

Italy - Presidential Election: Blank Ballots on Day One

(January 29, 2015)



On Day One of the election for the twelfth president of Italy, the polling opened in the Chamber of Deputies at 3 pm. Four hours later the vote is still being counted, but results show clearly that no one was elected today. The two parties of a pre-election pact, Premier Matteo Renzi's Partito Democratico (PD) and former Premier Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia (FI), had agreed to vote blank ballots today, and did. But tomorrow is another day, and the voting continues.

ROME - The moment of truth is at hand. On Day One of the election for the twelfth president of Italy, the polls opened in the Chamber of Deputies at 3 pm. At this writing, the vote is almost complete and shows 536 blank ballots by comparison with 360 for specific candidates such as former magistrate Ferdinando Imposimato with 120 votes. The two parties which had made a pact to cooperate, Premier Matteo Renzi's Partito Democratico (PD) and former Premier Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia (FI), had agreed to vote blank ballots, and did. But tomorrow is another day, and the voting continues.



Altogether 1,009 are entitled to vote: 630 from the Chamber of Deputies; 315 from the Senate; 58 delegates from the 20 regions; and six lifetime senators. Among the latter is former president (twice) Giorgio Napolitano, who received a standing ovation when he entered the Chamber. At this writing

In fairness, no result was expected today because for the first three ballots a two-thirds majority, or 673 votes, is required. Although this has actually happened in three previous elections, agreement on a candidate is easier later because for the fourth and successive votes a simple majority of only 505 votes is necessary. If no choice is made by this weekend, a risky stalemate could ensue, in “an Armageddon,” said TV commentator Enrico Mentana this afternoon.

Normally two ballots take place on Day Two, Friday, Jan. 30, but Premier Matteo Renzi may try to speed up the process by calling for three. In theory, at least, the PD vaunts between 430 and 450 votes from 307 deputies, 108 senators and perhaps 30 regional delegates plus a few life senators, making Renzi’s PD in pole position for a winning candidate. Renzi had to work hard to bring around his minority rebels to back Sergio Mattarella, but succeeded with generous help from the party’s former general secretary, Pierluigi Bersani.

Already Scelta Civica, the party created by former premier Mario Monti, with 32 votes, has declared for Mattarella. Uncertainties remain, however. Although in theory only 60 more votes would be needed besides those of the PD, in the secrecy of the ballot box some PD rebels may still reject party dictates. During the last presidential election of 2013, one out of four in the PD secretly defected, in a debacle resolved only by the restoration of Napolitano. Unlike 2013, Italy has a government, but this election severely tests Renzi’s capacity to lead both government and his party.

High court justice Mattarella, 74, an expert in constitutional law, is an unusual politician – reputable, intelligent and soft spoken. Behind him is a tragic family history. Born in Sicily, he was the son of a powerful Christian Democratic party (DC) boss, Bernardo Mattarella. But when Sergio’s older brother Piersanti entered Sicilian politics and rose to become president of the Sicilian Region, he was murdered by the Mafia in 1980. At that point Sergio, in his thirties, himself entered politics, and was elected to the Chamber of Deputies in 1983 representing Western Sicily for the now defunct DC.

Since that time Mattarella has held high office in several governments, including that of Giulio Andreotti in 1989. And therein lies a tale. When a law giving definitive recognition of Berlusconi’s nationwide TV networks risked failure in 1990, Andreotti forced its passage by calling a vote of confidence on the entire government. Sergio Mattarella, Andreotti’s interior minister, resigned on the spot, saying: “We hold that, to seek a vote of confidence in order to violate a Community directive is unacceptable in principle.”

Mattarella later supported Romano Prodi as head a center-left governing coalition and then served as Defense Minister under the governments of Massimo D’Alema on the left and Giuliano Amato on the center-right.

Trying to hammer out an agreement, Renzi and Berlusconi met for two hours Wednesday, only to agree to disagree. Despite their year-long so-called “Nazareno Pact” Berlusconi refused Mattarella’s candidacy, offering instead former premier Giuliano Amato. The PD rejected the Amato candidacy, and after this duel of vetoes, this afternoon Berlusconi declared that the Nazareno Pact between the two is finished.

The victory of a dark horse cannot be ruled out. Given the fragmented parties – 13 in all – Renzi faces a tough time, and not only from his enemies. Interior Minister Angelino Alfano is Renzi’s present partner in government. Looking ahead to this crucial election for a seven-year presidential term, Alfano’s Nuovo Centro Destra (NCD) – a breakaway faction from Silvio Berlusconi’s Forza Italia – is now making common cause with the smaller Unione di Centro (UDC). Together known as “Area Popolare,” they have 77 votes, and the first thing Alfano did was to hunker down, not with his PD governing partner, but with Berlusconi, until now Alfano’s bitter political rival; together they control a hefty packet of 220 votes. As a footnote, one cannot ignore that Berlusconi himself is less than happy at not being a candidate..



Despite much talk of a female candidate, there is no serious woman candidate although veteran journalist Luciana Castellina received a few votes. On the other hand, the election process is literally in the hands of four ranking women politicians. Laura Boldrini is president of the Chamber of Deputies and as such calling out the results. Valeria Fedeli, who is vice president of the Senate, is acting president of the Senate, whose president, Piero Grasso, is sitting in for Napolitano. And the secretaries general of the Chamber and Senate are both women, respectively Livia Pagano and Elisabetta Serafin.

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