
LOMBARDY, VENETO □ ITALY'S TWO RICHEST REGIONS □ VOTE FOR GREATER AUTONOMY

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Voters in Lombardy and Veneto have overwhelmingly supported non-binding referendums seeking greater autonomy. Italy's wealthy north has long called for greater control over finances and security.

Voters in Italy's wealthy northern regions, Lombardy and Veneto, on Sunday overwhelmingly backed non-binding referendums seeking more autonomy from Rome as Italians became the latest nation to ride the wave of self-determination sweeping Western politics.

Although the vote is non-binding, the strong support gives the regions' leaders a political mandate to seek a greater say in the distribution of their own tax revenue □ a long-standing gripe between prosperous northern Italy and the country's less wealthy south.

"Veneto offers itself as a laboratory of autonomy," Veneto President Luca Zaia said after polls closed. In neighboring Lombardy, the region's president, Roberto Maroni, said the votes represented a "historic occasion" for the two regions to grasp "greater responsibilities and resources."

The Democratic Party, which leads the central government in Rome, remains divided on the referendums. Both regional presidents have said they have no intention to strive for independence.

Turnout was projected at 57-61 percent in Veneto, clearing the 50 percent plus 1 hurdle to make the vote valid. However, in Lombardy turnout stood at only around 40 percent.

Those numbers fell short of turnout in Italy's constitutional referendum last December, when turnout was 64 percent in Lombardy and 66 percent in Veneto.

Preliminary results showed support for the referendums was at more than 90 percent.

Separatism across the EU

Lombardy has long been the industrial hub of Italy, with its capital Milan acting as the country's financial center. Together with Veneto, they account for more than 30 percent of Italy's GDP and one-quarter of voters.

Experts have pointed out that even with support for more autonomy, some demands □□□□ as greater control over finance, security and education □□□□ beyond the scope of the Italian constitution, and would thus prove nearly impossible to negotiate without making major

constitutional changes in Rome.

cw, es/cmk (AP, Reuters)

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