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# The failure of the referendum in Italy illustrates the problems that exist in reforming Europe although Matteo Renzi did make some mistakes

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Interview with Marc Lazar, professor of history and political sociology, director of the Centre d'Histoire de Sciences Po and Chairman of the School of Government of the University of Luiss in Rome.

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## 1. On 4th December the Italians voted by referendum on a major constitutional reform: the end of equal bicameralism via a reduction in the powers of the Senate. What were the political motives and issues at stake in this reform ?

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When he entered office in February 2014 the President of the Italian Council, Matteo Renzi clearly stated that one of his priorities would be to begin the reform of the institutions and of the voting method. For him this meant responding to a democratic problem that Italy was suffering to give the country stability and to make a strengthened executive more efficient. The reform comprised several features, the most important of which was the end of total or perfect bicameralism. After months of parliamentary debate, a bill was approved by Parliament in April 2016. Its main provisions comprise the reduction of the number of Senators from 315 to 100. The aim was for there to be 74 regional councillors and 21 mayors elected indirectly by the Regional Councils and 5 Senators to be appointed by the President of the Republic for a non-renewable mandate of 7 years. These Senators would not receive any parliamentary compensation but have a budget for any spending linked to their responsibilities. The Senate would have lost a major share of its present power. The President of the Council would no longer have needed to win its confidence,

only that of the Chamber of Deputies (Camera dei Deputati) would have been necessary. The Upper Chamber (Senato della Repubblica) would have been able to vote on some specific issues such as the constitutional reforms and laws, treaties concerning the European Union, law concerning the regions and the major cities and even those involving the referendums. The Senate would be able to examine the finance bill, but the Chamber of Deputies would be able to reject any possible modifications that it might want to bring by via a simple majority. In short the thing to remember is that if the Italians had approved this reform, the Chamber of Deputies would have had much greater power than the Senate. This reform did not win the approval of 2/3 of the MPs. In this case the Constitution provides that a popular consultation had to be organised with no quorum required in terms of turnout: in other words, whatever the electoral participation the reform would finally be approved or rejected. At the same time the government undertook a reform of the voting method (Italicum) in May 2016, which was not subject to referendum, but has been and continues to be a focus of public debate. The Italicum establishes that if a party wins 40% of the vote it will automatically win 55% of the seats, with the rest being distributed amongst the parties which have won over 3% of the vote. If no party wins 40%, a second round is organised between the two leading parties, with the winner of that round again taking 55% of the seats.

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**2. During the previous referendum it was seen that voters did not just vote on the text being submitted to them but also on much wider aspects. The Italian referendum seemed to be a referendum “against” Matteo Renzi. Why has the President of the Council been the focus of so much tension? Who are his opponents?**

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Indeed, this is true! This referendum was no exception to what you have said. The debate did not just simply focus on the virtues or shortcomings of this reform, but also on the person who promulgated it, ie the President of the Council. The latter paid, to a certain extent, for his provocative style, his way of seeing politics, and finally for the number of reforms he initiated. What do I mean by his provocative style? For example in 2014, when he stood before the Senators in a bid to win their confidence as President of the Council he explained to them that he hoped to be the last President of the Council who had to undertake an exercise like this! Matteo Renzi played the media coverage and personalisation card to the full. This led him to say at the beginning of the year that if he lost the referendum he would stop his political career. By doing this he turned the referendum into a plebiscite. The decline in his popularity and the failure of his party in the local elections last summer meant that he had to admit making a mistake, afterwards he softened his stance: he no longer speaks of withdrawing from public life, but the contrary. Then rapidly, seeing that the polls were turning towards a “no” vote, he again invested himself fully in the electoral campaign, continuing to turn the vote into a personal affair – which incidentally was inevitable since he always presented this reform as one of the key pieces in his programme. Finally, with his multiple reforms, for example of the labour market, education and even of the civil service, which has just been declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court<sup>1</sup>, he upset many Italians. Hence, a strong heterogeneous coalition formed calling to vote “no” to the referendum. The Northern League, Silvio Berlusconi’s Forza Italia (except for some leaders who support the “yes”), Fratelli d’Italia (far right), the 5 Stars Movement led by Beppe Grillo, various centrists including Mario Monti, the left of the left and the

minority left in the Democratic Party rallied together. Beyond the criticism they made of the content of the reform, one thing brings them together: they aimed to weaken and even get rid of Matteo Renzi, who of course no longer benefited from the state of grace he enjoyed in the beginning, but remained the most popular of Italian political leaders.

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**3. One of the major political phenomenon has been the rise of populism in Europe. How can this be applicable to the various Italian protest parties (Northern League, Five Stars Movement) and even to other parties? Is there anything specific about “Italian populism”?**

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Yes, Italy is experiencing a populist phenomenon. Moreover, it was perhaps the first to experience the rise of this type of movement that we now see in practically all democracies. We can quote four examples.

