



What is in a Name? Primary Elections, Italian Style

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A attempt to explain what Italians really mean when they speak about “primary elections”

What is in a name? William Shakespeare led us to believe that the answer to this question is nothing at all. Well, maybe when it comes to love affairs and family fights the poet was right. But if the object of interest is politics the answer should be quite different. No, this is not another article about political dynasties, family traditions in national politics, or other similar themes. Here we try to undertake a very hard, although fascinating “mission”: explaining to an American audience something virtually incomprehensible. Namely, what do Italians really mean when they speak about “primary elections”?

In the United States primary elections are serious business. Currently they are required by state law in several American states, and are organized by the US government just like any other election. They are – or at least should be – legally flawless. In some particular cases, such as in the so-called “non-partisan primary” of the state of Louisiana, the winner of the primary can be directly catapulted into public office, skipping the general election. Setting aside the legal/institutional aspects, politically speaking primary elections are and always were a fundamental guarantee of political competition in the United States. On one hand, primary elections solved the huge competition problem that all the “one-party-regions” once had. On the other hand, the primary season is currently used by political parties at all levels to choose their leadership and bridge the gap among contrasting factions of the same party.

In Italy the situation is quite different. To begin with, no Italian law requires primary elections. Italians started hearing about this funny type of election (invented in the United States!) around 2004. The Italian media covered the American primaries at some length, politicians started commenting and discussing this peculiar institution on national television, and the Italian people learned something they didn’t know about democracy: in a truly democratic country you get to pick your party’s candidate! That’s pretty much everything Italians know about primary elections. During an undergraduate Political Science class at the University of Naples in 2001, when a class of 300 students was asked about primary elections, not one student was able to give a complete answer. That’s quite a leap from not knowing what a primary election is to actually taking part in one!

Italian citizens had a chance to vote in their first primary election leading up to the general political elections of 2006. Romano Prodi’s center-left coalition, created especially for that election under the name “L’Unione”, organized and held a primary election to choose their candidate for Prime Minister. But, wait a minute... Why should Italians choose a party’s – or a coalition’s – candidate for Prime Minister if they don’t even get to vote for this candidate? In fact, Italians do not elect their Prime Minister. They only vote for the legislative body: the national Parliament. It’s the Parliament that in some way “elects” the Prime Minister, when it votes to grant its “confidence” to a new government. Until recently the voters could only guess who would be the Prime Minister, for there was no



candidate to the premiership during the election campaign. Actually, not many years ago it was virtually impossible to even know which parties would make up the coalitions before the ballots were cast.

Since the Berlusconi earthquake the rules of the game have changed quite a bit. In 2006 the center-left coalition decided that the Italian people should have the ability to select their candidate for Prime Minister in a "primary election". Interestingly enough, the only candidate in this primary was Romano Prodi, a former Italian Prime Minister, President of the European Commission and "front-runner" of the center-left coalition since day one of the Berlusconi administration. Mr. Prodi had to face token opposition from the leader of the Green Party - which gathers something like 1 to 2 per cent of the national vote election after election - and from the head of the leading Communist Party (Rifondazione Comunista), which gathers the vote of all the extreme-left communist contingent - representing 7 to 9 percent of the total vote. All candidates in this "primary" admitted that their opposition to Mr. Prodi was only symbolic and that they would be part of his government as soon as he won the primary and the general election against Berlusconi.

So, the 2006 Italian primary elections were quite peculiar from an American perspective: they were held by a private organization that somewhat resembled a political coalition; there was a sort of "polling tax" that people had to pay in order to take part in the election; the name of the winner was widely known way before a single vote was even cast. Nonetheless, with a little bit of imagination one could define that event a primary election.

But then came along this novel idea of an actual political party replacing the strange coalitions that election after election put together a number of small and extra-small political parties. The new party will be called "Partito Democratico" (PD), maybe to recall the American Democratic Party. And, since this party calls itself democratic, the people are being summoned to elect its leadership - that is... to vote in "primary elections".

Now, an American would ask: "What kind of candidate, for what kind of public office are Italians going to vote on October 14th?". The answer is surprisingly simple: no candidate for no office! What is going to happen next Sunday has indeed nothing to do with primary elections. Italians, or better yet, supporters of the newborn PD, are going to elect the head of the party and its board of directors. That's it. No one will choose any candidate for any office. The Italian media and even some politicians keep talking about primaries, but there are not going to be any primaries, just an internal election of the party's formal leadership. Of course, calling this election a "primary election" leads us to think that its winner will also be the new party's choice for Prime Minister at the next elections, but - given the Italian political tradition, and the absence of any legislation in this regard - there is no assurance that this will be the institutional outcome of next Sunday's internal party election.

October 14th will undoubtedly be an exercise in democracy. At least one million people are expected to cast their ballot to elect the national leadership of the new party and its secretary (almost certainly Walter Veltroni, the popular mayor of Rome). But it won't be a primary election in any sense this term may possibly have - at least from the standpoint of the country that indeed invented "the primaries".



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