

The real problem in Italian democracy is not the electoral law, but Silvio Berlusconi's continued grip over the country's media

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*Italy's new prime minister Matteo Renzi has made electoral reform one of his key priorities, with a new electoral law currently under consideration in the Italian Senate, having been passed in the lower house of the Italian parliament last week. **Valentino Larcinese** writes that while Renzi may succeed in his attempts at electoral reform, the fact that he has relied on the support of Silvio Berlusconi carries its own cost. By offering Berlusconi a route back into frontline politics, Renzi has effectively contributed to the former Italian PM's political rehabilitation following his expulsion from parliament. Moreover, the preoccupation with electoral reform has obscured the fact that the foremost problem with Italian democracy still remains: Berlusconi's grip over the country's media.*



Anyone who cares about Italy can only wish the new government of Matteo Renzi 'good luck'. There are, unfortunately, many good reasons to remain doubtful about the chances of the new government to do any better than the one it replaces. It faces the same internal constraints: the same parliament, the same majorities and the same bureaucracy. It also faces the same external constraints and, in particular, the same limits to the possibility of implementing any serious expansionary policy, constraints that come from Brussels and financial markets. It requires a great deal of naivety to believe that the problem with previous governments was lack of active involvement, initiative, energy or political will, in general, rather than objective political constraints.

More careful observers, however, will notice that there is one important difference in the political landscape that led Mr Renzi to the premiership: that is the agreement with Silvio Berlusconi to pass a [new electoral law](#) that Mr Renzi intends to use to discipline the small parties in his coalition. That is not a government alliance of course (Berlusconi remains very wisely in opposition to prepare his come-back), but a sort of grand-coalition to pass Constitutional reforms and the new electoral law. Mr Berlusconi and Mr Renzi intend to pass an electoral law that will severely penalise small parties by imposing minimum thresholds to obtain seats in parliament of 8 per cent of votes (4.5 per cent if in a coalition with a big party). In fact this is the most important difference (and *de facto* the only difference) between their proposal and the *porcellum*, the electoral system invented by Berlusconi in 2006 in an attempt to create political gridlock at a time when he expected to be on the losing side. The proposal has already been passed in the lower house of the Italian parliament and is now being considered by the Senate.

The alliance between Berlusconi and Renzi means that from now on policy-making will happen in the shadow of electoral reform. This is particularly important for NCD (New Centre-Right) the group of MPs that left Berlusconi last November to continue to support the grand-coalition government of Enrico Letta. Polls suggest that they would not be able to pass any of the thresholds that Mr Berlusconi and Mr Renzi intend to introduce, which means that, if the new law is approved, they will have an interest in letting the legislature last for as long as possible. In the meantime Berlusconi's Forza Italia [remains](#) well above 20 per cent in the polls, in spite of their leader having been convicted for tax fraud and expelled from parliament.

Well, you may say, this is actually a smart move by Mr Renzi: the small parties that support his government will soon be in his pocket. He will therefore be able to enforce discipline and pass reforms in key areas of the economy and of public administration. This is the reason why Renzi is pushing so much for immediate electoral reform and this is also why his allies (and many in Renzi's own Democratic Party) are instead trying to procrastinate over it for as long as possible.

The problem with Renzi's strategy is that it comes with a huge cost: the political rehabilitation of Berlusconi, from convicted tax fraudster to founding father of the Italian constitution. In the end Berlusconi managed to survive once again, and once again he needs to thank a leader of the Italian left. It is indeed quite shocking to notice how much attention Italians have devoted to electoral and constitutional reforms in the last twenty years, never really tackling the most important anomaly in Italian democracy: Mr Berlusconi's conflict of interests, a level of influence on public television and of control over his own media empire, which is intolerable for a democratic country.

The Italian left has systematically underestimated the importance of this anomaly and Renzi is not an exception. On the contrary, one of the first preoccupations of Mr Renzi has been to reassure Berlusconi that his media conglomerate will not be touched. The ministry for economic development, which is responsible among other things for media and

telecommunications, has been given to Federica Guidi, a person known to be very close to Berlusconi, and the best guarantee that the tycoon's media empire is in safe hands. In fact, Ms Guidi is herself in a rather delicate position when it comes to conflict of interest: her family business (Ducati Energia, with over 700 employees in several countries) relies substantially on public procurement. Also, by placing Enrico Costa as a junior minister for justice, Renzi has provided further assurances to Berlusconi in another area which is of key importance for the former prime minister.

There is no reason to be surprised. Media pluralism has never featured in Renzi's busy agenda. The myth of salvation through constitutional reforms remains intact in the only country in the developed world that changes electoral law every decade. And yet, there is a high chance that any constitutional reform or any new electoral law will not improve the quality of democratic governance if the media are not freed and the quality of journalism and political debate does not improve. Still, nobody dares to tackle the main anomaly of Italian democracy. I wonder why?

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Matteo Renzi, Credit: Carlo Nidasio (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

