Renzi Removed: the 2016 Italian Constitutional Referendum and its Outcome

Martin J. Bull

On 4 December 2016, Italians voted in a referendum on what was the most significant constitutional reform proposal since the one adopted by the Berlusconi government and rejected in a constitutional referendum in 2006 (Bull 2007). The reform was proposed by Prime Minister Matteo Renzi with the aim of overcoming the long-term deficiencies of Italian institutional arrangements and the failure of successive governments, over a period of forty years, to carry through institutional reform (Crainz and Fusaro 2016; Bull, 2015). This was only the third constitutional referendum in the history of the Italian Republic (following those held in 2001 and 2006). Like Berlusconi's proposals, those of Renzi were extensive (promising to rewrite nearly a third of the Constitution) and controversial, both in substance and in the way in which they had been passed through parliament. In addition, Renzi's proposals split the leadership of the Democratic Party (PD) as well as bringing forward judgement day on his government - a consequence of Renzi stating, in the Prime Minister's traditional end-of-year press conference in December 2015, that, 'if I lose the referendum, I will consider my political experience to have failed.' Even if he later tried to back-pedal from this position, it was clear that the future of the Renzi government depended on the referendum outcome, raising considerably its broader political significance. This was confirmed when, days after a decisive No vote in the referendum, Renzi resigned.

This chapter, having first explained the origins of this constitutional referendum (for detailed of the constitutional reform proposal see Fusaro 2017), then analyses the broader politics behind it, the referendum campaign, the result and, finally, the immediate impact on Italian politics and the potential implications for Italian institutional reform in the future.

The Origins of the Constitutional Referendum of 2016

The 2016 referendum was on the Constitutional reform proposal known as the Renzi-Boschi reform after its two main protagonists, the Prime Minister Matteo Renzi and the Minister for Reform, Maria Elena Boschi. It had been presented to parliament by the Renzi government on 8 April 2014 and been given final approval by that body, after some modifications, two years later, on 12 April 2016. The legislation's long and controversial journey through parliament led to significant revisions, although the final outcome was largely in keeping with the broad contours of Renzi's original bill. In brief, the constitutional reform involved the following major changes: a radical change to the nature of the Senate, through a curtailment of its powers and a drastic reduction in the number of Senators (from 315 to 100) who would be elected only indirectly; the location of the confidence vote and the power to decide on most legislation in the lower house (the Chamber of Deputies), with the Senate having equal powers only in relation to certain legislative areas (e.g. constitutional reform, ratification of treaties, election of the President), thus ending Italy's unusual system of 'symmetrical bicameralism' (where both Chambers had equal powers); a re-shaping of the competences between centre and locality, with all legislative authority being located in one or the other, thus ending the existing system of shared competences, and generally increasing the degree of centralized control; and the abolition of the provinces and of the National Council for Economics and Labour (CNEL). In total, the reform would have modified 47 of the Constitution's 139 articles.

Under Article 138 of the Constitution, laws amending the Constitution must be adopted by each Chamber after two successive debates with intervals of not less than three months and approved by an absolute majority of the members of each Chamber on the second vote. In addition, if the law is not passed by a two-thirds majority in each of the Chambers on the second vote, the law may be subject to a referendum if requested by either one fifth of the

members of either Chamber or 500,000 voters or five Regional Councils. Since the bill failed to meet this threshold, and since Renzi himself had, in 2015, announced his intention to call for a referendum on the reform to increase its popular legitimacy, a so-called confirmative referendum was inevitable. Hence, after the approval of the bill by parliament, MPs from both houses, as well as from both the opposition and government, acted swiftly to lodge a request with the Supreme Court of Cassation on 20 April 2016, with the 'Committee for Yes' later surpassing the necessary 500,00 signatures. The referendum was declared as legitimate, and the government, on 26 September, decided that the date of the referendum would be 4 December 2016.The text of the referendum read:

> 'Do you approve of the text of the constitutional law concerning "provisions for the overcoming of symmetric bicameralism, the reduction in the number of MPs, the containment of costs of the functioning of institutions, the suppression of the CNEL and the revision of Title V of Part II of the Constitution", approved by Parliament and published in the Official Gazette, no. 88 of 15 April 2016?'

The Political Context of the Referendum

There were three key elements that provided the political context to the referendum campaign and had a bearing on its nature: electoral reform, Renzi's future, and broader European and international developments.

From the outset, Renzi recognized that to improve the functioning of Italian institutions it would be insufficient to carry through constitutional reform if it were not to be accompanied by an electoral reform which reinforced the majoritarian trajectory of the former. Electoral reform was needed in any case following the Constitutional Court's

modification of the 2005 electoral law (the so-called Porcellum) on 4 December 2013 with its ruling that the law was, in part, unconstitutional. The Court's decision had effectively returned the electoral law to pure proportionality, following which there had been several renewed attempts to achieve electoral reform, none of which had succeeded until Renzi became Prime Minister. Renzi, in fact, had been elected leader of the PD four days after the Constitutional Court's decision in 2013, and in his acceptance speech he had committed himself to electoral reform to prevent the re-occurrence of governing by 'grand coalition' (a reference to the Letta and Monti governing experiences). Electoral reform subsequently constituted part of the Nazereno Pact with Berlusconi, forged in early January 2014 on Renzi becoming Prime Minister, and a new electoral law was passed in May 2015, popularly known as the 'Italicum'. This was a second ballot system based on proportional representation (with party lists, the first candidate being selected by the party), but adjusted with a majority bonus, and combined with a 3% threshold for representation. This electoral law would clearly help make real the majoritarian (and one Chamber) emphasis of the constitutional reform proposal, and Renzi therefore presented it as an integral – if formally separate - part of the constitutional reform package, and assumed that achievement of the former would help approval of the latter in the referendum.

However, over time, precisely the reverse began to happen, the electoral reform became increasingly seen as a liability, for several reasons. First, the reform did not have an easy passage through parliament, taking a year and a half and experiencing fierce opposition, even from within the PD's own ranks. The collapse of the 'Nazareno Pact' with Berlusconi in January 2015 meant Renzi had to turn the final vote on the bill into a confidence vote on the government to ensure its safe passage, which generated lasting opposition to the reform. Second, there was concern that the two reforms – electoral and constitutional – together would place too much (unchecked) power and control in the hands of the governing majority.

