

When Elections for Mayor Become a National Bellwether

by Judith Harris (May 13, 2011)



Of the 1,344 cities and towns which are to elect new mayors and city councils, pundits are watching the most crucial: Milan and Turin in the North, both grappling with waves of immigrants and a scourge of mob infiltrations, and Reggio Calabria and rubbish-ridden Naples in the South. Interestingly, anyone with official local residence papers is entitled to vote

ROME - The weary and worrying walkup to local elections on Sunday and Monday, May 15 and 16, has been a genuine reflection of the serious issues and high stakes behind small-town politics. Of the 1,344 cities and towns which are to elect new mayors and city councils, pundits are watching the most crucial: Milan and Turin in the North, both cities grappling with waves of immigrants in their factories and the relatively new scourge of mob infiltrations, and in the South, Reggio Calabria and rubbish-ridden Naples. Interestingly, anyone with official local residence papers is entitled to vote. Even if they are not Italian citizens, and hence cannot vote in national general elections, on the local level they can and will, and the participation of a large number of regularly registered immigrants cannot fail to leave traces.

In particular, the Milan race will be closely watched. Mayor [Letizia Moratti](#) [2], a Berlusconi faithful is again a candidate for the Premier's Partito della Libertà (PdL). Her campaign is abundantly financed



in comparison with the left opposition. Nevertheless it is being watched as a bellwether indicating the likelihood that the beleaguered and ever more bellicose Berlusconi will see out the coming two years, and what strength he can expect to muster for the election to the presidency of Italy to succeed [Giorgio Napolitano](#) [3] in 2013. Also at stake all over the country is Berlusconi's clout relative to that of the strengthened Northern League of [Umberto Bossi](#) [4], who threatens weekly to pull out of the government but does not, and the reformed rightist [Gianfranco Fini](#) [5], whose fledgling party is slipping in the polls.

In late April the two major coalitions, right and left, were both running at 42.5%, according to a nationwide poll by Demopolis for the [Gruppo L'Espresso](#) [6], with another 13% going to what is called the Terzo Polo (Third Pole), akin to the Lib-Lab party in the UK. Bossi's share would be over 11%. The margin of error is estimated, however, at 3.2%

The rhetoric shows the stakes. Berlusconi has taken the position that the local elections are a de facto referendum against the magistrates who have put him on trial for corruption, who are not the same as those accusing him of sexual dallying with (by, all appearances, willing) minors. "Whoever votes for us Sunday, votes against [Prosecutors] Ilda Boccassini and Fabio De Pasquale," he said May 9.

The current "surreal" trial (Berlusconi's definition of it) is parallel to the successful prosecution of British tax lawyer [David Mills](#) [7] in Milan on charges of false testimony in two 1990 corruption trials. Convicted, Mills—whom the court found guilty of receiving a \$600,000 bribe from a Berlusconi enterprise—could not be sentenced because the statute of limitations had run out and "saved Berlusconi's former lawyer," to quote the [Economist](#) [8].

Berlusconi is on record saying he never met Mills, which is not the same thing as saying Mills was not on a Berlusconi payroll, but at any rate this week Berlusconi's campaign managers handed out booklets alleging that Mills had fabricated the \$600,000 [bribe deal](#) [9]. The next hearing on Berlusconi's alleged involvement in the Mills bribe case takes place on Monday—the second day of elections. In this case the statute of limitations runs out in February 2012, so near and yet so far.

In the meantime, Berlusconi this week called the magistrates "a cancer." Quick on the uptake, the pro-Berlusconi [Daniela Santanché](#) [10] referred to the magistrates as a "metastasis." Together both outraged not only those who believe that states and statesmen need a balance of powers, but also actual victims of cancer, who have reacted as the use of these words intended as insults. Aggravating matters was that Berlusconi went on the attack on the same day when President Giorgio Napolitano broke into tears while commemorating the magistrates who had lost their lives to terrorists.

Reading the tea leaves is no simple matter. The vast majority of the townships renewing administrations were elected before 2006—that is, prior to creation of Berlusconi's party. In fact, in previous elections Berlusconi and Gianfranco Fini's Alleanza Nazionale (AN) presented candidates jointly on a single list. No precise comparative statistics are therefore available. However, for an idea of relative strength, in regional elections held just one year ago in the Milan circumscription the new PdL walked away with 36% of the vote on the same ticket with the Northern League (15%) and La Destra (0.5%). This three-party coalition won by a narrow margin of 51%. Opposing them was a left-leaning, grab-bag coalition of six parties, which together claimed under 40%. However, three other small parties on the left included [Beppe Grillo](#) [11]'s Movimento 5 Stelle. Together this trio claimed almost 9%, meaning that the real difference between the right and left votes was in the neighborhood of 51% versus 49%. While not a terribly close call, there was also the party of the independent Catholic candidate [Pier Ferdinando Casini](#) [12], which claimed 3.2%—that is, enough to overturn the Moratti coalition.

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