

Why Italy's German-speakers overwhelmingly voted 'Yes'

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07/12/2016

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.

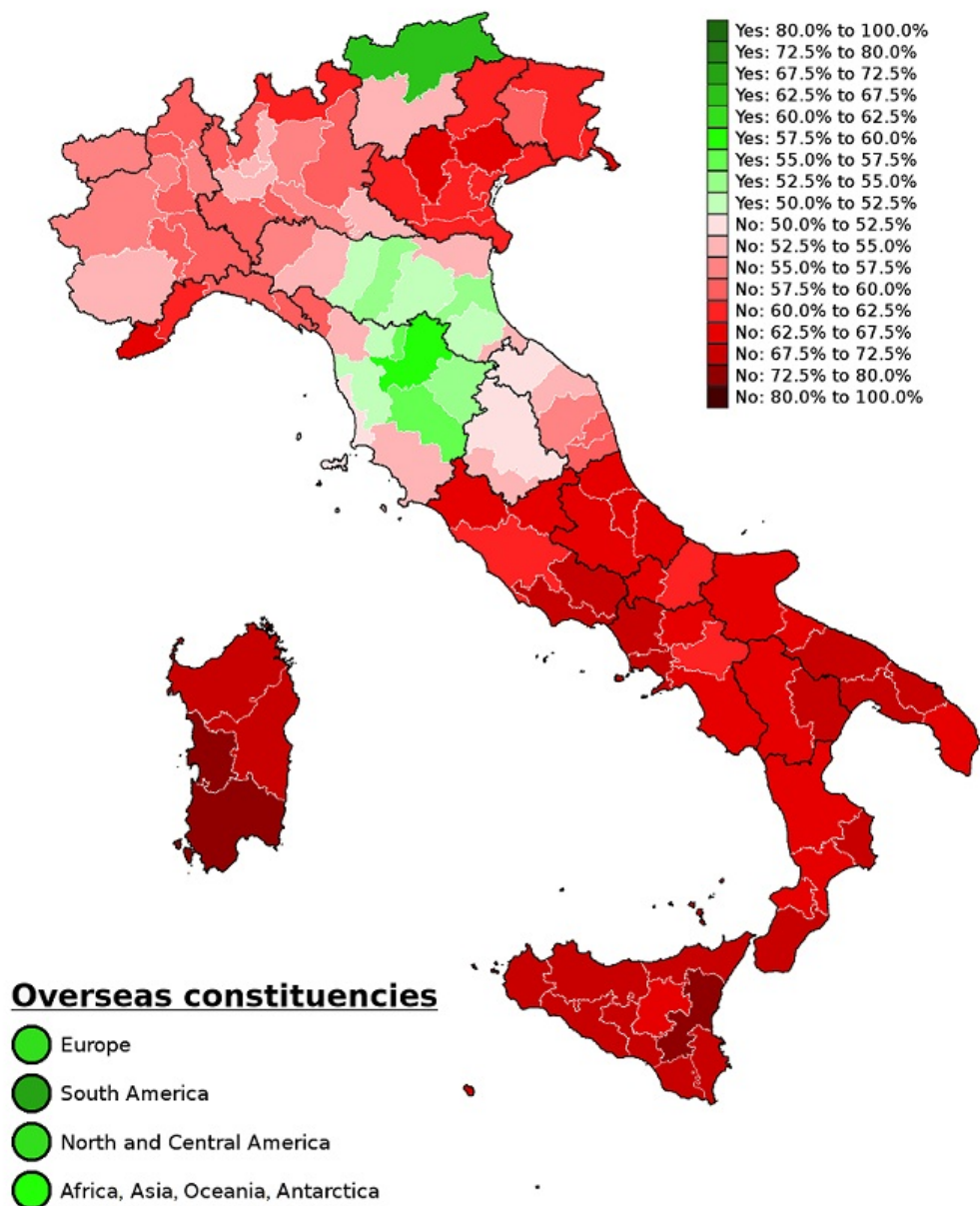


Check out [EUROPP's full coverage](#) of Italy's constitutional referendum.

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



Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#).

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 (*Süd-Tiroler 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

change for the Province without its consent. Furthermore, a vote in favour of the reform would signal South Tyrol's willingness to 'play ball' and underline its good relationship with Renzi's government.

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.

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