



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

## BACKGROUND

### Land and Climate

Italy, including the islands of Sardinia and Sicily, is slightly smaller than Norway and slightly larger than the U.S. state of Arizona. It boasts a variety of natural landscapes: from the alpine mountains in the north to the coastal lowlands in the south. Shaped like a boot, the country is generally mountainous. The Italian Alps run along the northern border, and the Apennines form a spine down the peninsula. Sicily and Sardinia are also rocky and mountainous. The “heel” and some coastal areas are flat. The Po River Basin, to the north, holds some of Italy's richest farmland and most of its heavy industry.

Southern agricultural areas are subject to droughts. The climate is temperate but varies by region. Winters are cold and rainy in the north, cool around Rome, and mild in the south. Typical of the Mediterranean climate, summers in the south can be very hot. The rest of the country usually experiences moderate summers.

Italy surrounds two independent nations: San Marino and Vatican City (Holy See). San Marino has been independent since the fourth century AD. Vatican City was governed by France for most of the 19th century until it was occupied by Italy in 1870, becoming a sovereign entity in 1929.

### History

#### *The Italian Peninsula and the Roman Empire*

Much of the West's civilization and culture stems from the Italian Peninsula. The area's history dates back several

thousand years; one of the first civilizations to flourish was that of the Etruscans, between the eighth and second centuries BC. The Etruscans influenced mostly central Italy and, later, the Roman Empire. Before the Romans became prominent, Greek civilization dominated the south. Rome later adopted much of the Greek culture and became a major power after 300 BC as it expanded throughout the Mediterranean region. By the fifth century AD, the western Roman Empire had fallen to a number of invasions. The peninsula was then divided into several separate political regions. In addition to local rulers, French, Spanish, and Austrian leaders governed various parts of Italy. The Italian Peninsula was the center of many artistic, cultural, and architectural revolutions, including the great Renaissance of the 15th and 16th centuries.

#### *Unification and Fascism*

The Italian unification movement, which was known as *Risorgimento*, began in the 1800s. The first Italian parliament in Turin declared national unification in 1861 and named Victor Emmanuel II king. The inclusion of Rome in 1870 completed unification.

Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini ruled the country from 1922 to 1943 and initially aided Adolf Hitler in World War II. In 1943, the Italian government overthrew the fascists, and the country lent its support to the Allies. Italy established itself as a republic in the 1946 elections, officially abolishing the monarchy by national referendum. Political violence and terrorism marked the 1970s. Conflicts within the coalition governments led to frequent government collapses during the 1980s.

#### *Political Instability and Scandal*

Elections in April 1992 hurt the ruling coalition but failed to bring a strong government to power. The proportional system of voting, originally designed to prevent totalitarianism, was blamed for consistently bringing weak coalitions to power. On its 16th vote, Parliament finally chose Oscar Luigi Scalfaro as president.

The country was soon rocked by dozens of political scandals, or *tangentopoli* (bribe city). Numerous top officials resigned, including the prime minister, and charges of past corruption became even more widespread. By 1994, six thousand individuals were under investigation for corruption in an enquiry called *Mani Pulite* (Clean Hands).

#### **Today's Challenges**

Italy continues to face ongoing problems, such as political instability, illegal immigration, organized crime, corruption, high unemployment, and the economic disparity between southern Italy and the more prosperous north. Italy is also still recovering from the 2008 global recession.

Attempts to stabilize the country's tricky coalition politics have been largely unsuccessful. Silvio Berlusconi, who was elected in 1994 and then reelected in 2001, served the longest term as prime minister since Italy became a republic in 1946. He was replaced by opposition leader Romano Prodi in 2006 but was reelected in the 2008 election.

Prime Minister Berlusconi's ruling coalition government was able to pass economic austerity measures in 2011 but struggled to implement them. Berlusconi was forced to resign in November 2011, and a series of political resignations and weak coalitions followed. Following several criminal charges of corruption and tax fraud, Berlusconi was removed from Parliament in 2013. He was convicted of many of his crimes in 2014 and 2015. In February 2014, Prime Minister Enrico Letta resigned after his Democratic Party elected a new leader, Florence mayor Matteo Renzi. Renzi was the youngest person to ever serve as Italy's prime minister. Shortly after being sworn into office, he promised to change election laws, cut taxes, and invest in jobs. However, these measures were not enough to prevent a return to economic recession in August 2014. After losing a referendum in 2016, Renzi resigned as prime minister and was succeeded by fellow Democratic Party member Paolo Gentiloni.

