

The election of Italy's new president has strengthened Matteo Renzi's grip over Italian politics

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On 31 January, Sergio Mattarella, a former Constitutional Court judge, was elected as the new President of Italy. [James L. Newell](#) and [Arianna Giovannini](#) write that while the formal powers assigned to the President remain fairly limited, the appointment of Mattarella represented an important victory for Italy's Prime Minister, Matteo Renzi. They argue that the nature of the negotiations leading up to the new President's election highlight the authority Renzi now holds over his own party, but may have implications for Renzi's working relationship with former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi.



On 14 January, the 89 year-old Italian President Giorgio Napolitano resigned his position, making way for the election of a new President – the ex-Christian Democrat, and former Constitutional Court judge, Sergio Mattarella. The resignation, and the new President's election (on 31 January), came at a very delicate moment in Italian politics, coinciding as they do with concerted attempts by the centre-left Prime Minister, the 40-year old ex-mayor of Florence, Matteo Renzi, to push through much-needed electoral-law and constitutional reforms.



Background: Napolitano and the 2013 parliamentary election

Napolitano had come by his position in April 2013, following a [watershed election](#) the previous February – an election that had brought the country to the brink of ungovernability. Then, widespread disenchantment with the conduct of established politicians and the performance of the political class had led to the explosive growth of a popular protest movement, the [Movimento Cinque Stelle](#) (Five-star Movement, M5S) led by the comedian, Beppe Grillo. Winning 25 per cent of the vote, it had made significant inroads into the support of both centre left and centre right, leading to the impression of a country divided into three more-or-less equal segments, none of which could agree with either of the others; and importantly, thanks to the electoral system, it led to the lack of any overall majority in the upper house, the Senate.

This was significant because the Senate, which is elected at the same time as the lower house (the Chamber of Deputies), has exactly the same legislative powers as the former, and therefore has the power to install and unseat governments through votes of (no) confidence. Napolitano had been elected as President in 2006 and his mandate was due to expire shortly after the 2013 election. Then, Parliament – and the regional representatives which, together with the legislature, comprise the electoral college responsible for choosing presidents – found it impossible to agree on a successor.

Divided internally, the parliamentary parties had in desperation asked the only candidate with a chance of winning a compact vote on right and left – Napolitano – to stand for an unprecedented second term. Napolitano had made a condition of agreeing to the request for the formation of an equally unprecedented grand coalition government, whose principal components would be the centre-left [Partito Democratico](#) (Democratic Party, PD) and its 'arch enemy' on the centre right led by Silvio Berlusconi.

Renzi's reform efforts

In January of last year, Renzi had reached agreement with Berlusconi for electoral law reform and a reform of the Senate – reforms which on paper looked like having a good chance of being passed because, together, Renzi's party and that of Berlusconi commanded a clear majority and the two seemed to have a strong incentive to achieve

success given the threat posed by the M5S.

By sponsoring an electoral-law reform that provided for a majority seat bonus for the 'party or coalition' obtaining 37 per cent of the vote (and after later discussion, the 'party list' achieving 40 per cent), together with a run-off between the two best placed if none reached that percentage, Renzi and Berlusconi calculated that they would make life difficult for Beppe Grillo's Movement – which, by its nature, would find it harder to coalesce with other forces and so obtain the magic percentage or emerge as one of the top two.

But because it applied to the Chamber of Deputies only, the proposal was necessarily linked to a change in the constitutional position of the Senate that would limit its size, its legislative powers and its powers to install and unseat governments. Together, the reforms were widely viewed as being essential to improvements in the performance of Italy's institutions and thus to stemming the tide of popular dissatisfaction expressed by the M5S.



Matteo Renzi, Credit: Palazzo Chigi (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

Renzi and Berlusconi in the 2015 presidential election

It is for this reason, then, that the presidential election came at a critical juncture. First, passage of the twin reforms is by no means assured. For one thing, both centre left and centre right are internally divided on them; for another the reform paradox must be reckoned with – can one expect senators, ultimately, to support a reform that will result in them voting themselves out of office? Moreover, the Senate reform must be passed using the cumbersome procedure for constitutional amendment. This requires two separate votes in each of the houses taking place within three months of each other, and it can be made the subject of a popular referendum if it is passed with less than a two-thirds majority on the second vote in either of the houses.

Second – and here we come to the crux of the matter – the positions parties take in presidential elections inevitably impinge on the positions they take in negotiating with other parties on 'ordinary', substantive matters. This is especially true in the early twenty-first century where the President's actual, as opposed to formal, powers have become much more significant than they were in the past, thanks to the 'mediatisation' of politics and the relative weakness of the Italian parties.

