# Italy’s citizenship referendum exposes deep divisions over immigration and identity



In Italy, a divisive referendum scheduled for Sunday and Monday has sharply highlighted the country's ongoing struggle with immigration policies and national identity. The proposed change aims to slash the residency requirement for non-EU citizens to obtain Italian citizenship from ten years to five, aligning with more pragmatic European standards. While proponents frame this as a move toward greater inclusivity and economic vitality, critics see it as part of a broader attempt to dilute Italy’s cherished national traditions—a dangerous capitulation to populist pressure.

Despite the rhetoric of some officials claiming the current law is “excellent” and “very open,” the reality reveals a government more concerned with stoking fears than embracing those who seek to contribute to Italy’s future. Notably, Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni has refused to endorse the reform, urging citizens to abstain from voting, effectively aiming to maintain the status quo under the guise of protecting Italy’s identity. Her coalition’s strategy seems designed to suppress turnout, risking the invalidation of the referendum altogether—a move that underscores the government’s reluctance to face genuine reform.

The debate exposes the darker side of Italy’s political landscape, where rising populism and fear-mongering threaten to undermine basic human rights. By discouraging a serious conversation on integration, the government risks turning a blind eye to the lived realities of millions like Sonny Olumati, who has faced years of bureaucratic neglect and institutional indifference during his quest for citizenship. His story of frustration and racial bias—highlighted by issues of unresponsive processes and systemic marginalisation—symbolises Italy’s failure to integrate its immigrant communities effectively.

This referendum serves as a stark reminder that, despite claims of openness, Italian politics continue to lean heavily on the preservation of a narrow nationalist vision. While advocates argue that easier access to citizenship could foster economic growth and social cohesion, reality suggests otherwise. The government’s focus on restricting migration and maintaining traditional notions of identity demonstrates a resistance to genuine progress—an attitude that will only serve to deepen divisions rather than reconcile them.

