Italy’s constitutional referendum resulted in a strong No vote in most parts of the country. But as Stephen J. Larin and Marc Röggla highlight, this was not the case everywhere, with over 60 per cent of voters in Italy’s predominantly German-speaking province, South Tyrol, backing the proposed reform. They write that this was a victory for the province’s governing coalition, but that the failure of the referendum may benefit separatist opposition parties in the long term if it leads to an anti-EU government in Rome.

Check out EUROPP’s full coverage of Italy’s constitutional referendum.

One surprise about Italy’s referendum is that the strongest supporters of the proposed constitutional reform speak German. South Tyrol, Italy’s northern-most and predominantly German-speaking province, voted 63.7 per cent in favour of the constitutional reform – 6 per cent higher than any other province – with at least 70 per cent support in more than half of the province’s 116 municipalities. The ‘No’ campaign won in only five municipalities, all of which are predominantly Italian or Ladin-speaking.

Figure 1. Italy’s 2016 constitutional referendum results by province
The article reporting these numbers is titled “Südtirol ist nicht Italien” (South Tyrol is not Italy), a reference to a notorious slogan of the separatist South Tyrolean Freedom Party (Südtiroler Freiheit). But the Freiheit, along with the rest of the province’s opposition parties, campaigned against the reform. The reasons vary, but one of the most prominent arguments was that the centralising reform could jeopardise South Tyrol’s autonomy.

Last month, however, the South Tyrolean People’s Party (Südtiroler Volkspartei – SVP), which governs in coalition with the provincial branch of the Democratic Party (Partito Democratico Alto Adige – PD), decided to recommend voting for the reform. The main reason for this is the inclusion within the reform bill of a so-called ‘safeguard clause’.

The relationships between Rome and Italy’s autonomous regions and provinces are explicitly set aside in the reform bill (Article 39), and these relationships were to be renegotiated bilaterally after a successful referendum. This ‘safeguard clause’, the SVP and PD argued, would put South Tyrol’s autonomy arrangement on a better footing than it has been until now, provide the opportunity to negotiate for greater competences, and meant that nothing would
It seems that a significant majority of German-speakers in South Tyrol found the SVP’s argument persuasive. This is an impressive accomplishment, given the party’s recent internal fragmentation and the loss of some support to other German-speaking parties. But it probably reflects public confidence that the SVP would not jeopardise the autonomy arrangement more than increased support for the party itself (which won 45.7 per cent of the vote in 2013).

Now that the referendum has failed and Renzi has announced his resignation, however, South Tyrol’s opposition parties may benefit in the long term. If the populist and Eurosceptic Five Star Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle) were to gain power and try to take Italy out of the European Union, for example, that would likely strengthen support for separatism, as some polls indicate Brexit did in Scotland. In the short term, the result will likely lead to renewed criticism of South Tyrol’s ongoing Autonomy Convention, billed by the Provincial Council as a participatory democratic process to debate and draft a proposal for revising the 1972 Autonomy Statute, which has been partly justified as a necessary response to impending constitutional reform.

Please read our comments policy before commenting.

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 or EURAC. Featured image: Bolzano, South Tyrol – CC0 Public Domain.


About the authors

Stephen J. Larin – EURAC
Stephen J. Larin (@sjlarin) is a political scientist and Senior Researcher with the Institute for Minority Rights at the European Academy of Bozen/Bolzano (EURAC), Italy. His research focuses on the relationship between majority nationalism and minorities such as migrants and sub-state nations. He is co-editor with Bruce J. Berman and André Laliberté of The Moral Economies of Ethnic and Nationalist Claims (UBC Press, 2016), co-editor with Per Mouritsen of “The Civic Turn in European Immigrant Integration Policies”, a special journal issue accepted by the Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, and editor of The Politics and Law of Plurinational States: Contemporary Developments, which will be published by Peter Lang as part of its ‘Diversitas’ series.

Marc Röggla – EURAC
Marc Röggla (@MRggla) is a trained lawyer and Researcher with the Institute for Minority Rights at the European Academy of Bozen/Bolzano (EURAC), Italy. His research focuses on minority autonomy, protection, and media. He is one of two coordinators of EURAC’s administrative and advisory role in South Tyrol’s Autonomy Convention, and a EURAC representative in the European Association of Newspapers in Minority and Regional Languages (MIDAS).