

THE ITALIAN ELECTIONS

By JOHN GATES

THE ITALIAN ELECTIONS of April 18, 1948, were of great significance for the future of Italy and of the world. For a brief period, the ancient saying "all roads lead to Rome" applied to modern Italy, as the attention of the world centered on the outcome of the Italian elections. Which would emerge stronger—the camp of imperialism, fascism, and war, or the camp of anti-imperialism, democracy, and peace? That was the basic issue at stake in the elections, and the world waited impatiently for the decision.

The De Gasperi government emerged victorious in the election and continues its rule over Italy. But was this retention of power as overwhelming a victory as the capitalist press claims? And how great a defeat did the popular forces suffer? Reactionary circles answer these questions by contrasting the elections of June 2, 1946, with the recent ones. They conclude that, as compared with the results two years ago, reaction made great gains, while the Popular Front suffered huge losses. This, however, is a distortion of the truth, for a comparison of the two elections warrants somewhat different conclusions.

ISSUES AND RESULTS IN 1946

What were the issues and results of the 1946 elections?

The background of the 1946 elections was entirely different than in 1948.

Italy had but recently been liberated. A loose coalition, including the Communists, Socialists, and Christian Democrats, still existed among the major political parties. (In fact, the government formed after that election included representatives of all these parties.) There appeared to be unity against fascism and in favor of basic industrial and land reform. The one big issue in the campaign was the referendum on the restoration of the monarchy, and on this there were no differences between the Socialists, Communists, Republicans, and Christian Democrats. The U.S. government played no large role in the campaign, nor did the Vatican. The Socialist Party—while containing a Right and a Left Wing—had not yet split into two separate parties. There were no Right or Left groupings of parties and each party ran separately in the campaign. The strength of the Italian capitalists had been greatly weakened in the course of the defeat of fascism and they were not able to influence the elections greatly.

In that kind of situation, a total of 23 million votes was cast.

The Communists received 4,350,000 votes, or 18.9 per cent of the total vote, and 104 seats in the Constitu-

ent Assembly. The Socialists received 4,740,000 votes, or 20.7 per cent of the total, and 115 seats. Communists and Socialists together received 9 million votes, or 39.6 per cent of the total, and 219 seats. (Most analysts of the 1948 elections contrast the Popular Front vote of 1948 with the combined Socialist and Communist vote of 1946. This is misleading because in 1948 the Popular Front was a combination of Communists and Left-wing Socialists, while in 1946 the Right-wing of the Socialist Party had not yet split away from it.)

In 1946, the Christian Democrats received eight million votes, or 35.2 per cent, while all the other small parties combined received six million votes, or about 25.2 per cent.

Thus, two years ago, the Socialist and Communist parties received 39.6 per cent of the total vote, and all other parties combined received 60.4 per cent.

THE SITUATION AND OUTCOME IN 1948

What was the situation and outcome in 1948?

In the two years since 1946, in common with a similar trend on a world scale, a sharp differentiation took place among the political parties in Italy, which grouped themselves into two diametrically opposed blocs. Under the direct instigation of U.S. imperialism, the Communists and Left-wing Socialists were driven out of the Italian government. The Right-wing Socialists, led by Sara-

gat, split away from the Socialist Party and formed a new party called the Socialist Unity (with imperialism!) Party. Italian capitalism—recovered somewhat from its shattered state at the end of the war with the aid of the De Gasperi government and, particularly, Wall Street—began to press forward boldly. When the 1948 election period arrived, the reactionary parties banded together in their opposition to the Popular Front, heartened by the United States government and the Vatican which intervened in the elections on a scale and in a manner unprecedented in world history.

In this tense atmosphere, which made the 1946 elections appear almost idyllic by comparison, 26 million votes were cast. The Popular Front ticket received eight million votes, or 31 per cent of the total, and 182 seats in the Chamber of Deputies. The Saragat Socialist Unity Party received 1,800,000 votes, or 7 per cent of the total vote, and 33 seats.

Thus, the Popular Front, consisting of the Communists and Left-wing Socialists, and the Saragat Party received 9,800,000 votes, or 38 per cent of the total, and 215 seats. Therefore, when the capitalist press claims that the Popular Front percentage of the vote dropped from 39.6 in 1946 to 31 in 1948 and its numerical vote from nine to eight million, it deliberately overlooks the voting strength of the Right-wing Socialists. To arrive at a true comparison of the authentic Left-wing strength in the

two elections one must subtract the Right-wing Socialist vote of 1948 from the total Communist-Socialist vote of 1946. On this basis, the Left-wing strength declined by only 1.6 per cent.

