Everything Must Change to Stay the Same

The Failed Promise of the New Italian Electoral Reform

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As the Italian government led by Giorgia Meloni prepares to enter the final year of its term, already the longest running executive of the 80 years old Republic, its latest move has been the approval of new electoral legislation. This reform had been long awaited as one of the predominant electoral promises of the *Fratelli d'Italia* party back in 2022. However, the final text is both a far cry from the original aspirations and a potential political misfire. Ultimately, the reform seems to fail on one of its main promises: a more stable party system.

The Electoral Reform

The Italian system of government has always suffered from extreme instability. Ruling parties from both sides of the aisle, over the years, have put forward their proposals to overcome this problem and ultimately reduce the number of alternating executives – so far 68 in 80 years. Giorgia Meloni, in her 2022 campaign, proposed her own ambitious constitutional reform to overhaul the country's institutional makeup. In 2023, the government introduced a constitutional reform bill to directly elect the prime minister, and automatically grant the winning party 55% of seats in Parliament. Meloni called this "the mother of all reforms". However, the proposal was not pursued further.

After the failed constitutional reform concerning the judiciary, the electoral reform was introduced as ordinary legislation. Yet, it did not lack its setbacks. In July 2026, the provisional text was rejected by the Chamber of Deputies, where many in the governmental coalition voted with the opposition. Moreover, it was subject to several amendments to remove blatantly unconstitutional provisions. Nonetheless, the revised bill was approved in October 2026. Nicknamed "Stabilicum", after its objective of improving the stability of the executive, the law's main feature is its proportional system boosted by a "majority bonus".

Furthermore, the reform seeks to fulfil the promise of more direct choice in representatives by allowing voters to indicate their preferred candidates for individual seats (to a certain extent) and it demands that parties/coalitions indicate the name of their candidate for prime minister on the ballot.

Additionally, the reform imposes additional burdens on new parties seeking to participate in elections, changes to how representatives of Italians residing abroad are elected, and potentially undermines gender balance on the ballot.

On the bright side, however, the reform newly allows persons temporarily living away from their legal residence (such as students going to university in a different city) to vote where they are staying.

Overall, this is a modest proposal compared to what was announced and feared years ago. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise the reform's potential shortcomings, especially in anticipation of the Constitutional Court's pronunciation on the matter.

The Contested Majority Bonus

The concept of majority bonus is highly controversial. On one hand, its legacy is associated with Mussolini, who was the last head of government to implement this policy at the national level, paving the way for his dictatorship. It is also reminiscent of a similar infamous feature in the Hungarian electoral system, as designed by Viktor Orban during his autocratic turn, whereby a relative majority of the vote (i.e. under 50%) can become a 2/3 supermajority in parliament. On the other hand, however, this system has been successfully in use for over a decade at the regional and municipal

level in Italy, improving governability by removing deadlocks.

The main concerns relate to distorted representation, increased polarization, and executive overreach. Firstly, from the perspective of representative democracy, the majority bonus seems to undo much of what the (re)introduction of preference votes and the naming the prime ministerial candidate on the ballot were meant to achieve. The extra seats would be filled by lists/candidates who did not win enough votes on their own but entered Parliament indirectly through the "bonus" back door. This sits uneasily with the internal logic of the reform, namely, having more direct representation.

Secondly, in the highly fragmented Italian political system, the initial proposal that a relative majority (usually at around 35-37% at best) could occupy 55% of the seats appeared considerably disproportionate. Such majority would have the power to adopt constitutional amendments, elect the President of the Republic, and appoint judges to the Constitutional Court.

The law that passed through Parliament, however, is a much more tempered version of these initial aspirations. The threshold for accessing the bonus has been set at 42% of the consensus for a party or coalition in both chambers. The bonus itself is a maximum of 70 extra seats in the Chamber of Deputies and 35 in the Senate, which amounts to a 56% majority. Moreover, the maximum number of deputies and senators obtained through the bonus is 220 and 113 respectively (out of 600 total seats), meaning that no supermajority can be produced artificially.