Some even suggested that it had the potential to embed authoritarian tendencies in the system. In this way, opposition to - and divisions over - the electoral reform, especially inside the PD, spilled over into the constitutional reform debate, as the mutually reinforcing effect of the two reforms was seen in negative, and not positive, terms. Third, the potential for those effects to be realized in unwelcome ways was demonstrated by the changing electoral support for the different parties. The PD's electoral dominance in the 2014 European elections (where the party had gained approximately 40% of the vote) had changed, by 2016, into a situation of tripolarity, successive opinion polls showing a rough balance of support (about 30%) between the PD, the Five Star Movement (M5S), and the three parties of the centre-right (Forza Italia, Lega Nord, Fratelli d'Italia). The mayoral elections of June 2016, moreover, which saw the M5S win Turin and Rome, were evidence that centre-right voters in the first round were willing to support the anti-establishment M5S in the second run-off ballot when the only other choice was the centre-left. The risk, therefore, was that an electoral system based on two rounds of voting would give the opportunity for all the anti-PD forces to align in the second round. Fourth, the electoral reform, despite being approved by parliament as law, had to overcome more than one legal challenge to its constitutionality. On the one hand, the constitutional reform itself contained a provision that would call on the Constitutional Court to make a ruling, within 45 days of the referendum, on the constitutionality of the electoral law, on the request of at least a fifth of Deputies or Senators, a request that was a virtual certainty. On the other hand, the electoral law was, from February onwards, subject to a judicial onslaught by lawyers acting for the M5S and Left, Ecology Liberty (SEL), who tabled requests with different courts concerning the putative unconstitutional nature of the Italicum. The Constitutional Court decided, in September 2016, that, in line with the constitutional reform, it would postpone any constitutional verdict of the electoral law until after the referendum had been held, thus giving the impression that, even if the Yes vote

prevailed, further changes would be possible. Finally, everybody was aware that, in the event of a No vote, the Italicum would be rendered useless, because it would only be applicable to one Chamber in a political system based on symmetric bicameralism (identical powers for both Chambers), so electoral reform would be necessary.

As a result of these factors, by the time the new electoral law came formally into effect (1 July 2016) its replacement was already being openly discussed, even by Renzi, who saw that the best way of buttressing support for the constitutional reform was by shifting to a more flexible position and supporting a possible revision of the Italicum once the referendum had taken place. The Chamber of Deputies discussed the matter on 20 September 2016 and approved a motion which, in principle, supported a review of the Italicum; and Renzi subsequently signed up to an agreement inside the PD to revise the existing law. Electoral reform, then, which had been commenced in 2014 as a means of reinforcing both the direction of, and support for, the constitutional reform, appeared, by 2016, more as an albatross around its neck, and likely to increase the size of the No vote on 4 December. An opinion poll released on 19 September 2016 found that 63% of those surveyed were opposed to the introduction of the new electoral law and only 37% in favour.[1]

The second element of the political context concerned the future of Renzi as Prime Minister, which became an issue in December 2015, when Renzi took a political gamble in explicitly staking his political future on the referendum outcome. This had the effect of turning the ballot into a form of plebiscite on himself, a move subsequently recognized even by himself as a tactical error, for even in a situation where his personal ratings were very high, it gave his opponents - and especially the M5S and the Lega - a distinctive purpose in this referendum: to mobilize the voters who did not approve of Renzi (and who constituted a majority) against the reform *not* on the basis of the merits of the reform but precisely because it presented them with an opportunity to remove him from power. It was also distasteful to

the PD minority that a Prime Minister should explicitly link his own government's political fortunes to constitutional matters.[2] The situation was exacerbated when Renzi's personal ratings began to fall and when the world witnessed the outcome to the Brexit referendum in the UK and the American Presidential election. These putative 'populist' outcomes were grist to the mill for the anti-Renzi, 'anti-establishment' campaigns of the M5S and the Lega.

The third element of the political context was that the referendum and its possible outcome was not just of concern to a national audience, it had become an event with international visibility and implications. This was partly because of the way in which Renzi had 'talked up' the reform in the European Union and in the United States - emphasizing how important it was for improved governance in the country, and receiving support in Europe and a direct endorsement from President Obama - but also because the referendum followed close on the heels of the UK Brexit referendum, whose result had had such a dramatic impact on sterling and the markets. A 'No' outcome began to conjure up, in the imagination of many, a possible similar impact on the Italian economy and on Italy's credibility abroad.

The Campaign: 'Yes' versus 'No'

As with the 2006 referendum, the parties divided broadly along government-opposition lines (see Table 1), although there was a minority in the PD (centred around former leaders Massimo D'Alema and Pier Luigi Bersani) that was fiercely opposed to the reform. Beyond the parties, however, the referendum cut more generally across the left-right spectrum. The trade unions were split, the catholic-based Italian Confederation of Italian Workers (CISL) being in support of the reform, the left-wing General Confederation of Italian Workers (CGIL) being opposed and the Union of Italian Workers (UIL) remaining neutral. Confindustria (the organization representing Italian business interests) was in favour of the reform, Vincenzo Boccia (its President) calling on entrepreneurs to campaign for a Yes vote:

'To have a stable government able to take important decisions is a benefit for the country. Those in favour of a No vote argue that with such a vote nothing changes, and this is precisely what the country cannot permit itself to do.'[3] The Association of Italian National Partisans (ANPI) was vehemently opposed, Renzi seemingly underestimating just how important the existing Constitution was to the former Communists, and especially the older generation who had fought in, or had been influenced by, the Resistance. The Constitution was long regarded as one of their signal achievements, and its (and the left's) claim of partial ownership had always rankled those on the right. The old left regarded the document as sacrosanct and Renzi's reform as destroying it, and Renzi was given a rough ride when he was hosted by the ANPI at the Festa de l'Unità in Bologna on 15 September 2016. The academic community (and notably constitutional lawyers) played an active role in the referendum debate. In April, over 50 jurists (including university professors and magistrates) signed a manifesto against the reform, which was more than matched, in May, by 193 university professors from various disciplines signing a manifesto outlining the reasons for a Yes vote. In March *Il Fatto Quotidiano* began a petition against the reform which attracted scores of signatories, while *La Repubblica*, on 2 June, published a call for a vote in favour signed by over 300 people from the academic and related professions. The press was divided, with *Il Sole 24 Ore*, *L'Unita* and *Il Foglio* being in favour of the reform, *Il Fatto Quotidiano, Il Manifesto, Il Giornale* and *Libero* being opposed, and the three big dailies, *Corriere della Sera, La Repubblica* and *La Stampa* remaining undeclared.

