

Bologna Institute for Policy Research

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Speakers: **Donatella Campus**, Associate Professor of Political Science, University of Bologna; **Justin O. Frosini**, Adjunct Professor of Constitutional Law, Johns Hopkins University SAIS Europe; Associate Professor at Bocconi University, **Gianfranco Pasquino**, Senior Associate Fellow, Johns Hopkins University SAIS Europe

Chair: **Erik Jones**, Professor of European Studies and International Political Economy at Johns Hopkins University SAIS Europe

**BIPR webinar:
Italy: No Country for Trivial Elections**

On 20th and 21st September 2020, Italians went to the polls for regional elections and for a national constitutional referendum to reduce the number of parliamentarians. While the center-left coalition led by *Partito Democratico* (PD) won 3 regional seats, the center-right coalition led by Matteo Salvini's *Lega* was successful in 4 regions, and the constitutional referendum passed with around 70% approval. As the results started to come in on Monday night, Professors Campus, Frosini and Pasquino joined Professor Jones to assess the performance of Italian political actors and to discuss the implications of these elections for the country's future.

Unpacking the election results, the speakers underline the role played by populism. Campus, who studies political communication and leadership, explains that supporters employed a very clear political message rooted in populism for the constitutional referendum: "we can cut the number of these parliamentarians because they are a needless expense." This political message, which Frosini describes as "pure gold populism," was successful. Pasquino elaborates that this ties in with M5S' anti-expertise stance, which he argues has proven false during the COVID-19 crisis where health experts played critical roles.

Incumbency is also stressed for having been an influential electoral factor in the regional elections, in particular -Campus emphasizes- for those presidents who showed to be in command during the COVID-19 crisis. This is the case of the De Luca in Campania and especially that of Luca Zaia for whom the successful management of pandemic crisis is likely to have contributed to a landslide win in Veneto. On the other hand, Giorgia Meloni's capable leadership of the rightwing *Fratelli d'Italia* (Fdi) also guided her party to victory in Marche, notes Pasquino, where the center-left coalition led by PD lost control.

Discussing the merits of the constitutional changes, all three speakers admit they were not in favor of the reform. According to Pasquino, the reduction of parliamentarians will produce a twofold consequence: on the one hand, the parliamentarians will inevitably provide less political representation to the voters and, on the other hand, they will encounter major difficulties in monitoring the activities of the government. Frosini argues that, rather than reducing the number of parliamentarians, Italy needs to transform the Senate into a body that represents regional governments. Frosini suggests that Italy follow the German constitutional model and stresses that all parts of the model should be taken with no cherry-picking.

Touching on the fate of the Italian political actors after the elections, Professor Campus notes that the rise of leaders like Zaia and Meloni demonstrate that Salvini is not the only indisputable leader of the center-right anymore. Regarding the ruling coalition (PD and MS5), Professors Frosini and Pasquino express their belief that it will likely continue until the 2023 elections, assuming the politicians make no major mistakes. The government's biggest challenge remains the proper management of EU funds for the economic recovery after the devastation left by the COVID-19 crisis.

In his closing remarks, Professor Jones explains that, despite many observers' apprehension, the elections did not produce results that destabilize Italian and European politics. Instead, Italian voters expressed their approval of how well Italy was run during the pandemic. The notion that competence is rewarded, Jones remarks, remains important.