However, the law will now have to pass the hurdle of constitutional review. The Constitutional Court already deliberated twice on majority bonuses. In ruling 1/2014, it struck down the proposal due to the absence of a minimum threshold of votes to trigger the award of the bonus. The Stabilicum clears that bar. In ruling 35/2017, the Court found that the majority bonus was not per se unconstitutional. In that case, 40% of the vote would have resulted in a 54% majority, although only in the Chamber. According to the Court, this was not manifestly unreasonable, as it struck a balance between representativeness and sufficient lawmaking power (but was nonetheless rejected via referendum). It remains to be seen whether a bonus that applies in both Chambers, with a higher threshold but also a larger share of seats, will pass the reasonableness test the Constitutional Court set out in 2017.

Other Problematic Provisions

Even though the majority bonus is the most eye-catching provision in the act, there are a number of smaller provisions that do not seem to strike the correct balance between stability and democracy. The reform has raised the threshold for new parties to be able to run in elections from 1,500 to 6,000 signatures per constituency, amounting to up to 450,000 signatures to run nation-wide. No such requirement is necessary for parties already present in Parliament as of 2025. This creates a double standard that is hard to justify. Although it is clear that the reform seeks to move towards a more bipolar system, allegedly for the sake of stability, this provision appears to considerably burden democratic participation.

Additionally, the legislation introduces the gerrymandering of the votes from Italians residing abroad. It does so by abolishing (most) territorial districts, which had been designed to represent the distinct cultural heritage of Italian communities spread across the world. This is predicted to create an advantage for centre-right parties, who tend to have more consensus in the most populous areas and would thus be able to earn most of the 12 seats assigned this way – overturning the traditional success of the centre-left in this area. Interestingly, these seats do not count for the purposes of reaching the 42% threshold. Nonetheless, they would be added on top of the 56% bonus, potentially granting a few extra votes to the majority.

Lastly, the new system that allows parties to lock in their leading candidates for each list does not require a gender balance. As Articles 3 and 51 of the Constitution demand positive efforts towards equal opportunities, the reform's wording falls short on this particular obligation (although it does require gender balance for other lists and candidates). In a global landscape in which rejecting inclusion has become a hallmark of democratic backsliding, and given

Meloni's role as a champion of this movement, this provision should be seen, at the very least, as a performative anti-feminist move, one that opens the door to potential abuse further down the line.

Stable Only in Name

Despite all these measures, the irony is that the reform is unlikely to build strong majorities which will increase governments' longevity, trust, and international reliability. Indeed, its key provision, the majority bonus, may not even be activated in the elections of 2027.

At present, no party/coalition is polling close to 42%. The right-wing ruling majority is close but would need to court the votes of a new far-right party, *Futuro Nazionale*, which has been polling at around 8% while being very critical of the government. Its performance in the upcoming elections is highly unpredictable, and so is whether it will enter into an alliance with the broader coalition.

Meanwhile, the centre-left opposition is trying to form a coalition, the so-called "*campo largo*", which brings together several parties seeking to offer an alternative to Meloni. Together they potentially have the votes to win the majority bonus. Yet they disagree on most issues, above all who should be their candidate for prime minister, whom the new law requires them to name before the campaign starts. This could lead to bruising primaries and an overall loss of support among what would be a rather diverse electorate.

Therefore, I foresee one of two possible scenarios. In the first, no party/coalition reaches 42% and the majority bonus is not triggered. As the Meloni government has already demonstrated, this does not mean that an executive able to carry out its term may not be formed, but it would put into question the purpose of the reform.

In the second scenario, one of the two diverse coalitions wins. The right thanks to far-right votes, the centre-left by uniting around a single goal – ending Meloni's tenure. Arguably, neither of these options projects stability. Nothing in the new law prevents a coalition to fall apart like any other coalition before. Lawmakers from the ruling party have hailed the reform as a return to bipolarism and thus stability, but it is impossible to say who stands to gain most from it.

Ultimately, the reform will doubtfully usher Orban-style supermajorities governing unopposed, which is, naturally, a good outcome. But it may equally do little to fix the volatility and fragmentation endemic to Italian politics. Once again, Meloni has channelled the old wisdom of *The Leopard,* one of Italy's great novels on political renewal and opportunism: "If we want everything to remain the same, everything must change."

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