Table 1: Party Positions on the 2016 Constitutional Referendum (with % of vote in 2013 national elections, Chamber of Deputies)

Yes	**No**	**Undecided / Neutral**
Democratic Party (PD) (29.43%)	Five Star Movement (M5S) (25.6%)	Radicals (*Radicali italiani*) (N/A)
New Centre Right (NCD) (N/A)	Forza Italia (FI) (21.6) (as The People of Liberty)	
Liberal Popular Alliance (ALA) (N/A)	Northern League (LN) (4.9%)	
Civic Choice (SC) (8.3%)	Brothers of Italy (FdI) (2.0%)	
Italy of Values (IdV) (N/A)	Union of the Centre (UdC) (1.8%)	
Italian Socialist Party (PSI) (N/A)	Conservatives and Reformists (CR)	
Democratic Centre (CD) (0.5%)	Greens (*Verdi*) (3.2% - as part of Left, Ecology, Liberty)	
Act to Stop the Decline! (*Fare!*) (1.1%)	Italian Left (SI) (3.2% - as part of Left, Ecology Liberty)	
	Possible (*Possibile*) (N/A)_	
	Communist Refoundation (RC) (N/A)	

Source: Italian Ministry of the Interior

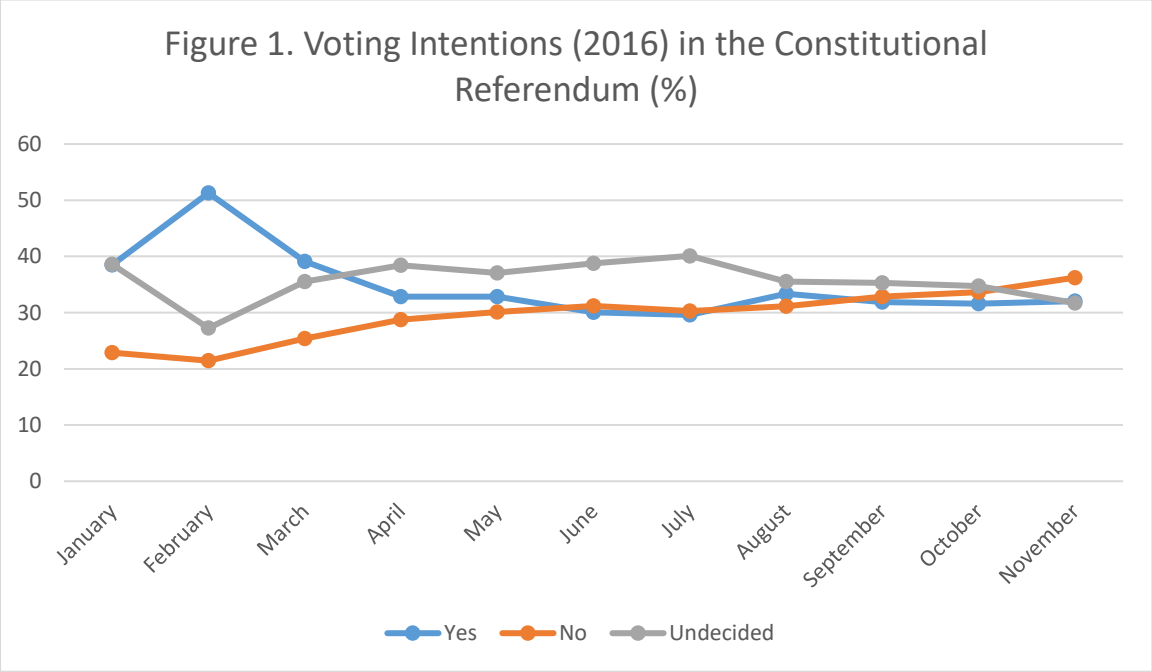
As with previous referenda, the campaign became oriented around Committees for Yes and No. For the 'Yes' campaign, Renzi appointed the American Jim Messina (and his colleague David Hunter), who had led Barack Obama's re-election campaign in 2012 and had acted as consultant in David Cameron's re-election campaign in 2015. The 'Committee Just a Yes' was launched on 21 May 2016 under the strapline 'Just a Yes' (*Basta un sî*). On the 'No' side, the largest 'Committee for No' was the first one set up in October 2015 by Alessandro Pace and Gustavo Zagrebelsky (*Comitato per il No nel referendum sulle modifiche alla Costituzione*). There were a number of other committees on both sides of the referendum, but the above two tended to lead the campaigns.

It is difficult to identify precisely when the campaigns commenced because, long before a referendum (and certainly its date) had been decided upon, the supporters and opponents of the reform began positioning themselves and attempting to frame the debate (Diamanti 2016). Consequently, the debate that took place over the constitutional reform during its legislative journey largely rolled straight into the debate over the forthcoming referendum. For Renzi, therefore, the arguments with which he had commenced the constitutional reform were articulated throughout the referendum campaign: that this was an essential element of his broader programme aimed at scrapping the old political class and radically reforming its principal institution, parliament (public confidence in both of which had sunk to historic low levels), and thereby creating a new politics in Italy (*rottamazione*). The constitutional reform was presented primarily as being concerned - alongside electoral reform – with streamlining and simplifying the political process, increasing the capacity of Italian governments to pass legislation, and reducing the costs of politics - especially relevant and timely in view of the corruption scandals engulfing the political class at the regional levels.

This linking up of the reform with Renzi's broader political programme may have been advantageous earlier on, but during 2016 it became clear that it was not working. By the Spring, Renzi's team were confronted with polling evidence that showed that the long-term predominance (albeit with some volatility) of the 'Yes' support, stretching back to the legislative approval of the reform in 2014/15, had ebbed away, and the decline continued into the Autumn, with the 'No' vote being in the majority by the last two months of the campaign, albeit in a context of a still substantial number of undecided voters (as high as 30% in September), thus leaving the reform on a knife-edge (see Figures 1 & 2).

The Yes campaign therefore focused first and foremost on the undecideds. This group was divided roughly in half, between those voters declaring that they intended to vote but had

not made up their minds (and who therefore needed convincing of the merits of the reform), and those who had not yet decided whether to vote (or did not indicate their preference). Regarding the latter, furthermore, polls suggested that the potential vote was in the 'Yes' campaign's favour. A poll held in July found that a small projected 'Yes' majority of 3% based on only those who declared themselves certain to vote increased to 7% when all those interviewed were included.[4] This suggested that the bigger the turnout the more votes would likely be cast for 'Yes', and so (even though there was no quorum for confirmative referenda) the campaign was focused also on simply getting the vote out.