Although the Left-wing Socialists and Communists ran together on a single ticket, it is possible to estimate their relative strength inasmuch as the voters for the Popular Front could choose from a list of preferential candidates. Of the 182 Popular Front deputies elected, 142 were Communists and 40 were Left-wing Socialists. This represents an increase of 38 Communist deputies over 1946. 73 deputies were elected by Left-wing and Right-wing Socialists, a decline of 42 compared with 1946. Of the eight million votes in 1948 for the Popular Front, as the proportion of Communist to Left-Socialist deputies indicates, the Communists received 6,200,000 votes and the Left-wing Socialists about 1,800,000. Thus, the Communists received almost two million more votes than in 1946, while the combined Left-wing and Saragat Socialist vote of 3,600,000 in 1948 was one million less than in 1946.

The Christian Democrats amassed 12,750,000 votes in 1948, or 47.9 per cent of the total vote, and 307 seats—an absolute majority in the Chamber. However, this gain of almost five million votes, or 13 per cent, over 1946 was not at the expense of the Left. The total non-Socialist and non-Communist vote was 62 per cent in 1948 as compared with

60.4 per cent in 1946. All the parties other than the Socialist, Communist, and Christian Democratic Parties, received only three million votes out of 26 million votes in 1948, in contrast to the six million out of 23 million votes they received in 1946. This clearly establishes the fact that the Christian Democrats gained their increase in strength through the absorption of the smaller Right-wing parties.

The above are the over-all results, but the picture would not be honest or complete without the breakdown of the vote by regions. Italy can be roughly divided into four parts: the North, which comprises 46 per cent of the electorate, and is the industrial region of Italy, including such cities as Milan, Turin, Genoa and Florence; the Center, which includes Rome; the South, which is mainly agricultural, and includes Naples and takes in the toe and heel of Italy; and the islands of Sicily and Sardinia, which are still largely feudal in character. The Popular Front lost 8 per cent in the industrial North, and gained 8.3 per cent in the Center, 6.6 per cent in the agricultural South, and 5.6 per cent in Sicily and Sardinia. In the Rome region, which is especially important because it is the home of the Vatican and the seat of the government, the Popular Front received 85,000 more votes than in 1946 and increased its percentage of the total vote by 8 per cent.

The following conclusions can be

drawn from the results outlined above:

1. The Popular Front forces did not gain by comparison with 1946; they even declined slightly. Generally speaking, however, they maintained their strength virtually intact, suffering an important loss in the industrial North but gaining considerably in the agricultural areas.

2. Viewed against the results as a whole, the Communists made important gains. Its two million additional votes were made up of the one million votes lost by the Socialist Party and Saragat's Socialist Unity Party, and the one million votes it received from the three million new voters.

3. The combined Right-and Left-Socialist vote declined by one million, mainly because of the split of the Socialist Party by Saragat. The Saragat Party emerged as a Social-Democratic Party of the traditional type, representing a dangerous splitting and weakening factor in the struggle of the forces of progress.

4. The Christian Democrats have emerged as the largest single electoral party, chiefly but not solely through its absorption of the votes of the other reactionary parties. It gained its additional five million votes by taking away three million votes from these parties and winning two million of the three million new voters. As a result, the camp of reaction is more united and represents a greater danger than in the past.

U.S. IMPERIALIST INTERVENTION

The political aspects of the campaign were without parallel in history. The intensity with which it was waged by both sides is shown by the fact that 94 per cent of the electorate turned out to vote. The enormous resources at the disposal of the De Gasperi government enabled it to bring out the vote of the most backward masses of the population. But the decisive factor which influenced the final outcome was the brazen and direct intervention of American imperialism.

Capitalist propaganda in our country portrayed the Italian Communists, in contrast to the "poverty-stricken" reactionaries, as having unlimited funds at their disposal. However C.B.S. commentator Howard K. Smith broadcasting from Milan, revealed that the "anti-Communist parties together spent \$7.50 to every Communist dollar." Where these funds came from was shown by John Foster Dulles who stated in a speech in New York on May 6 that the U.S. had "given nearly \$2,000,000,000" to Italy, and who complained that "yet in Italy communism made a strong fight." And Senator Taft declared on the Town Meeting of the Air (May 18) that "we intervened in the Italian election as we would never have done before the war. . . ."

The most shameful aspect of American intervention was its use of food as a weapon to blackmail the Italian people into voting in accord

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with Wall Street's desires. The most widely used poster in the reactionaries' campaign was one which showed a loaf of bread cut into two pieces, and which bore a legend to the effect that 60 per cent of the Italian's loaf of bread comes from the United States which gives it to Italy "free." During the last two weeks of the campaign, Secretary of State Marshall announced that if the Popular Front should win, the United States would withdraw all aid. In this blunt fashion, the Italian people were told that they must either vote as Marshall wanted them to, or he would take the bread out of the mouths of their children. Incidentally, the quality of the bread improved, that is, became whiter, as election day approached; as soon as the election was over it reverted back to its original poor quality.

