

# Is Renzi making the same mistake as Cameron?

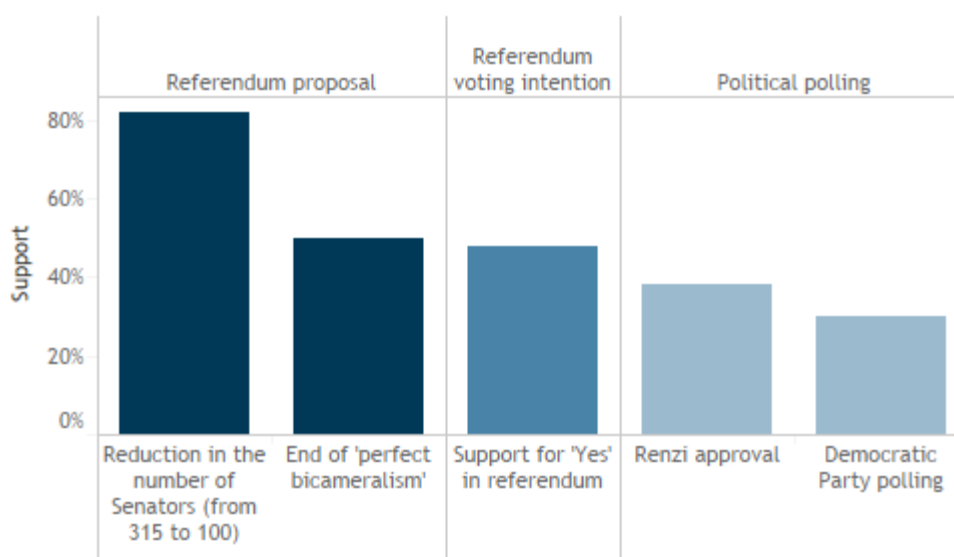
Blog post by Associate Adviser Roberto Robles, 10 November 2016

Discussing Italy’s constitutional referendum with people in Milan this week, I was struck by the parallels with the UK, and the ways Matteo Renzi risks falling into the same traps as former UK Prime Minister David Cameron.

Though a victory for the ‘Yes’ side led by Matteo Renzi cannot be ruled out given the large number of undecided and abstaining voters, Renzi now seems to be heading for a narrow referendum defeat. The latest poll shows his side being defeated by a 52-48 margin. This seems ironic given that the reforms, which seek to streamline the Italian political and legislative process, are broadly popular. Individually, the measures enjoy support from between 82% to 50% of Italians; they seek to reduce the size and power of the Senate, and clarifying the division of responsibilities between the regions and the centre.

Renzi’s mistake has been to turn the constitutional referendum into one on his premiership. His initial pledge to resign if he lost - which he has since attempted to soften - has framed the entire campaign, and gifted the opposition - and even critics within his own party, such as Prime Minister Massimo D’Alema and former PD leader Pierluigi Bersani - with a tool to destabilise the government. Two and a half years into his premiership, Renzi’s approval ratings are down to around 40%, and for many, Renzi the *rottamatore* (‘scrapper’) has become part of the political establishment he sought to shake up.

Italy’s constitutional referendum



Source: IPSOS, IPR

Like David Cameron and the Remain side in the UK, Matteo Renzi is fighting a campaign focused on the economic and political risks of supporting the other side. Renzi has sought to present his opponents as “the old politics” and “the past”, and warned of the risks to political stability of voting ‘No’. In the UK, these sorts of warnings were at best ignored, and at worst counter-productive. Such a campaign risks having the same effects in Italy.

Renzi enjoys one advantage that his UK counterpart did not have; while Cameron had to fight for EU membership in a traditionally Eurosceptic country, the substance of Renzi’s proposals does have support in Italy, and a positive campaign on the merits of reform has more potential. Renzi’s proposals are more popular than himself, and only three weeks before polling day, he should make the most of that if he wants to avoid Cameron’s fate.