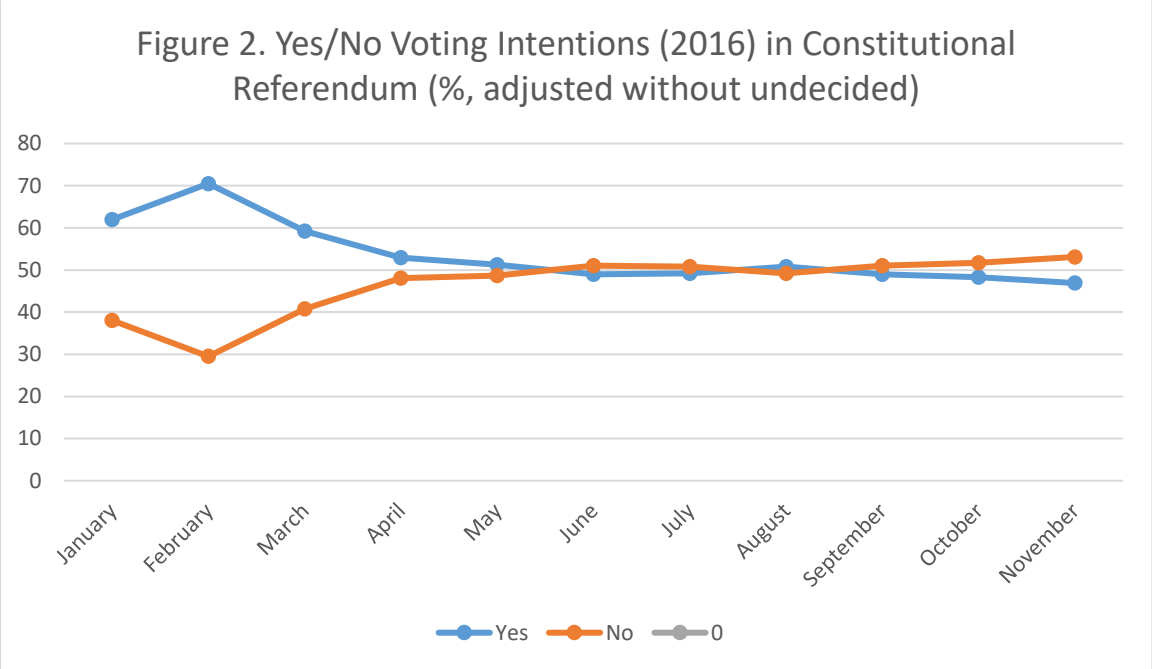


Note: This is a monthly average 'poll of polls', calculated by the author on the basis of a total of 116 polls (Jan: 9; Feb: 4; March: 2; April: 7; May: 11; June: 9; July: 13; Aug: 4; Sept: 15; Oct: 21; Nov: 21). The final poll (before the required 'blackout') was held on 17 November.

Sources: http://www.sondaggipoliticoelettorali.it;

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Italian_constitutional_referendum,_2016;

https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sondaggi_sul_referendum_costituzionale_del_2016_in_Italia



Note: This is a monthly average 'poll of polls', calculated by the author on the basis of a total of 116 polls (Jan: 9; Feb: 4; March: 2; April: 7; May: 11; June: 9; July: 13; Aug: 4; Sept: 15; Oct: 21; Nov: 21). The final poll (before the required 'blackout') was held on 17 November.

Source: http://www.sondaggipoliticoelettorali.it;

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Italian_constitutional_referendum,_2016;

https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sondaggi_sul_referendum_costituzionale_del_2016_in_Italia

The Yes campaign also focused on attracting voters from beyond the PD to support the reform. Polling suggested that, despite the divisions in the PD leadership, PD voters were as compact as the M5S and the Lega, with 81% projected to vote for the reform and 19% against, in contrast with 19% and 81% for the M5S and 21% and 79% for the Lega. However, voters for Forza Italia (40% Yes / 60% No) and the centre lists (59% Yes, 40% No) were more fragmented, so the hunt was on for votes from these quarters.[5] Attention was particularly focused on supporters of Forza Italia on the grounds that Berlusconi had, in parliament, voted for the reform, but then shifted position solely as a consequence of the election of Sergio Mattarella as President of the Republic. Renzi declared – to the consternation of the PD minority – that the left was virtually won over and that to win the

referendum it was necessary to appeal to the right.[6] At the same time, the PD minority was not completely ignored, and Bersani's own votes in parliament for the reform were emphasized to expose similar contradictions and instrumentality at the heart of the minority's position, i.e. that it was opposition to Renzi and not to the reform that lay at its heart. Emphasis was also placed on the long, two-year parliamentary process and 122 amendments the reform had undergone, to demonstrate its legitimacy since the opposition was arguing that this was a personal reform of Renzi's rammed through parliament on the strength of its majority.[7]

To be successful in targeting these constituencies required an operation to depersonalize the campaign, focusing on the substantive merits of the reform, especially as poll findings suggested that this was potentially fruitful ground. Of the main points of the reform (reduction of senators from 315 to 100, end of symmetric bicameralism, suppression of the CNEL, reduction of quorum for referenda, increased competences to the State, abolition of the provinces), there was a majority in support of each of them, producing an overall average of 48% in favour of the reform. However, when presented with the same question but about the package of reforms overall, the approval ratings were suppressed by 6%, suggesting that personalization was getting in the way of approval. At the same time, despite the reform being very well known in the corridors of power and amongst the intellectual community, polling revealed the large degree of ignorance about the reform, which was perhaps indicative of the lack of public engagement with the referendum until the campaign's final weeks. Despite the coverage of the issue in the press and television (albeit much of this focused on the divisions between and inside the parties), only 10% of people surveyed said they knew about the reform in detail, 44% knew the broad lines of the reform, while 38% had 'heard the reform spoken about' and 8% were not even aware of its existence.

Yet, despite a concerted attempt to convince voters that 'this is not a referendum on Renzi',[8] with Renzi begging Italians to vote on the basis of the merits of the reform and not on him, saying 'there'll be plenty of other occasions to send me home,'[9] it proved difficult to put the genie back in the bottle. The parties of opposition had their mantra, and even Renzi himself – knowing he would in fact resign if defeated – could hardly press the argument too far that this reform had nothing to do with the survival of his government. In any case, he himself could not resist championing the political aspects of the vote beyond the merits of the reform itself. There would not be, he warned, another occasion like this in thirty years and 'if we lose, beyond the PD there is no proletarian revolution, but the right [wing politics] of Salvini and Grillo'.[10] And, in maybe an unguarded moment, he said to the party faithful that if he lost he would 'change profession.'[11] Finally, Renzi was probably the best apologist for the reform, and therefore had to be used to the maximum. Hence, the high-profile campaign debates he engaged in on national television, first with Gustavo Zagrebelsky and then with Ciriaco De Mita (whereas both Berlusconi and Grillo refused to debate him). In a poll carried out in July, 53% of those interviewed indicated that they would be voting on the basis of a judgement on the Renzi government, and by 15 November, this figure had risen to 56% (www.sondaggipoliticoelettorale.it), suggesting that no depersonalization of the referendum had occurred.