Although, so far as I could observe, the maneuvers on Trieste and the inspired campaign of letters from the U.S. failed to achieve decisive results, they had some effect in developing anti-Popular Front hysteria. Proof that the letter campaign was not very effective is demonstrated by the fact that the relatives of most Italians living in the U.S. are in Southern Italy, which is where the Popular Front gained influence.

More important was the fear of civil war, which the United States deliberately fostered during the campaign. On three separate occasions Palmiro Togliatti, General Secretary of the Communist Party of Italy, challenged Premier de Gasperi to

state whether he would respect the election results should the Popular Front win. De Gasperi refused to answer and thus made it clear that he would refuse to transfer power peacefully to the Popular Front. Large numbers of people who were undoubtedly sympathetic to the Front's program were intimidated into voting against it because they feared a civil war, which they knew would be provoked by De Gasperi and would receive U.S. government backing.

THE ROLE OF THE VATICAN

Of equal importance with American intervention was the role of the Vatican, which wields enormous power in Italy. It openly participated in the campaign in direct violation of the Lateran Treaty, with the De Gasperi government naturally closing its eyes to this violation.

The Vatican worked directly through the tens of thousands of priests and nuns, but its main direct instrument was Catholic Action, an active, disciplined mass organization which worked on a precinct and house-to-house level.

The extent to which the Church intervened is shown, not only in the threats of excommunication and denial of absolution if one voted for the Popular Front, but also in the sudden outbreak of a rash of "miracles" during the height of the campaign. Witnesses suddenly appeared who had seen a certain religious statue walk from one place to another or

had heard a portrait of some saint talk. Naturally, the message of these "miracles" was to vote against the Popular Front.

RESURGENCE OF RIGHT-WING SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

The third decisive factor in the reactionaries' election campaign was the resurgence of Right-wing Social-Democracy.

The base of traditional pro-imperialist Social-Democracy had been greatly weakened with the defeat of Italian capitalism at the end of the war. This expressed itself in the dominant position of leadership won by the Left-wing, headed by Pietro Nenni, in the Socialist Party. But with the help of American imperialism, world Social-Democracy, the Vatican, and the return of reaction to power in Italy, the Right-wing Social Democrats gained new strength, fought the progressive Nenni leadership, and finally split away to form their own party.

The C.I.O., the A. F. of L., the British Labor Party, and the French Socialists gave considerable assistance to Saragat during the election campaign. How the Vatican regards the Saragat Socialists is shown by the fact that it urged its campaigners to strive in the first place to convince individuals to vote Christian Democrat, but workers who would not vote for a clerical party under any circumstances were to be urged to vote for Saragat.

In addition, Saragat carried on a

very demagogic campaign under the slogan of "Vote for Socialism." Those workers, particularly among the labor aristocracy, as well as middle-class elements, who fell victim to Red-baiting but who nevertheless professed to be for Socialism, were taken in by Saragat.

THE POPULAR FRONT'S CAMPAIGN

In the face of this enormous array of resources and power, the democratic Popular Front conducted a magnificent campaign.

The basis for its excellent work was the creation of the Popular Front itself. This was much more than a mere electoral tactic. The Popular Front was conceived as a coalition of mass organizations banded together in a fighting movement for the realization of an advanced democratic program. It was created, not only for the purposes of the elections, but as a vital instrument in the struggles that would inevitably develop once the elections were over.

The central core of the Popular Front is the united front of the Communist and Socialist Parties, but it also includes the factory committee movement; women, youth, partisan, and cultural organizations; the unemployed movement and the "land for the peasants" movement; and organizations of dissident Republicans and Christian Democrats. It is the new form in which the unity of the forces of anti-fascist resistance is being reconstituted after the disintegra-

tion of the old National Council of Liberation of which the Christian Democrats and Republicans were a part.

Despite the strategy of reaction to make Red-baiting the main issue and thus obscure the real issues, the Popular Front succeeded to a large degree in bringing to the people the issues of basic industrial and land reform, the high cost of living, unemployment, the land question, and the danger of fascism and war. It unmasked Wall Street's role before millions of Italians and pointed out the danger of America to Italian independence, freedom, and peace. An especially effective aspect of the Front's campaign was its complete identification of its purposes with the most progressive tradition of Italy—the Garibaldi movement. The Popular Front was Garibaldi and Garibaldi was the Popular Front, and the reactionary camp was unable to destroy that identity though it tried very hard.

Beyond doubt, without American and Vatican intervention the Popular Front would have won an overwhelming victory. Howard K. Smith said, in the same radio broadcast mentioned above:

Suppose that the access of both sides to the press in the campaign had been equal. Suppose the election funds had been approximately equal. Suppose that the most powerful religious institution and the most powerful and richest nation on earth had not intervened on one side in the elections. There is no doubt in anybody's mind here that the Reds

would have dealt the democratic government a crushing defeat. By free choice, the Italian people in that case would have chosen Communism over democracy without a Russian soldier or a Kremlin kopek around to induce or force them.

