

MNI POLITICAL RISK – Italian Regional Elections Set To Deliver Rebuke To Governing Democratic Party

by Tom Lake

Seven Italian regions are due to hold local elections on September 20-21 in what is likely to prove a significant test of the centre-left Democratic Party (PD)'s popular appeal. The PD governs at the national level alongside the leftist anti-establishment Five-Star Movement (M5S) and is currently leads the provincial government in four of the seven regions holding elections.

The most interesting contest are in Tuscany, Marche, and Apulia, where incumbent PD administrations, in coalition with other centre-left and leftist parties, face stiff challenges from the centre-right candidate. In Marche, the centre-left candidate Maurizio Mangialardi trails centre-right candidate Francesco Acquaroli by a wide margin in opinion polls, with a PD loss now widely expected in the region. Historically this would have been almost unthinkable, with the Marches, alongside Emilia-Romagna, Umbria, and Tuscany forming the 'red belt' of regional strongholds for socialist parties.

The PD looks more likely to hold onto Tuscany, where centre-left candidate Eugenio Giani has held a consistent lead in polls over the centre-right candidate Susanna Ceccardi from the right-wing League. However, some of the poll leads have been narrow, meaning an upset could be on the cards. The election in the southern region of Apulia is too close to call, with incumbent regional president Michele Emiliano from the PD neck-and-neck with centre-right coalition candidate Raffaele Fitto from the nationalist Brothers of Italy.

The only other election where the PD is facing a challenge is in Campania, centred around the city of Naples. The incumbent regional President Vincenzo De Luca holds a wide lead over the centre-right candidate Stefano Caldoro from the centre-right Forza Italia. Should the centre-right unexpectedly take Campania it could be the one loss that results in major changes within the leadership of the national PD and the governing coalition, with the loss of other regions either already expected or not seen as mortal wounds to the PD's national credibility.

The contests in the remaining regions, all in Italy's prosperous and increasingly conservative north, are not set to result in any change in power. In Veneto, centered on Venice and its surrounds, the incumbent centre-right coalition President Luca Zaia from the League leads in polls with around 70% support. Liguria, around the city of Genoa, the regional *Cambiamo!* (Let's Change!) party of president Giovanni Toti – supported by Forza Italia, the League, and Brothers of Italy – also holds a substantial lead in polls. Should the centre-right lose either of these regions it would be a major shock. The election in the Aosta Valley, Italy's smallest and lowest-populated region, cannot be viewed in a national context given its unique regional political parties that dominate proceedings in the Alpine region.

Constitutional Referendum Set To Pass

On the same days as the regional votes, all of Italy will vote in a constitutional referendum that proposes the reduction in the number of parliamentarians in Italy. The lower house, the

Chamber of Deputies, would be reduced from 630 members to 400 and the upper house, the Senate, from 315 to 200 if the referendum passes.

Opinion polls show strong support consistently in favour of the reforms, with the polls in September offering only a yes/no option (no 'don't knows') showing support for the change at between 70% and 75%. All major political parties (PD, M5S, League, Forza Italia, Brothers of Italy) are in favour of the reform.

Smaller parties have opposed the proposed reforms, arguing they will silence minority voices in parliament. However, the referendum is strongly backed by the senior partner in government, the M5S, which has long-argued for a reduction in the number of parliamentarians, with the anti-establishment party advocating fewer representatives as more cost effective and less likely to lead to corruption. Given the vehement support across much of the political spectrum and the large lead in opinion polls in favour of the changes, should the referendum fail it would be a major blow to the governing coalition.