#### **Recent Events and Trends**

- **Migrant crisis:** By April 2016, tens of thousands of migrants arrived in Italy, many dangerously smuggled across the Mediterranean Sea from Libya. Italy, along with Greece, is a major entry point into Europe for the millions of economic migrants and refugees coming from across Africa and the Middle East. Most of the arrivals hope to make their way north to countries like Germany or Sweden, but many of Italy's neighbors have closed their borders, forcing people to linger or face deportation.

- **Deadly earthquake:** In August 2016, a deadly 6.2-magnitude earthquake struck central Italy, destroying entire medieval towns and killing hundreds of people. The Italian Peninsula is one of the most quake-prone areas in Europe, due to its location in the area where the African and Eurasian tectonic plates collide. In 2009, L'Aquila, also in central Italy, was hit by a 6.3-magnitude earthquake that killed 295 people and left thousands homeless. The

destruction that follows Italy's earthquakes has more to do with the quality of construction than the strength of the quakes.

## **THE PEOPLE**

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### **Population**

There is increasing concern about Italy's birthrate, one of the lowest in Europe, because Italy's population is expected to decline significantly in the coming decades, and the ageing population is expected to put a large strain on Italy's economy. Rome is the capital and the largest city, with over 3 million people. Most of the country's inhabitants are ethnic Italians, but there are small groups of ethnic Austrians, French, and Slovenes, as well as Albanian Italians and Greek Italians. Although Italy historically has lost many citizens to emigration, the nation has experienced a large influx of immigrants in the last two decades.

### **Language**

Italian is the official language, although dialects differ from city to city. The Florentine and Roman dialects had a major influence on modern Italian. Most youths also speak English, the most common second language; older generations are more likely to speak French. Significant French-, German-, and Slovene-speaking minorities exist. An ethnic minority in Tyrol speaks Ladin, a Romance language native to northern Italy.

### **Religion**

Eighty percent of Italians are Christian, and the majority are Roman Catholic. Most Italians do not attend church services on a regular basis, as secularism has become more appealing to many segments of society. At the same time, many Catholics are finding alternate ways to worship (through pilgrimages, informal gatherings, praying at shrines, and so forth).

Though Italians may not always live according to Catholic principles of morality, the Catholic Church is widely respected, and it wields significant social and political influence in Italy. Vatican City, home of the Roman Catholic pope and headquarters for the Roman Catholic Church, is located within Rome. The Italian constitution guarantees freedom of religion. A small percentage of Italians are Protestant, Muslim, or Jewish.

### **General Attitudes**

Because of improved economic and social conditions in southern regions and the influence of the media, differences between northern and southern Italians are diminishing. However, some regional attitudes remain, and Italians still refer to one another by their city of origin (Milanese, Roman, Florentine, etc.). Adopting practices of their German and Austrian neighbors, people in the industrialized north traditionally value punctuality, reliability, organization, and economic success. They often are less relaxed and view time as a resource not to be wasted. They take pride in having a low tolerance for criminality and public corruption.

Southerners are appreciated for their warm character and friendliness. They enjoy a leisurely life and tend to take their time doing business. Family values prevail in the south and are often more appreciated than economic success.

Regional economic differences have led to tensions within the country. Many in the more prosperous north feel they are too heavily taxed to subsidize special projects in the south. Those in the south often resent the higher incomes and better employment rates of the north. Political movements calling for more regional autonomy in a federal system have gained some momentum, particularly in the north. However, most Italians still oppose a political separation.

Italians consider social interaction very important; they try not to miss social events, such as parties and celebrations. People desire a good reputation in their social circle and seek approval from their peers. Often the ability to influence others is associated with how well one can accommodate different interests or points of view. Humor, agreeability, reliability, and success in business and social life are regarded more favorably than individual assertiveness. Italians value their health, family, serenity, and financial security.

