

Who will succeed Sergio Mattarella as President of the Italian Republic?

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ANALYSIS

On 24 January, the procedure for the election of the President of the Italian Republic will begin. The mandate of the outgoing head of state, Sergio Mattarella, expires on 3 February. With two weeks to go before the election, the race is very much open. No single personality has emerged as a candidate for the supreme office.

In Italy, the president of the Republic is an important figure who, even if he has limited powers, has often reassured Italians during political crises, which are frequent in the peninsula.

Sergio Mattarella was elected President of the Italian Republic on 31 January 2015 by 655 votes (out of 995 voters) in the fourth round of voting. He succeeded Giorgio Napolitano, who had resigned on 14 January.

THE SILVIO BERLUSCONI OPTION

Silvio Berlusconi (Forza Italia, FI) has made his wish to accede to the supreme magistracy public. Considering the composition of the college of electors, the game seems mathematically playable for the former president of the Council (1994-1995, 2001-2006 and 2008-2011). The right-wing parties have a sufficient number of votes (around 45% of the electors) to impose their candidate in the fourth round of voting, provided that they are united in their support for the candidate.

Forza Italia, Fratelli d'Italia (FdI) led by Giorgia Meloni and the Northern League (Lega) led by Matteo Salvini, support Silvio Berlusconi but each of these parties is in fact thinking of the next move. Matteo Salvini has a vested interest in seeing the former Prime Minister take over the Quirinal, (the residence of the Italian heads of state): this would mean that he would "leave" the political scene and thus prevent him from having any influence on the Italian right. As for Giorgia Meloni, she would undoubtedly prefer to see the current Council President, Mario Draghi, take over the supreme office, which might lead to the organisation of an early parliamentary election. "Public support for Silvio Berlusconi by the Italian Brotherhood and the League is

a way of ensuring that Forza Italia remains in the right-wing alliance for the post-legislative period," analyses Giovanni Orsina, a political scientist at Luiss University.

However, many political analysts doubt Silvio Berlusconi's ability to embody national unity. "Silvio Berlusconi, who considers himself to be the most important Italian politician of the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st, believes that Italy has not acknowledged his historical importance. To be elected President of the Republic at the end of his career would be a rehabilitation of his role and his person", said Giovanni Orsina, adding: "if he were to be elected, there is a risk that half of Italy would consider his election a scandal".

The so-called *Cavaliere* was banned from holding public office for several years in 2013 after being found guilty of tax fraud. Several legal proceedings are still underway against him on suspicion of corruption of witnesses and prostitution of minors. Silvio Berlusconi nevertheless has political rights, which were restored to him in 2018.

THE MARIO DRAGHI OPTION

Mario Draghi, President of the Council since February 2021, is the favourite candidate of many politicians. However, his supporters would like him to stay in office until the next parliamentary elections in early 2023. The former president of the European Central Bank (ECB) (2011-2019), who describes himself as "a grandfather at the service of the institutions", said his cabinet had "created the conditions to continue work, regardless of who leads the government" until the end of the legislature. "The decision is entirely up to the

political forces, which by forming a very broad coalition have allowed this government to act," said Mario Draghi.

However, if he were elected President of the Republic, it is not clear whether his successor as head of government could rally the political parties and obtain the same broad support as he enjoys. The President of the Council heads a broad government coalition that brings together right-wing and (the League, Forza Italia), left-wing parties (Enrico Letta's Democratic Party (PD), Free and Equal (LeU) led by Pietro Grasso), the Five Star Movement (M5S) led by Giuseppe Conte and several independents. The parties are united around the need to manage the €209 billion of European funds allocated to Italy in the context of the health crisis and intended for the country's recovery.

However, if the parties are divided over the election of the head of state, will they be able to remain united within the government, especially in the run-up to the parliamentary elections? Nothing is less certain.

Many see the Minister of Economy and Finance, the independent Daniele Franco, as the successor to Mario Draghi should he become President. Analysts foresee what they call a Mattarella II scenario, which would witness the re-election of the current President of the Republic who would somehow "commit" to resigning from office in one or two years. This scenario, a first in the history of the peninsula since the establishment of the presidency of the Republic in 1948, became a reality in 2013 when, following numerous setbacks, the head of state, Giorgio Napolitano, was re-elected after six rounds of voting. This came in the wake of a new crisis after the parliamentary elections of 24 and 25 February 2013. In Italy, no President of the Council has ever directly become President of the Republic.

THE PRESIDENTIAL FUNCTION IN ITALY

The President of the Republic occupies an essentially honorary position in the peninsula. He is also traditionally a prestigious figure. As guarantor of the Constitution and the unity of the country, he has three essential powers: the power to dissolve Parliament (except during the last quarter of his term), the power to veto the government proposal made to him after

the parliamentary elections and the power to refer a law back to the parliamentarians on two grounds (if he deems the text to be unconstitutional or if he considers that a proposed measure is not properly financed).

In April 2018, Sergio Mattarella thus refused to appoint Paolo Savona as Minister of Economy and Finance because of his Eurosceptic positions, a decision he explained to his compatriots in a televised address. Three years later, in January 2021, he announced that despite the fall of the government of Council President Giuseppe Conte (M5S), Italy would not hold early parliamentary elections due to the coronavirus pandemic and the need to revive the country economically.

The President of the Italian Republic is elected for seven years (with no limit on the number of terms) by secret ballot by a college of electors who meet in the Montecitorio Palace, seat of the Chamber of Deputies. This college comprises 630 members of the Chamber of Deputies, 315 senators, 6 senators for life (former presidents of the Republic) and 58 representatives of the 20 regions of the country (3 per region except for the Valle d'Aosta, which appoints only one), making a total of 1,009 electors in 2022.

The president, who will be elected in 2022, will be the last to be elected with such a large college of electors. In fact, the Constitution was amended in 2020: the revision reduced the number of deputies from 630 to 400 and the number of senators from 315 to 200. The number of members of regional councils sitting in the college of electors was also reduced to maintain the existing balance between the latter and the parliamentarians. This measure, which was adopted in a referendum held on 20 and 21 September 2021 (69.96% "yes" vote, turnout: 51.12%), will not be effective until after the next parliamentary elections.

In the first three rounds of the presidential election, a candidate must win at least two-thirds of the electorate's votes, i.e. 673 votes. From the fourth round onwards, a simple majority (505 votes) is sufficient to be elected.

Traditionally, the President of the Italian Republic is a man of consensus who brings together all political parties. He usually wins the votes of the majority of the electorate on his name.

If no candidate is elected President of the Republic after the first three rounds of voting, Italy does not have to hold early parliamentary elections. Voting continues until a head of state is finally appointed. In 1971, Giovanni Leone was elected after 23 rounds of voting.

According to an opinion poll conducted by Demos and the University of Urbino, three out of four Italians are in favour of direct election of the head of state by universal suffrage. The current procedure for appointing the president in Italy is explained by the fact that after the Second World War, the constitution makers wanted to prevent the emergence of a new Benito Mussolini. Another Demos poll shows that Mario Draghi is the person most likely to be chosen by his compatriots, followed by Silvio Berlusconi and the outgoing President of the Republic, Sergio Mattarella.

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