In this case, Renzi was aware that the solidity of his 'reform pact' (the so-called *Patto del Nazareno*) depended on finding a presidential candidate amenable to Berlusconi. He also had to keep in mind that while only a simple majority is required to elect the President in the fourth round of voting, two-thirds majorities were required in the first three rounds of voting, and Renzi did not have the required numbers to reach that level of support.

The fact that Renzi's party was internally divided over the reform proposals and the collaboration with Berlusconi that they entailed, ensured that support from his own party was also far from assured. His tactic in the immediate aftermath of Napolitano's resignation was to refuse to be drawn on his choice of candidate and then to urge his followers (as Berlusconi did in the case of his followers) to cast a blank ballot in the initial three rounds of voting – while at the same time consulting Berlusconi in confidence. Neither man could afford to be seen as being the hostage of the other so they kept their cards close to their chests.

Thus it was that on 28 January, the day before the voting was due to begin, Berlusconi announced to his followers:

“we have not yet found a candidate. We will be in permanent consultations to find a presidential nominee able to guarantee our interests”. Meanwhile, Renzi announced, obliquely, to *his* followers: “The profile of the ideal candidate outlined during the course of the consultations was of one who would defend the Constitution, a politician acceptable to almost everyone – [but] we will not accept vetoes”.

In effect, the decision to advocate blank ballots in the first three rounds was a joint one on the part of Berlusconi and Renzi, who were aware of the difficulties in finding a mutually agreeable candidate able to succeed at that point, and aimed to postpone the real negotiations, which began in earnest on 29 January when Renzi publicly endorsed the candidature of Mattarella.

He had pulled a rabbit out of his hat: as a member of the PD who had once resigned as a minister in protest at legislation that would assist Berlusconi to build his media empire, Mattarella was opposed by Berlusconi. But the entrepreneur was aware that, as a widely respected politician who had been prominent in the fight against the Mafia, Mattarella would not only attract relatively cohesive support on the centre left but would attract the support of many on the centre right too.

He was thus left with a choice: either support Mattarella and appear to have caved in to Renzi, or urge his supporters to continue to cast blank ballots in the fourth round of voting, knowing that in the secrecy of the polling booth some might disobey him – with a corresponding dent to his authority. In the end, he chose the latter option and the blow to his authority was duly delivered: Mattarella was elected with 665 votes, almost a two thirds majority, in the process revealing a major split in Berlusconi’s party, since the number of blank ballots was about 40 less than the number of his followers.

Renzi’s victory

The outcome of the presidential election represents an important victory for Renzi because it reinforces his leadership of the PD, highlighting that he has substantially more authority over his party than many thought he would be capable of when he became leader at the end of 2013. It is also important for Renzi in terms of his relationship with Berlusconi.

The former Prime Minister, as is well known, has for years been widely criticised over conflicts of interest underlying his position as a prominent politician and as a significant entrepreneur. So Renzi was always vulnerable to criticisms within and outside his party (especially from the M5S) that the *Patto del Nazareno* was a kind of unholy alliance based on an exchange of favours, not all of which were likely to be legitimate. What the presidential election outcome does, then, is suggest that the Prime Minister is far less beholden to Berlusconi and his interests than Renzi’s critics have so far argued. And this too strengthens him.

While Renzi’s victory could put the deal on institutional reforms with Berlusconi in jeopardy, his confidence seems to suggest that he has played his cards right, if not with Berlusconi himself, perhaps with other members of the centre right. On the one hand, some among Berlusconi’s followers, feeling that they have been outmanoeuvred by Renzi, have spoken of the death of the *Patto del Nazareno*. Others have urged caution, aware of the dangers of appearing to subvert an agreement widely portrayed in the media as one that represents the best opportunity in at least a decade for a much needed overhaul of the political system.

On balance the [judgement](#) of Federico Santi seems correct, namely, that the manner of Mattarella’s election “will undoubtedly increase friction within and without the ruling coalition. It may complicate reform progress at the margin. However, it will not derail reforms or threaten political stability”.

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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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About the author

James L. Newell – *University of Salford*

James L. Newell is Professor of Politics in the School of Arts and Media at the University of Salford. He recently edited a special issue of the Italian journal *Polis* on [Politics, citizens' engagement and the state of democracy in Italy and UK](#) with Arianna Giovannini. He is Treasurer of the PSA's [Italian Politics Specialist Group](#).



Arianna Giovannini – *University of Huddersfield*

Arianna Giovannini is a Lecturer in Politics at the University of Huddersfield. Her research focusses on Italian and British Politics. She recently edited a special issue of the Italian journal *Polis* on [Politics, citizens' engagement and the state of democracy in Italy and UK](#) with James L. Newell. She is Co-Convenor of the PSA's [Italian Politics Specialist Group](#).



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