The party political nature of the referendum campaign may have been inevitable and it may also have been a consequence of the No campaign, or that part of it aligned with the Five Star Movement and the Lega, which largely ignored the substantive merits of the reform itself and appealed to voters to reject it simply to remove Renzi. For them the reform was of interest only because of its dubious constitutional legality (which they challenged unsuccessfully in the courts) and the supposedly illegitimate parliament that passed it (because the Supreme Court had ruled the electoral law through which the parliament had

been elected as unconstitutional). Yet, it would be wrong to reduce the No campaign to this, especially as Berlusconi did not sit in this camp (indeed, he was largely invisible in the campaign, fearful of being identified too closely with Matteo Savini's Lega) and nor did Bersani, both arguing that Renzi should stay on if defeated. More generally, with the issue cutting across the opposition parties and the PD, the overall message was fragmented (naturally the PD minority did not wish to see itself as aligned with the right-wing populists).

The vitriolic nature of some of the debate inside the PD suggested that the PD minority's differences with Renzi went beyond the constitutional reform itself, and that the goal of some party members was to secure a 'No' victory and a subsequent seizing back of control at the party congress.[12] Even an attempt by Gianni Cuperlo to forge some kind of agreement around a possible reform of the Italicum (to make it more likely that the PD minority might vote for the constitutional reform) was rejected by Bersani. Yet, at the same time, there was also genuine concern in the PD voiced about substantive aspects of the reform, and notably: its majoritarian nature which, when reinforced by the Italicum, was regarded as too extreme, creating a Prime Minister, government and single Chamber with almost unchecked powers, especially worrying in view of the electoral strength of the M5S; the reduction of the Senate to a body which failed to represent either voters or sub-national governments; and the degree of centralization of the reform, which undermined the centre-left's own devolutionary changes of 2001.

Overall, however, the two campaigns were characterized more by straplines than engagement in substantive debate, and by a polarization of debate around broadly party political positions, which the existence of the PD minority did little to offset. Those intending to vote 'No' were repeatedly branded as voters who were against any change and were irresponsible in wanting to bring down the government and destabilize the country, while those intending to vote 'Yes' were identified as Renzi acolytes who, for the sake of securing

their own power base in the short term, were willing to undermine Italian democracy, locating too much power in the government and Prime Minister. True, at the intellectual level, there was a more profound debate – especially amongst constitutional lawyers and political scientists – on the merits and demerits of the reform.[13] Yet, while this was characterized by much passion, it also – like the Brexit referendum debate it followed – indulged in a good deal of questionable assumptions about the effects of the proposed reform. Genuine scientific debate was constrained by the fact that the referendum demanded a single vote on a package of different measures, compelling most contributors to side entirely with either Yes or No.[14] In any case, it is not clear what effect – clarifying, convincing or simply confusing – this passionate intellectual debate had on the wider public, assuming people even followed it.

The Results

The referendum result was a resounding rejection of the proposed constitutional reform, with 59.1% (just under 19 and a half million voters) voting against and 40.9% (just under 13 and a half million voters) voting for, on a turnout of 65.5% (68.5% if one excludes Italian voters abroad).[15]

The high turnout was an indication of just how important this referendum had become for the voting public, whatever its level of ignorance about the substantive issues and whatever motivation behind its voting. Indeed, compared with the two previous constitutional referenda, this was a real high water mark in participation: in 2006 it was 53.8% and in 2001 a mere 34.0%. The turnout was also higher than in the previous two European elections (2014: 58.7%; 2009: 66.5%). However, there was a regional dimension to the turnout, with the northern and central regions registering much higher turnouts than the south and the islands. This was reflected, without exception, in the turnout by region, where the largest

turnout was Veneto (76.66%) and the lowest Calabria (54.43%) (see Table 1). It was also reflected at the level of the provinces - where turnout ranged from 47.7% to 78.9% - with all central and northern provinces exceeding the national average and all southern provinces being below it. Furthermore, the patterns of turnout in the referendum reveal very distinct similarities with the previous national elections of 2013 rather than previous referenda, suggesting that the clear polarization, partisan politicization and personalization of the campaign was carried through into the vote itself (Pritoni 2016).

Table 2: The Constitutional Referendum 2016: Turnout and Results by Area/Region

Area/Region	Turnout (%)	Yes (%)	No (%)
North West:	**72.04**	**42.80**	**57.20**
Piedmont	72.30	43.52	56.48
Valle d'Aosta	71.90	43.25	56.75
Lombardy	74.22	44.51	55.49
Liguria	69.73	39.92	60.08
North East:	**73.80**	**43.65**	**56.35**
Trentino Alto Adige	72.23	53.87	46.13
Veneto	76.66	38.04	61.96
Friuli Ven Giulia	72.51	39.03	60.97
Red Belt:	**74.17**	**49.17**	**50.83**
Emilia-Romagna	75.93	50.39	49.61
Tuscany	74.45	52.51	47.49
Marche	72.84	44.93	55.07
Umbria	73.47	48.83	51.17
Centre:	**66.77**	**33.36**	**66.64**
Lazio	69.16	36.68	63.32
Abruzzo	68.71	35.61	64.39
Sardinia	62.45	27.78	72.22
South:	**59.74**	**33.17**	**66.83**
Molise	63.92	39.22	60.78
Campania	58.88	31.48	68.52
Puglia	61.71	32.84	67.16
Basilicata	62.85	34.11	65.89
Calabria	54.43	32.96	67.04
Sicily	56.65	28.40	71.60
Italy	**68.48**	**40.04**	**59.96**
Overseas	**30.75**	**64.70**	**35.30**
Total	**65.47**	**40.88**	**59.12**

Source: Minister of the Interior, and author's own calculations.

There was also a clear regional dimension to the voting patterns for Yes and No, even though the decisiveness of the No vote was not in doubt. All the broad areas of the country (North-West, North-East, Red Belt, Centre and South) voted against the reform, albeit with different margins, the Centre and South of the country rejecting the reform by large margins. Yet, all were decisive apart from the Red Belt where the percentage difference was marginal. At the regional level, only three regions - Trentino Alto Adige, Emilia-Romagna and Tuscany – voted for the reform, while the islands and some southern regions recorded very high majorities against the reform: Sardinia, Sicily, Campania, Puglia and Calabria (see Table 2). At the provincial level, only 12 provinces in the whole of the country voted in favour of the reform. Eleven of these were in central Italy (Firenze, Siena, Pisa, Arezzo, Pistoia, Prato, Forlì-Cesena, Ravenna, Bologna, Modena and Reggio Emilia) and one was in the far north (Bolzano/Bozen). And in keeping with the regional divide, the larger the majorities were in the south, with some provinces registering votes of over 70% against the reform.

If the regional analysis suggests a socio-economic dimension to the voting patterns (the more peripheral or marginalized areas of the country voting No), this tends to be confirmed in an analysis of the big cities, where the Yes vote did decidedly better than the smaller urban centres, with a clear contrast between the central zones and the more peripheral localities. In Milan (where the Yes vote prevailed), Rome and Turin (where, in both, the No vote prevailed), the central areas voted for the reforms and the peripheries against (D'Alimonte and Emanuele 2016; Borghese 2016). The No vote was especially large in those provinces where the youth unemployment rates were high (Pasquino and Valbruzzi forthcoming), although this pattern was more discernible and consistent in the south than in the north of the country, which experienced greater variation (Regalia and Tronconi, forthcoming).