### Personal Appearance

Italy is a major center of the European fashion industry. Italians take pride in their appearance and tend to dress up for occasions as common as an evening stroll or a casual visit. Italians seldom wear worn or sloppy clothing. Although attitudes vary among the younger generation, many people base their opinions of others on how they dress. Youths throughout the country follow the latest fashion trends, often wearing expensive, brand-name clothing.

It is common to see people of all ages wearing casual shoes such as sneakers, and young people often wear jeans. Formal clothing is worn by some professionals, such as bankers or workers in government offices. For others, it is usually reserved for special occasions such as weddings or graduations. Women commonly wear jewelry and makeup.

## CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

### Greetings

Men and women greet each other by shaking hands. When in groups, Italians avoid crossing other people's handshakes. If a person has dirty hands, he or she may offer a forearm, a finger, or a simple apology instead. When a man and a woman are introduced to each other, the man bows his head slightly and waits for the woman to extend her hand first.

Close friends often greet each other by hugging or by kissing on both cheeks—or rather, by brushing cheeks as they kiss the air. Except in southern Italy, the kiss on both cheeks between men is reserved for family members. Friends and family members say *Ciao* (“Hi” or “Good-bye”) as an informal greeting. More formal terms include *Buongiorno* (Good day) and *Buonasera* (“Good afternoon” or “Good evening”). Friends of the same gender often walk arm in arm in public.

### Gestures

Italians, especially those in the south, are known for their use of hand gestures during conversation. In fact, they often communicate with their hands instead of words. Italian gestures are so numerous that foreigners sometimes find gesture dictionaries useful.

A common gesture is rubbing the thumb rapidly against the fingers to indicate “money.” Pulling down the lower eyelid with a finger is a way of acknowledging someone's cleverness. In some areas of the south, a person might indicate “no” by nodding the head upward. Moving the hand away from the nose as if to make it longer indicates that the speaker is telling a lie (a reference to the story of Pinocchio).

When counting, Italians start with their thumb. Men remove their hats when entering buildings. Removing one's shoes in the presence of others is impolite. One covers the mouth when yawning or sneezing.

### Visiting

Italians value long friendships and enjoy visiting one another, especially on holidays and Sundays. Busy schedules in urban areas require that most visits be planned. In villages, people are used to unannounced visits by friends and neighbors. Hosts might offer their guests coffee, cake, ice cream, or drinks. Dinner guests often bring a bottle of good wine, a box of chocolates, or flowers (traditionally in odd numbers) as a gift for the hosts.

If visiting before dinner, guests generally are expected to stay for the meal. Not staying may be considered impolite, especially in the south. Guests often wait for the hosts to sit before they are seated and to begin eating before they eat. At the end of the meal, guests wait for the host to offer second or third helpings. In the evening before dinner or on holidays, Italians enjoy taking a walk in town.

### Eating

Italians usually eat in the continental style, with the fork in the left hand and the knife in the right. Hands are kept above the table; placing them in the lap is improper. When finished eating, a person places the utensils parallel on the plate. One does not leave the table until everyone has finished.

Although Italian families traditionally eat lunch together, this custom is becoming less common, especially in large cities. Most families at least try to get together for dinner (often around 7 or 8 p.m. in the north and 8:30 or 9:30 p.m. in the south).

When eating with guests, Italians usually do not hurry; a meal may last one to four hours. Regular family meals are much shorter. Dinner conversation often includes soccer, politics, family matters, business, and local events. Hosts appreciate compliments on the home and meal. In informal settings, guests may volunteer to help clean up. At restaurants, the bill often includes a service charge, but leaving a small tip (around 5–10 percent) for the server is also appropriate.

## LIFESTYLE

### Family

**Structure**

Italians enjoy strong family ties, and when being together or helping each other is possible, they honor their family obligations. The average northern family has one or two children, and most live as nuclear units. Southern families are traditionally larger, and multiple generations often live in the same house or town. Extended families throughout the country gather often and frequently live near each other.

Many villages are still comprised of groups of families who have lived in the same area for generations. However, due to economic difficulties, younger generations are moving far away from their families to find work and educational opportunities. Even so, attachment to families remains strong. Children go home for important holidays, and parents visit children that live away from home for extended periods of time. The divorce rate is growing, and single, working mothers have become more common.

