

## Bologna Institute for Policy Research

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Speakers: Mark Gilbert, Professor of History and International Studies, Johns Hopkins University SAIS Bologna Center, Italy; Gianfranco Pasquino, James Anderson Senior Adjunct Professor, Johns Hopkins University SAIS Bologna Center, Italy

Moderator: Erik Jones, Director of European Studies and Director of the Bologna Institute for Policy Research, Johns Hopkins University SAIS

### **2013: Critical Elections in Italy**

A few days before the Italian general election, the three speakers offered an overview of the major political forces, the most important issues and the potential outcomes of the electoral race. They all agreed that a divisive political outcome would have a destabilizing impact on the economy of Italy and of the Eurozone in general.

Professor Jones opened the discussion by explaining why following Italian politics is important. Italy's political scene attracts world attention because it is now the country with the second largest sovereign debt burden in the Eurozone. A net creditor to the EU until July 2011, Italy's transition to a net debtor placed the whole Eurozone in jeopardy. Instability resurfaced a year later, in July 2012, when ECB President Mario Draghi had to pull the Eurozone out of its "existential crisis" by reassuring the markets of the central bank's commitment to ending the slowdown. Mario Monti's technocratic government also reintroduced confidence in the Italian economy and created a new faith that Italy will adopt much-needed reforms. However, Monti's resignation in December 2012 and the announcement of early elections renewed uncertainty. While Italian bond prices have been relatively stable before the elections, private loans are still hard to secure and bankruptcies are common. According to Jones, the economic situation can improve but only if the elections produce a politically stable outcome. It is therefore worth untangling Italian politics for its implications for the future of the European economy in general.

Professor Gilbert gave a comprehensive overview of the main political parties and coalitions that are running in what he called the most important Italian elections since the "landmark" ones of 1992. On the left of the political spectrum, a coalition between Pier Luigi Bersani's PD (Partito Democratico) and SEL (Sinistra Ecologia Libertà) seems to be leading the polls and is likely to get the majority prize that the electoral system grants to the most popular party. SEL, led by Nichi Vendola, the current governor of Puglia, represents the far left as it has emerged from post-Communism and emphasizes its commitment on social issues and the ecology. On the right, the biggest coalition includes Silvio Berlusconi's PdL (Popolo della Libertà) and Lega Nord (LN). Roberto Maroni, a former Minister of Interior under Berlusconi's government, is the LN-leader who made the controversial decision to align with Berlusconi for another election. The two leaders however are proposing a third politician, Angelino Alfano, for the premiership.

Smaller and newer parties cover the rest of the political range in the electoral race. Scelta Civica (Civic Choice) is an alliance of political groups around the outgoing Prime Minister, Mario Monti. His “civic list” includes not only politicians like the former Christian-Democrat Pier Ferdinando Casini and Gianfranco Fini, but also members of the civil society that have confidence in Monti’s ability to improve the economic situation. The Five Star Movement, led by the comedian Beppe Grillo, has also emerged as a potentially successful political force. For Gilbert, the party’s success is a “testimony to the remarkable ability of Italian politics for innovation” in the form of new political faces. Grillo’s movement represents public disgust with the state of politics and the emergence of a *qualunquismo* movement, an effort to remove party politics from the operation of the government. The new right represented by Fratelli D’Italia and the Rivoluzione Civile party, the latter of which is led by former investigating magistrate Antonio Ingroia, complete the range of political choices. In addition, two “wild cards” that have entered the race could influence the outcome indirectly. Oscar Giannino, leader of the Stop the Decline (Fare per Fermare il Declino) alliance, was recently found to have fabricated his CV, leaving Lombardy, the biggest electoral region, up for grabs by either of the two major coalitions.

Professor Pasquino completed the picture of the electoral race by referring to potential outcomes and the main challenges that the new government will have to tackle. The Center-Left coalition seems bound to win and Bersani to become the Prime Minister, while Berlusconi’s defeat will mean that he will be left out of the political arena. In the event that the Center-Left lacks a sufficient majority, Pasquino thinks that it will align with Monti’s party. One possible surprise that he forecasted was a better performance for Grillo’s movement, perhaps even better than Berlusconi’s PdL/LN coalition, based on the support of young, center-right voters who see no better alternative on offer. In either case, the challenges for the winning coalition will start after election day. In the past, center-left coalitions have been successful in the polls but have faced significant obstacles in their attempt to govern.

The first important challenge for the new government will be the election of a new President of the Republic by May 15. The exact composition of the Parliament will be decisive for this very important political role. The outgoing President Giorgio Napolitano for example was to a large extent responsible for keeping the Berlusconi government in check and for choosing Monti. The electoral outcome will therefore have significant implications for the political system in the longer term, since the President’s tenure is for seven years. Finally, the other often-overlooked challenge for the new government will be governing with an inexperienced and therefore incompetent Parliament. If the majority of the new Parliament is composed of new politicians without previous experience with political procedures, the government’s efforts might be easily obstructed and delayed.

Pasquino concluded that the election is unlikely to produce significant change in the Italian political system. Instead what is necessary is a new vision, a leader that will bring innovation to the political arena. Along the same lines, Jones argued in closing the discussion that while economic reforms might be beneficial in the short term, what is more important is the reintroduction of confidence that only a stable political system can provide.