There was also a partisan dimension to the voting, which is revealed by a comparison of the vote with the 2013 national elections.[16] A straightforward addition of the electoral strengths in the 2013 national election of those parties which opposed the Constitutional reform in 2016 (the M5S, the parties of the centre right and the parties to the left of the PD), and adjusting for party organizational change, produces a total percentage (59.7%) which aligns almost precisely with the percentage that voted No in the referendum. At the same time, there were distinct regional variations in this pattern, with the political alignment being closer in the north than in the south. The No vote in 2016 surpassed its 2013 levels in almost all the southern regions, the islands and large parts of the North East, while in the Red Regions it only marginally below its 2013 outcome (Tronconi, 2016; Regalia and Tronconi forthcoming; and see Cavallaro 2016).[17]

If this suggests that Renzi's attempt to convince supporters of the opposition parties to vote Yes failed, it is confirmed in comparing the changes in vote for individual parties in 2013 with their votes in the 2016 referendum. Based on an analysis of eleven cities, Vignati (2016) found that there was a high turnout amongst the voters (as registered in 2013) of the M5S, the vast majority of whom voted against the Constitutional reform (with the proportion in more than half of the cities in excess of 90%). The compactness of the M5S vote was surpassed by the (albeit small number of) voters for the centrist parties (the Monti coalition) in 2013, who voted almost unanimously for Yes (save for a few exceptions in the South). In complete contrast, the PD's voters from 2013 – while having the highest turnout of the parties in 2016 – divided over the referendum, an evident effect of the split in the leadership over the reform. The proportion of dissenters ranged from 20.3% in Florence to as high as 33% in Turin (in the North) and 45.9% in Cagliari (in the South), figures that were exacerbated by the addition of abstainers (and notably in Reggio Calabria at 29.4%, combined with 12.0% voting No). And similarly, those who in 2013 voted for the Popolo

della Libertà (PDL) were divided in the 2016 referendum, probably the effect of Berlusconi's change of position and subsequent low-key, ambivalent approach in the campaign, with relatively high minorities in support of the reform in some cities (Florence 44%, Bologna 41%).

Finally, there was an age demographic in the voting patterns, with younger voters voting more decisively to reject the reform than older voters: 81% of 18-34 year olds and 67% of 35-54 year olds voted No, while only those over 55 registered a small majority (53% in total) in favour of the reform (Pasquino and Valbruzzi forthcoming).

In summary, and from hindsight, this was an election that Renzi was never likely to win. Voters appear to have interpreted the referendum primarily from the perspective of a normal election rather than a consultation on a specific reform, meaning it was essentially a political vote. This explains both the very high turnout and the partisan identification of much of the voting, especially in the north. However, the strength of partisanship between the different parties varied, the main opposition (M5S) having a granite-type compactness, in contrast with the PD which Renzi failed to hold together for the vote. There was, in other words, more to the political nature of the vote than simple partisanship (as measured against the previous national election). The vote was also political in the sense of embodying a judgement on Renzi's government and its record. A post-referendum poll by Demopolis revealed a further increase (on the pre-referendum polls) of the percentage of people having voted on the basis of a judgement on the government (67%) rather than on the reform itself (33%).[18] And this political vote had a distinct socio-economic dimension to it insofar as a significant determinant of the rejection appears to have been the dissatisfaction of many voters in precarious, marginalised economic situations (especially in the South and amongst younger voters). In that sense, the message coming from the M5S and the Lega seems to have got through: 'this referendum can be compared with the Brexit referendum and Trump

election, two cases in which the impact of the centre-periphery dimension and the influence of marginalized voters can be seen' (D'Alimonte and Emanuele 2016). Renzi himself, of course, originally introduced the idea that the referendum should be a plebiscite on himself (and judgement on his government), and that is ultimately what he appears to have got, except not with the outcome he wanted: the vote can be interpreted as a clear signal of dissatisfaction with the Renzi government, if not an outright rejection of it. It was also a vote that witnessed a split in the country, with different voting patterns in the North (where political partisanship prevailed) to the South (where the economic situation prevailed) (Regalia and Tronconi forthcoming: 111).

The Impact

The impact of the referendum was almost immediate, Renzi resigning three days later, on 7 December, thus keeping his promise (as he reminded Italians) and implying that he accepted the vote as a verdict on his government. President Mattarella moved fast, knowing that calling fresh elections was not an option open to him, because the rejection of the Constitutional reform left Italy with two different electoral systems for two chambers which had identical powers, making possible two different majorities and subsequent legislative gridlock. Elections could, practically, only take place following further electoral reform to harmonise the two existing electoral laws. Mattarella therefore engaged in a series of consultations over two days with delegations from all 26 political parties/groupings. Inevitably, the PD played the most important role in this process by identifying the politician most likely to secure the party's overall support. Once a clear consensus emerged, Mattarella gave Paolo Gentiloni a mandate to form a government. Gentiloni moved similarly quickly to choose his Ministers, who were sworn in on 9 December, the government then securing the confidence of both chambers on 13-14 December.

By Italian standards, this was a remarkably swift and smooth transition between governments (Gentiloni even breaking the record for the shortest ever confidence speech to parliament, at only 17 minutes long). Whether due to this or more generally because the markets had pre-adjusted in anticipation of a No vote, the feared economic 'shock' did not happen. Apart from a temporary fall in the value of the Euro, the markets seemed prepared to give Italian politicians the time to remove the uncertainty pertaining to its lack of government, which they did without difficulty and fuss. However, it would be unrealistic to paint this exercise in purely positive terms. On the contrary, it is coloured by a strong dose of irony and *déja-vu.* For if, as this chapter has argued, the referendum was above all a (negative) political judgement on Renzi and his government then what was installed following that verdict was, in many ways, little more than a paler version of the Renzi government itself – but without the constitutional reform.

