remains by far the most powerful electoral medium. It is possible to get hundreds of thousands of followers on Twitter, but these tweets are mostly preaching to the converted. Television is still best at reaching undecided voters: those who often don't follow politics, don't read newspapers, and will form their opinions in the final days of the campaign.

Moreover, internet usage by Italian politicians is still very rudimentary. The only exception is Beppe Grillo's 5SM, which decided to boycott TV and focused instead on the internet and face-to-face campaigning. Some people are just fed up with quarrelsome and often useless talk shows: the more they see candidates on TV the less they want to vote for them, and this time they have the choice of an anti-TV movement. However while the strategy can work for an 'outsider' anti-system movement, it could hardly be applied more broadly. While we await future developments in the media market, pluralism in traditional media remains a crucial ingredient for a functioning democracy.

The new leader of the Italian government (unless it's Berlusconi himself) should pass a law to ensure greater media pluralism as their very first act, if they really intend to put an end to 'telecracy'. There is little reason to feel encouraged on this front as none of the major parties' manifestos contain plans to increase media pluralism, party leaders have yet to mention it in the campaign, and no journalist has raised a question about it. In the meantime the only independent national private channel, La7 (which has established a reputation by hiring several top journalists who struggled to find a job due to not being sufficiently sympathetic with Berlusconi), has just been acquired by Urbano Cairo, one of Berlusconi's friends who started his career as his assistant.

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