**Parents and Children**

Italian parents are very supportive of their children, and in turn, children are dedicated to their parents. Grandparents frequently help with child care. Children usually live at home until they get married or find a job. Traditionally, children grew up to work in family businesses. Today, young Italians seek financial independence, though high unemployment rates in the south hamper the attainment of this goal. Many parents help their children buy a home or pay for an apartment—even if it means significant financial sacrifice.

**Gender Roles**

Italy is still largely a male-dominated society. Traditionally, men are considered the head of the family and are responsible for supporting it financially, while women are expected to stay home and take care of the family. Family gender roles are influenced by age and socioeconomic class; young husbands and wives in middle- to upper-class families are more likely to share domestic responsibilities.

Today, more women are becoming educated and working outside the home, but most still perform the majority of household duties, such as cooking and cleaning. Italian women often encounter difficulties when balancing careers and families. Though gender-based discrimination is against the law, Italian women still face many challenges regarding wage equality and participation in the labor force. In recent years, women have become more involved in politics, although this sector is still largely male dominated.

**Housing**

A large percentage of the population owns a home, and many Italian families who do not own a home dream of someday doing so. However, the high price of a new house effectively ensures that—at least in the big cities—some families stay their whole lives in a rented apartment, which they nevertheless tend to call a *casa* (house), not an *appartamento* (apartment).

Most modern apartments, especially in the center and south of the country, have balconies on which occupants grow flowers and other plants. Outside major urban centers, more people tend to live in houses. Very well-off families may own large villas. These are usually brick structures covered with white- or cream-colored plaster and topped with the

distinctively Mediterranean red-tiled roof. Some villas contain several units, in which various generations of the same family often live.

**Dating and Marriage****Dating and Courtship**

As in other Western countries, Italians date either in groups or as couples. Eating together is an important component of socializing. Young single people often go to pizzerias and pubs on the weekends. Dancing and going to movies are also frequent activities. Being part of a couple is important to most young Italians, and public displays of affection are common among young people. Couples of mixed race or nationality are becoming more common but still earn the disapproval of some older Italians.

**Marriage in Society**

Marriage is respected. Men rarely marry before finishing school and finding employment. Therefore, though engagements can happen quickly, they often last several years. Most men and women marry in their early to mid-thirties. Both the man and the woman wear rings while engaged. Lower- and middle-class young people often have matching silver rings; wealthier couples may buy a diamond engagement ring for the woman. Same-sex marriage was legalized in 2016, making Italy the last western European state to recognize this type of union, which is opposed by the Roman Catholic Church.

**Weddings**

The bride and groom are not supposed to see each other the day before the wedding. The bride wears a white wedding dress, usually paid for by the groom, and a veil; the groom wears a tuxedo or a dark suit. Marriage ceremonies most often follow Catholic traditions. The wedding takes place in the church of the bride's hometown, often in the morning, with an elaborate ceremony lasting at least an hour.

Family and friends then meet the bride and groom at a restaurant or a rented venue to celebrate. Before dinner, wine is served and the best man toasts the couple. The celebration lasts into the evening and includes a meal with as many as 14 courses. A traditional multilayered cake is served to guests. The bride's mother-in-law gives her a jewel as a wedding present; pearls are never given because they are believed to bring bad luck.

**Divorce**

Divorce is granted only after six months of legal separation (meaning the couple has gone to court to register their separation agreement). Nevertheless, the divorce rate is growing, and the marriage rate is slowing as more couples live together instead of marrying, especially in northern Italy.

**Life Cycle****Birth**

Many important life events follow Catholic customs. Most Italians baptize their children as infants. Babies were traditionally given the name of one of their grandparents, but today young couples tend to give their children a name of their own choosing.

**Milestones**

Catholic confirmation is an important ceremony in which

young Catholics receive the Holy Spirit, a member of the Catholic godhead. In the ceremony, a bishop draws a cross on a child's forehead with holy oil. This is a rite of passage for most Italian children and takes place around age 10 or 11.