The new Prime Minister was no outsider, for he had held one of the key ministries (Foreign Affairs) in Renzi's government. Gentiloni, moreover, was a supporter of Renzi since backing him in his successful bid for the leadership of the PD in 2013, as well as being a long-term supporter of the PD (he had been a member of the founding committee in 2007). The composition of his new government did not just smack of continuity with its predecessor, it was almost a carbon copy of it. The majority on which it rested was essentially the same as that which had supported Renzi's government: the PD, a marginally changed 'Popular Area' (made up of the New Centre Right and the Centrists for Italy) and two independents. The only real difference was the refusal of Denis Verdini's 'Liberal Popular Alliance' (ALA) to join the government (it had been in Renzi's), but only because Gentiloni, despite requests, did not give the party any ministries. With some reshuffling, all but five Ministers were the same as before. Perhaps most surprisingly, the former Minister for Relations with Parliament, Maria Elena Boschi, who had been responsible for navigating through parliament the

Constitutional reform proposal which ultimately wrecked Renzi's premiership, and who, like Renzi, had promised to resign if the reform were rejected, was not just kept on but promoted to Under Secretary to the Prime Minister. The goals of the government were no different to those which the Renzi government had been prioritizing just before the vote: electoral reform, sorting out the crisis in the Italian banking sector, applying relief measures to the Italian earthquake zone, and securing agreement with the unions on a new public workers' contract. Gentiloni, in his confidence speech, explicity lauded the Renzi government and its achievements and claimed continuity with it. Renzi, meanwhile, remained leader of the PD and quickly made it clear that, far from retiring from politics, he wished to lead the party into the next election campaign with a view to winning and then continuing with his programme of reform.

In short, while, from one perspective, the new Gentiloni government was seen as providing institutional stability in a time of crisis, from another it was viewed as amounting to the establishment's resistance to - or denial of - the popular rejection of Renzi, and giving the latter and his troops the time to re-group. For the M5S and the Lega, it was as if the Yes vote had prevailed, and they derided the appointment of the new Prime Minister as a cynical manouevre to prevent them from coming to power. It was also, they believed, symptomatic of the deep crisis Italian democracy was undergoing: Gentiloni was the fourth Prime Minister in a row (after Gianni Letta, Mario Monti and Renzi) who had been appointed to the Prime Minister's office in the absence of an electoral victory. The last time that happened was as long ago as 8 May 2008 when Berlusconi was appointed Prime Minister after a sweeping electoral victory.

It was not surprising, therefore, that the new government had a large dose of opprobrium poured on it, most vividly expressed in the opposition parties taking the unprecedented measure of boycotting the parliamentary confidence debate. Expressing their

opinions via the *piazza* and the internet, they left Gentiloni speaking to a half-empty chamber. On his blog, Beppe Grillo, in an evident reference to the referendum result, declared that, 'This government has received a vote of no confidence from 20 million Italians.'

Whichever interpretation was accurate, what was clear at the end of 2016 was that the Gentiloni government was not seen as anything *more* than either providing stability during a crisis or an establishment denial of a popular verdict on Renzi. Although not made explicit, it was clear from the views expressed by politicians and party spokespersons that the new government had a shelf-life dictated by the delivery of electoral reform (once the Constitutional Court had released its judgement on the Italicum, due on 24 January 2017); once achieved, the pressure on Gentiloni to resign to allow fresh elections would likely be difficult to resist.

Finally, the question arises as to the impact of the referendum result on institutional reform and its future prospects. When the Italian people last rejected a major constitutional reform, ten years before, the outcome was regarded by this author as the 'end of the "great reform" but not of reform itself' (Bull 2007), the 'great reform' involving a wide-ranging, comprehensive constitutional reform passed as a single package. Ten years on, it is evident that the pursuit of the 'great reform' had not, in fact, ended, or at least not in the eyes of the political class. Aside of the differences between Berlusconi's and Renzi's reform proposals and how they came about (Renzi's, after all, originated in President Napolitano's initiation of a process in 2013 which Renzi then inherited), there is little doubt that they were both attempts within the 'great reform' tradition. The difference to other failed 'great reform' attempts (e.g. the *Bicamerale,* Bozzi) is that they attempted to pass the reform on the back of parliamentary majorities - rather than via a type of 'Constituent Assembly' - the sizes of which were not large enough to prevent recourse to the popular will (which Renzi had wanted

in any case). They both consequently came to grief in the ballot box, and for reasons largely beyond the merits of the reforms themselves. The consequences, however, were much greater for Renzi than for Berlusconi (who had already lost office before the 2006 referendum had been held) and they are consequences that leave the future of institutional reform in doubt. Renzi had come to office on an anti-establishment platform (albeit from the centre left), promising to sweep away the old politicians and introduce a new politics to Italy. An essential element of that strategy was the overhaul of key institutional structures and political procedures that were acting as an obstacle to achievement of other pressing reforms. Renzi therefore placed his personal stamp on the constitutional reform, linking it inexplicably to this anti-establishment strategy. Yet, in the nearly three years it took from conception of the reform to referendum, Italian party politics changed and the reform became increasingly identified (or presented by opponents) in opposite terms: as part of an attempt by Renzi (as part of the establishment) to hold on to power in the face of anti-establishment forces (on the right) which were ready to seize power. In short, while the referendum undoubtedly amounted to a rejection and removal of Renzi, it would be wrong to assume that it had no consequences at all for the reform itself. The manner and decisiveness of the rejection leaves politicians in a quandary, for it is difficult to envisage in the future any Italian parties or politicians having the courage to take on a reform of that scale when the parameters of interpretation of the reform and its protagonists are subject to the loss of control that Renzi experienced. With fundamental institutional reform having now been sunk by two referendums in the space of a decade, it is possible that this last attempt will go down in history for finally exhausting – after forty years – the 'long quest in vain' (Bull and Pasquino 2009) of the Italian political class.

Acknowledgements

An earlier draft of this chapter was presented at the 'Politica in Italia' Workshop organized by the Istituto Cattaneo and held at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, 12 November 2016. For their comments thanks go in particular to Carolyn Forestiere, Carlo Fusaro, Piero Ignazi, Alex Wilson and Alessandro Chiaromonte.

References

AAVV (2016), *Perché Sì. Le ragioni della riforma costituzionale* (Bari: Laterza).

Algostino, A., L. Ciotti, T. Montanari and L. Pepino (2016), *Io dico no. Modifiche costituzionali e Italicum* (Turin: Gruppo Abele Onlus).

Barca, F. (2016), 'L'Elefante e il Cavaliere: Promemoria sul Referendum Costituzionale', 29 September: http://www.fabriziobarca.it/fabrizio-barca-referendum-costituzionale/, accessed 5 October 2016.

Borghese, S. (2016), 'Referendum costituzionale: tutti i numeri', http://www.youtrend.it/2016/12/09/referendum-costituzionale-tutti-numeri/

Bull, M. J. (2007), 'The Constitutional Reform of June 2006: End of the "Great Reform" but not of Reform Itself', in *Italian Politics. The Center-Left's Poisoned Victory* ed. J-L Briquet and A. Mastropaolo, Oxford, Berghahn, pp. 99-118.

Bull, M. J. (2015), 'Institutions and the political system in Italy: a story of failure', in *The Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Italy* ed. A. Mammone, E. G. Parini and G. A. Veltri, London, Routledge, pp. 103-114.