Despite his gratuitous labeling of the De Gasperi government as democratic, Smith's assertion is eloquent of the fact that the elections were neither free nor democratic.

On the other hand, had it not been for the creation of the Popular Front and the splendid campaign it carried on, the Left forces would have been overwhelmed. Instead, it maintained its strength numerically as compared with 1946, but on a much higher qualitative level. The eight million votes cast for the Popular Front in 1948 represented a far more conscious and advanced vote. Those who voted Left in 1948 did so despite threats of hellfire and damnation, fear of civil war and of bread being taken away from their children, and the most violent Red-baiting. Apropos of this, the London *Daily Mail* commented: "De Gasperi has won a victory, but the Communists have not been defeated." There is some truth in that comment, even though it is not the whole truth.

Togliatti wrote, immediately after the election results became known, that while the Communists had made considerable gains, they were not what had been hoped for. He said, further, that the Communist gains could not be viewed in isolation from the losses suffered by the

Popular Front as a whole. He stated that the Communists had played a major role in the creation of the Front; they took full responsibility for it, and its losses were their losses. There had been a certain tendency to place on the Left-wing Socialists the main responsibility for the failure to achieve better results, but this statement of Togliatti rejected it.

WEAKNESSES OF THE POPULAR FRONT'S CAMPAIGN

Although the main factors influencing the election outcome were U.S. imperialist and Vatican intervention, and the role of Right-wing Social Democracy, there were also important weaknesses in the Popular Front and Communist campaign. These were the following:

1. The Popular Front had only been created in December, 1947, and was therefore only four months old at election time. As a result, it was never really organized as an effective mass movement in some places, where it existed only on paper. Also, in some cases, the Communists worked in such a way as to exclude Socialists from active leadership and participation in the Front, which had a narrowing and suffocating effect.

2. Since the North had always been the traditional Left stronghold, the Communists tended to take it for granted and concentrated their main effort in the South, which was the traditional weak spot. On the other hand, the major concentration of reaction was in the North.

3. The Communists underestimated the effect of foreign intervention and especially the new role of Right-wing Social Democracy in the campaign. Consequently, it failed to struggle seriously enough against Saragat and his party.

4. The Communists tended to be over-optimistic because of the remarkable popular response to them during the campaign. They organized the most successful mass demonstrations in their history, demonstrations of 200,000 in Rome, 300,000 in Milan, 250,000 in Naples, etc. Their own growth of influence blinded them to the losses of both the Left-wing and the Saragat Socialists, as well as to the fact that the enemy was also maintaining and slightly increasing its strength with a regrouping of forces in favor of the Christian Democrats.

PERSPECTIVES

What is now the perspective for Italy? The De Gasperi government is duty-bound to Wall Street, the Vatican, and the Italian capitalists and big landowners. It therefore cannot and will not nationalize basic industry or give land to the peasants. Consequently, great mass struggles are bound to develop, against which the government will use repressive measures.

The government has declared it intends to outlaw strikes and liquidate the partisans' organization. It would like very much to suppress the Communist Party. It is working to split

the trade unions and, once again, the Left-led Socialist Party. Reaction wants to break the peace treaty so as to be able to rearm and to rebuild a big army, navy, and air force, and to draw Italy into the Western military bloc initiated and backed by U.S. imperialism. In a word, the De Gasperi government is moving in the direction of establishing an open clerical-fascist dictatorship.

The main aim of the Popular Front is to prevent the establishment of such a dictatorship by fighting against all reactionary efforts to bring it into existence, and by fighting to carry through the advanced democratic program the Front put forward during the election campaign. The key to achieving this is the continuation and strengthening of the Popular Front as a mass movement of struggle. Following the campaign, the Popular Front met and all its constituent organizations expressed their support and voted to continue and broaden their activity.

A peculiar feature of the post-

election period, expressing itself in certain recent developments, is that the Christian Democrats won, so to speak, too big a victory. In Italy, fear of political rule by the Church is very great. Millions who did not vote Popular Front do not want a clerical dictatorship either. Hence, the very victory of the Christian Democrats has created conditions for a broader, more effective struggle against them.

The perspective in Italy, therefore, is one of a long period of sharp and difficult struggle. Although they are acutely aware of the new dangers ahead, the Italian Communists are confident in their ability to rally the masses to defeat the enemy. As Togliatti said on April 22:

"The more than 8 million votes won under the conditions of the April 18 elections constitute a formidable barrier which cannot be overwhelmed either by the foreign imperialists who would like to push us toward war nor by our own reactionaries who dream vainly of a return to a fascist-type regime."