

Election Results / The Worst Possible Outcome

by Simon Serfaty

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There could not have been any worse possible outcome to last week's election in Italy than the political tie that leaves Romano Prodi with a plausible claim of victory, but a clear inability to govern. Such conditions had already been seen in Germany last September. They may well be seen next in France next spring—and in Spain the year after that. Everywhere, weak governments are getting weaker, making out their passivity to be a virtue and their flexibility to be a strength. That is certainly not to the benefit of the U.S., where the prospect of a weak and stalled Europe is worrisome.

Throughout the campaign, Silvio Berlusconi insisted that in this bipolar contest between an alleged left and a so-called right, America was on his side because of his close friend George W. Bush—echoes of earlier political campaigns waged during the Cold War from 1948 on. Echoes, too, of the conditions that prevailed after the unexpected victory of Mr. Zapatero's socialist party in Spain in March 2004. Such absurd attempts to resurrect the ghosts of Alcide de Gasperi were no less flawed than the implicit comparison with José Maria Aznar. Not only because Aznar had a personal intimacy with President Bush to which Berlusconi never came close, but also because Spain had a credibility in the U.S. to which Italy never came close either. The evidence is compelling; it is found in the March 2003 meeting in the Azores, between Bush, Blair and Aznar. Not only wasn't Berlusconi invited, he was not even informed.

Don't worry, Romano Prodi. You'll be welcomed in Washington when you make your first trip here later this year—so long, of course, as you put aside the silly talk that some of your allies uttered during the campaign, such as Francesco Rutelli's insistence that Italian forces will be withdrawn from Iraq "the very moment the government takes office." But unlike Zapatero, you, Mr. Prodi, know better and relations with Washington are surely worth waiting a short, but decent interval.

In any case, for the past 15 months, Bush has cultivated Europe not one state at a time, but all of them together in the context of the European Union to which the U.S. president has reasserted his country's commitment. As a result, the central significance of bilateral relations—and, in this context, the personal dimensions of these relations—has been eroded. The issue is no longer what Italy—or Britain or Poland—can do for the U.S., but what the U.S. can do with Europe in the context of the two sets of organizations, N.A.T.O. and the E.U., that define the trans-Atlantic partnership.

There, in the E.U., the switch from one man, Berlusconi, to another, Prodi, might make a difference, not because Prodi proved to be an effective president for the European Commission, but because Berlusconi proved to be such a disliked head of government for Italy. In other words, Italy will regain an influence within the E.U. that had faded over the past few years. The problem, however, is that the more the E.U. becomes populated by weak members—not just *à l'italienne* but also *à la française* or German-like and more—the less likely it is to emerge out of the deep institutional crisis into which it has fallen of late.

Which gets us back to the disturbing tendency to go into democratic overtime as each election ends with an unwanted tie. That makes it difficult for each new or fading government to make the decisions needed to assuage its respective constituencies, for the E.U. to make the decisions needed to satisfy its members, and for the U.S. to be confident in its allies' ability to not only be willing, but also capable and relevant.

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