Bull, M. and G. Pasquino (2009), 'A Long Quest in Vain: Institutional Reforms in Italy', in M. Bull and M. Rhodes (eds), *Italy – A Contested Polity* (London: Routledge).

Cavallaro, M. (2016), 'Referendum: la geografia politica del voto', http://www.youtrend.it/2016/12/12/referendum-la-geografia-politica-del-voto/

Crainz, G., and C. Fusaro (2016), *Aggiornare La Costituzione. Storia e regioni di una riforma* (Rome: Donzelli).

D'Alimonte, R. and V. Emanuele, (2016), 'Città spaccate dal voto: centri per il Sì, periferie pe il No', *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 6 December.

Diamanti, G. 'Referendum: la guerra dei frame', www.youtrend.it/2016/09/20/referendum-la-guerra-dei-frame, 20 September 2016, consulted 25 September 2016.

Emanuele, V. and N. Maggini, 'Le elezioni amministrative di giugno', in *Politica in Italia 2016* ed. A. Chiaromonte and A. Wilson, Bologna, Mulino.

Fusaro, C. (2017),

Pasquino, G. (2016a), 'Buttare l'Italicum e gli opportunismi', *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 29 June 2016: https://gianfrancopasquino.wordpress.com/2016/06/29/buttare-litalicum-e-gli-opportunismi/

Pasquino, G. (2016b), 'Una legge elettorale, non un trucco', AGL, 14 September 2016: https://gianfrancopasquino.wordpress.com/2016/09/14/una-legge-elettorale-non-un-trucco/, consulted 17 September 2016.

Pasquino, G. (2016c), *NO positivo. Per la Costituzione. Per le buone riforme. Per migliorare la politica e la vita* (Novi Ligure: Edizioni Epoké).

Pasquino, G. and M. Valbruzzi (forthcoming), 'Italy Says No: The 2016 Constitutional Referendum and its Consequences, *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 22/2, March.

Pritoni, A. (2016), 'La participazione elettorale al referendum costituzionale del 4 dicembrre 2016', www.cattaneo.org/press_release/la-partecipazione-elettorale-al-referendum-costituzionale-del-4-dicembre-2016

Regalia, M. and F. Tronconi (forthcoming), ''Il No in cerca di spiegazioni: fattori politici e sociali nella distribuzione territoriale del voto', in A. Prtoni, M. Valbruzzi and R. Vignati

(eds), *La Prova del No. Il sistema politico italiano dopo il referendum costituzionale* (Calabria: Rubbettino).

Tronconi, F. (2016), 'Voto per il No e voto alle elezioni politiche del 2013. Confronto per provincia fra i voti ottenuti dai partiti per il No nel 2013 e il No al referendum', http://www.cattaneo.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Analisi-Istituto-Cattaneo-Referendum-4-dicembre-2016-Flussi-da-elezioni-politiche-2013-05.12.16.pdf

Vignati, R. (2016), 'I flussi elettorali tra elezioni politiche del 2013 e il referendum costituzionale. Gli elettorati di Pd e Pdl si sfaldono, quello del M5s è sempre più compatto', http://www.cattaneo.org/2016/12/05/gli-elettorati-di-pd-e-pdl-si-sfaldano-quello-del-m5s-e-sempre-piu-compatto/

Zagrebelsky, G. with Pallante, F. (2016), *Loro diranno, noi diciamo. Vademecum sulle riforme istituzionali* (Bari: Laterza).

Notes

[1] Eumetra Monterosa for *Il Giornale*, 19 September 2016: http://www.sondaggipoliticoelettorali.it Although it also appears that the negativity may have come from a large degree of ignorance about the reform.

[2] 'To link a government with a Constitution is an error, the Constitution is not to be confused with the government. What sort of precedent would we create? That every new government makes its own Constitution?' (former PD leader, Bersani), 'Bersani sul referendum: Se vince il no Renzi resta al suo posto', www.lastampa.it, 29 July 2016, consulted 30 July 2016.

[3] 'Referendum, Boccia: "Invito imprenditori all'impegno civile"', www.ilsole24ore.com, 23 September 2016, consulted 23 September 2016.

[4] 'Renzi si gioca tutto sull'affluenza: se cresce, sale il sì', www.youtrend.it/2016/07/19/renzi-si-gioca-sullaffluenza-cresce-sale-si, 19 July 2-016, consulted 20 September 2016.

[5] 'La caccia grossa è a destra. A Renzi serve l'elettore di B.', www.youtrend.it/2016/10/04referendum-renzi-eletttori-centrodestra, 4 October 2016, consulted 4 October 2016.

[6] 'Renzi: "Il referendum si vince con i voti della destra". La minoranza Pd insorge', www.lastampa.it, 29 September 2016, consulted 30 September 2016.

[7] 'Referendum Renzi: "Nel Pd da un anno e mezzo mi danno contro". Ed è resa dei conti in direzione', www.republicca.it, 9 October 2016, consulted 10 October 2016.

[8] '"Non è un referendum su di me, all'inizio ho sbagliato." E il Financial Times lo attaca', www.lastampa.it, 5 October 2016, consulted 5 October 2016.

[9] 'Referendum Renzi: "Nel Pd da un anno e mezzo mi danno contro". Ed è resa dei conti in direzione', www.republicca.it, 9 October 2016, consulted 10 October 2016.

[10] 'Il contropiede di Renzi: finché ho la fiducia, resto', *La Stampa*, 16 September 2016, consulted 16 September 2016.
[11] 'Renzi: se perdo cambio mestiere', www.lastampa.it, 7 October 2016, consulted 7 October 2016.
[12] 'L'apertura di Renzi sull'Italicum stoppata dai bersaniani nel PD', www.lastampa.it, 3 October 2016, consulted 3 October 2016.
[13] For a flavour of this vast debate, see, for example: AAVV (2016); Pasquino (2016); Zagrebelsky with Pallante (2016); Algostino et al (2016).
[14] For an exception to this trend see Barca (2016) who, rather mundanely, concluded that the reform carried with it both advantages and disadvantages, and advocated what he called 'active abstentionism'.
[15] Except where stated otherwise, the figures come from the Italian Ministry of the Interior, http://elezioni.interno.it/referendum/votanti/20161204/FI01votanti.htm
[16] Or the 2014 European elections (see Cavallaro 2016 for analogous results).
[17] The regional totals are a product of an analysis by Tronconi (2016) at the provincial levels. Cavallaro (2016) analysed the communal level, finding that only 833 communes out of a total of 7,998 voted Yes, and this number is brought down further to a mere 292 if one excludes Trentino-Alto Adige (where the Soutb Tyrolean People's Party (SVP) was clearly in favour of the reform).
[18] In contrast, Quorum for SkyTg24 found that 46% voted politically against the Renzi government.