As Italy grapples with an uncertain future, the message from the current administration is clear: it will prioritize its vision of “Italian identity” over the principles of fairness and inclusion. For those waiting and working to become part of Italy’s fabric, this referendum is more than a vote—it’s a stark choice between progress and regression. Sadly, without meaningful leadership willing to champion fairer policies, many remain trapped in a limbo of rights and recognition, their hopes dashed by a government more interested in political spectacle than in building a truly inclusive society.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c780yk3z2lyo> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.ft.com/content/401e9234-0a3f-46bd-af7b-23089f870d6b> - Italy is holding a pivotal national referendum to reform its stringent citizenship laws, particularly for long-term non-EU migrants and their children. The current process for gaining naturalization can take up to 20 years, leaving many immigrant-origin youths without political rights in the country they were raised in. The referendum proposes reducing the required continuous residency from 10 to 5 years, potentially allowing 2.5 million legal residents to apply for citizenship. Supporters argue that reform is essential for Italy’s democratic inclusion and economic sustainability, especially as the population ages. However, Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's right-wing coalition opposes the change, emphasizing Italian identity rooted in ancestry and urging voters to boycott the referendum to invalidate it through low turnout. Critics accuse the government of ignoring the issue and marginalizing vital immigrant contributions. Despite challenges, advocates see citizenship reform as inevitable and crucial for integrating Italy’s increasingly diverse population. The outcome, while uncertain, signals growing momentum for recognizing the rights of foreign-born residents who live, study, and work in Italy as de facto Italians.
3. <https://www.roma-o-matic.com/en/refeed/605598> - Italy's Constitutional Court has approved a referendum that could significantly alter the country’s naturalization process. The measure aims to reduce the residency requirement for non-EU citizens seeking Italian citizenship from ten to five years. Officials expect the vote to take place between April and June 2025, marking a pivotal moment in the country’s naturalization policy. The current Law No. 91 of 1992 mandates a ten-year legal residency period before non-EU citizens can apply for citizenship. This requirement ranks among Europe’s most stringent naturalization policies, contrasting sharply with Spain and Portugal’s five-year requirements or France’s two-to-five-year timeline. Proponents of the referendum argue that the ten-year residency rule is outdated and does not reflect modern migration patterns. They point out that many countries in the European Union (EU) have shorter residency requirements for citizenship applications. Spain and Portugal, for example, require only five years, while France allows naturalization after two to five years, depending on individual circumstances. A grassroots campaign gathered over 500,000 signatures to initiate the referendum. The Constitutional Court’s Judgment No. 11/2025 confirmed the referendum’s legal validity while preserving other citizenship criteria, including B1-level Italian proficiency and absence of criminal records. Supporters claim that halving the residency requirement would help integrate immigrants more quickly and align Italy’s policies with those of other European nations.
4. <https://www.roma-o-matic.com/en/refeed/566959> - A petition in Italy calling for a referendum to make it easier for foreigners to claim Italian citizenship has reached the half a million signatures needed to trigger a public vote. The proposed referendum aims to reduce from 10 to five the number of years of continual legal residence in Italy required to apply for Italian citizenship which, once obtained, would automatically be passed on to the citizen's children. Under the current legislation, which dates to 1992, non-EU nationals are required to be legally resident in Italy for 10 years before they can apply for citizenship, and children born in Italy to foreigners cannot apply for citizenship until they turn 18. The referendum petition was launched earlier this month by the liberal, centre-left +Europa party and has been backed by Italy's centre-left opposition parties and pro-migrant groups. The goal was to reach 500,000 signatures - the minimum threshold needed for the consitutional court to assess whether or not to hold a referendum - by 30 September. In recent days the petition received a surge of signatures, helped by a major social media campaign and the fact that people can sign online via Italy's digital identity system SPID.
5. <https://www.thelocal.it/20250314/italy-sets-date-for-landmark-referendum-on-easing-citizenship-rules> - A pivotal referendum on easing Italy’s citizenship by residency rules will take place in early June after the Italian government signed off on a decree officially implementing the vote. The referendum will be held over two days – Sunday, June 8th and Monday, June 9th – with Italians asked to vote on a proposal to create a quicker path to citizenship by residency by cutting the current 10-year wait time down to five. As rumoured earlier this week, the vote is set to be held alongside the second round of Italy’s 2025 municipal elections, which involve the local administrative bodies (mayors, city councils and city committees) of some 124 municipalities across the country. Polls will be open from 7am to 11pm on Sunday, and from 7am to 3pm on Monday, Italian media reports said. Ministers' approval of the decree implementing the referendum came a little less than two months after Italy’s Constitutional Court deemed the vote legally admissible in a historic ruling. The proposed reform at the centre of the referendum seeks to ease Italy’s citizenship by residency laws – currently among the toughest in Europe – by aligning them with those of countries such as the UK, France and Germany. According to estimates from the +Europa party, if passed, the reform would make around 2.5 million residents eligible for Italian citizenship (the figure includes minors who would automatically become Italian nationals as a result of their parents’ naturalisation). As is the case with all referendums in Italy, voter turnout will need to exceed 50 percent for its result to be valid.
6. <https://www.roma-o-matic.com/en/refeed/566959> - A petition in Italy calling for a referendum to make it easier for foreigners to claim Italian citizenship has reached the half a million signatures needed to trigger a public vote. The proposed referendum aims to reduce from 10 to five the number of years of continual legal residence in Italy required to apply for Italian citizenship which, once obtained, would automatically be passed on to the citizen's children. Under the current legislation, which dates to 1992, non-EU nationals are required to be legally resident in Italy for 10 years before they can apply for citizenship, and children born in Italy to foreigners cannot apply for citizenship until they turn 18. The referendum petition was launched earlier this month by the liberal, centre-left +Europa party and has been backed by Italy's centre-left opposition parties and pro-migrant groups. The goal was to reach 500,000 signatures - the minimum threshold needed for the consitutional court to assess whether or not to hold a referendum - by 30 September. In recent days the petition received a surge of signatures, helped by a major social media campaign and the fact that people can sign online via Italy's digital identity system SPID.
7. <https://www.thelocal.it/20250210/what-are-the-chances-of-italy-voting-in-favour-of-easing-citizenship-rules> - Out of around 51 million eligible voters (including 4.7 million Italians residing abroad), over 25.5 million people will need to take part in the vote for its result to be considered valid. It’s currently hard to make predictions as to whether or not the referendum will meet the required threshold. Some Italian news reports see this as difficult given that voter turnout for abrogative referendums has historically been low. According to Il Post, over the past 50 years, Italians have been called to vote in 77 abrogative referendums. Of those, only 39 reached the quorum. Furthermore, of the 39 referendums that did meet the required voter turnout, 35 took place between 1974 and 1995. The latest abrogative referendum was held in June 2022 and saw a 20.9-percent voter turnout. Does this mean that the referendum has no chance of reaching the required turnout? Not really. The overall decline in voter turnout in referendums held over the past three decades has been frequently attributed by political commentators to their questions being on issues of little interest to the general public (e.g., the judicial system, the careers of magistrates and journalists, and the installation of electrical conduits on private land) or on topics where it was extremely difficult for many people to form an informed opinion (for instance, assisted reproduction). PM Meloni openly criticised the proposed reform, saying that she didn’t “see the need for a change” and considered the ten-year period “appropriate”. “I think Italy has excellent citizenship laws. I believe this is demonstrated by the fact that we are among the European nations that grant the highest number of citizenships to foreigners,” she added. Where does this leave us? According to the latest Ipsos polls on voting intentions, the ruling coalition (Fratelli d’Italia, Lega and Forza Italia) enjoys the support of around 45 percent of voters. By contrast, the centre-left coalition backing the reform (Partito Democratico, Alleanza Verdi e Sinistra, Italia Viva and +Europa) is backed by around 32 percent of voters. On paper, the centre-left coalition doesn’t currently have the numbers to overcome the united right-wing front. However, two key considerations must be made at this point. Firstly, Giuseppe Conte’s M5S, which has the support of 12.5 percent of voters, hasn’t yet made its intentions clear regarding the referendum.