At the end of the 80’s and at the beginning of the 90’s the Northern League deployed the regionalist populism of the well-to-do that became soundly anchored in the richest part of the peninsula, enjoying a broad popular base (workers, craftsmen, traders and small business owners). The Northern League criticised Rome the Thief, vilified the entire political class, denounced immigrants with rare violence and, after having declared themselves pro-European, they quickly criticised the European Union. The founder, Umberto Bossi was a populist platform, who spoke crudely and rudely, his behaviour broke from traditional practices in politics, as he systematically called the people to oppose the elites. The Northern League has changed its political direction and it is now less regionalist and is trying to establish itself across the rest of the country, but its leader Matteo Salvini is a populist all the same. As of 1994, Silvio Berlusconi invented another form of populism even though Berlusconiism, which was Italy’s obsession for two decades, cannot not be reduced to this only. Silvio Berlusconi was three times the President of the Council and he revolutionised communication by using his media and television group. He represented another type of populist leader, that of the businessman who throws himself into politics pretending to embody the “new man” in contrast to the “system”, as he multiplied his contradictory promises,

1. [http://www.cortecostituzionale.it/documenti/sinossi/2016/2016\\_251.pdf](http://www.cortecostituzionale.it/documenti/sinossi/2016/2016_251.pdf)

attacking his enemies unrelentingly (the communists and the judges) and announcing a total break from the past. In brief a forerunner to Donald Trump.

The Five Stars Movement (M5S) illustrates many singular features. Its founder, Beppe Grillo, has absolute authority, and yet at the same time M5S practices a type of participative democracy via the social networks. It associates traditional left-wing proposals with post-modern left-wing themes (environment) with extreme right-wing positions, notably regarding migrants. It also attracts left and right-wing voters, as well as abstentionists. Firmly established across Italy as a whole, it attracts many young people, and the M5S remains high terms of voting intentions in spite of the problems it is encountering in Rome (where it is in charge of the town hall) for example, or because of some scandals that are now starting to emerge.

Finally, populism is contaminating the government parties in a way too, notably Matteo Renzi, who played this tune in a bid to try to provide people with a taste for politics again: hence his sometimes sweeping statements, his provocations, his wish to stand apart from the usual political classes, his bid to shake up traditional political practice, his body language and the way he dresses.

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#### **4. Italy, a founder of the European Union was one of the most “pro-European” countries. Now the polls show that this no longer seems to be the case. What lies behind this development?**

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Italy, one of the most pro-European countries, a co-founder of the European project swung over to euroscepticism a long time ago. It really started when Italy joined the euro zone after making many sacrifices. For most Italians the euro meant a loss in purchasing power, even though data contradicts this belief. Moreover, the South has undoubtedly benefited the least from the European Structural Funds. A certain number of credible personalities have advocated Italy's exit of the euro, which has not convinced the Italians, who mainly want to continue using the single currency. The European Union is now being brought into question because of its austerity policy and for the way it has managed the migrant flows, whose mass dramatic disembarkation Italy has witnessed on its

shores. Several parties have used criticism of Europe as a major political resource. This was striking in the 2013 election: Forza Italia, the Northern League, the Five Stars Movement constantly attacked the European Union with joint and different arguments. Matteo Renzi understood the rise of euroscepticism very well and played on both registers. On the one hand he denounced Brussels, the European Central Bank, Germany about austerity (by asking for budgetary flexibility, which he might just be achieving) and migrants (by not unjustifiably criticising the lack of decisions being taken at European level) on the one hand and, on the other, he has stood as the best European possible, reactivating the federalist tradition (this summer he organised the Ventotene meeting between Angela Merkel and François Hollande) and by reviving the idea of the “United States of Europe”.

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#### **5. What are the consequences of the victory of the “no” in Italy?**

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The wide victory of the “no” vote with over 59% and high turnout shows that this was a stinging failure for Matteo Renzi. He said that he would resign, handing in his resignation to the President of the Republic Sergio Mattarella. The latter will consult and try to find a solution, calling on someone who can form a government to redraft the electoral law. This might lead to early elections in 2017 or more surely in 2018, at the end of the legislature. But writing a new electoral law might take time. I do not believe that there will be early elections with the two different types of voting methods that exist at present in the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. In all events I cannot see how the 5 Stars Movement, one of the main winners in this election might enter office especially as it rejects any form of alliance. Either the elections will take place with the two present electoral laws, a majority voting method in the Chamber of Deputies and a fully proportional vote, and this would certainly lead to an inextricable situation (with a clear majority in the Chamber but not in the Senate). Or there will be a new voting method and one would imagine that the other parties will come to agreement in order to find one that will disadvantage the 5 Stars Movement.

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**6. In which way does the “no” open up a period of uncertainty for Italy? What impact might this have on the European Union?**

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Yes, a period of uncertainty has now opened up and the financial markets, just like the other heads of government do not like that – this is all the more the case since the economy and even more so, the

Italian banks, are weak. Italy is one of Europe’s major economies. After the Brexit the negative result in this referendum, which was not about Europe, is however a second major tremor for the European Union. Italy is not moving towards leaving the EU, nor the euro zone, except if there is a major monetary crisis, which I believe unlikely. However the failure of this referendum shows that there are problems in reforming Europe, even though Matteo Renzi did commit some mistakes.

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