Legally, adulthood comes at 18, when Italians can drive and vote. Graduation from high school, moving out of one's parents' house, and marriage are also signs of adulthood for Italians. However, many students who live away from home are still financially dependent on their parents and are not usually considered adults. Military service has traditionally been considered an important sign of adulthood, but as of 2005, military service is no longer required.

### Death

In southern Italy, funerals can be highly elaborate affairs, with a reception held after the church service. In the more urban north, they are simpler. Throughout the country, the casket typically remains open in the home for 24 hours. Friends and family members come to pay their respects to the deceased. The room containing the casket is lit by wax or electric candles, and the front door remains open and the blinds closed for the entire time. A church service is held afterward. Cremation is rare.

Wealthy families tend to bury their dead in family tombs, which are almost like chapels. Because land is scarce, many families pay to bury their loved ones in the ground for a period of ten years, at which time an *esumazione* is performed; the casket is taken out of the ground and is put into a tomb above the ground.

Every year on 2 November, people commemorate the loss of loved ones by laying flowers on their graves. The deceased are often remembered in masses offered a month and then a year after death. It is not uncommon for a widow in the south to carry a picture of her dead husband in a locket around her neck.

### Diet

Breakfast traditionally is light, consisting of a cup of coffee, a cappuccino, or warm milk (for children) and a *cornetto* (cream-filled croissant) or bread with jam or honey. With fewer people eating the main meal at midday, heavier dinners are becoming common. The main meal, whether lunch or dinner, traditionally includes three courses: pasta, fish or meat, and vegetables. Contrary to popular belief, spaghetti and meatballs is not a typical Italian meal.

In the north, pasta or rice is part of every main meal. Pasta is dominant in the south. A simple salad (lettuce and tomatoes) or roasted vegetables are served with the second course (meat dish). *Salsa di pomodoro* (tomato sauce) and *ragù* (sauce with meat) are popular with various types of pasta; however, there are many more types of sauces, which vary by region. While some pasta sauces have small amounts of meat in them, Italians usually eat the main meat dish after the pasta course.

Veal, beef, and lamb are favorite meats. The standard salad dressing contains olive oil, vinegar, salt, and pepper. Wine commonly accompanies meals and also is used widely in cooking. Italians enjoy hundreds of cheeses, including mozzarella and parmesan.

Italian pizza differs from region to region; it is generally

thinner and less rich than U.S. American pizza. Classic *margherita* pizza, with mozzarella cheese and tomatoes, is the most popular.

### Recreation

#### Sports

Soccer (called *calcio*, or *football*) is by far the most popular sport, and teams wear the colors of their home city's flag. Italians often gather in homes or bars to watch soccer matches. Avid fans follow the World Cup competition, which Italy's national soccer team has won multiple times. During important soccer matches, the streets are empty. After the game, fans of the winning team dance in the streets and drive around honking their horns and yelling.

Children of all ages, particularly boys, can be seen playing soccer everywhere. Bicycling, horse racing, skiing, tennis, boxing, fencing, swimming, and track-and-field are also popular.

#### Leisure

Leisure time is very important to Italians; hobbies, vacations, and recreation are high priorities. For recreation, Italians may go to the beach, the countryside, movies, dances, or sporting events. *Bocce*, similar to lawn bowling, is a popular game played in parks or at home. Italians often socialize at outdoor cafés and bars.

In the evenings, people of all ages usually go out to eat gelato, go window shopping, and meander through the streets and piazzas to greet each other. Most young people meet their friends every day for *la passeggiata* (the ritual of taking a walk in the evening), after doing homework or participating in after school activities.

#### Vacation

Most Italians stay in Italy for vacations. The beach is a popular destination during summer holidays. Seaside resorts are packed in August for the *Ferragosto* holiday. Many vacationers go snorkeling and scuba diving. The second-most popular vacation destination is the mountains, where recreational activities include hiking, swimming in lakes, and bicycling.

In winter, many Italians take a "white week," during which they head to the Dolomites Mountains for skiing. For weekend getaways, Italians often frequent farmhouses converted into bed-and-breakfast establishments. These are located throughout the country and offer traditional regional cuisine cooked from food grown on the establishment's land.

### The Arts

Italy has been center of the arts for centuries, shaping art movements throughout Europe and the world. The Romans played a key role in the development of Western architecture, using techniques such as the arch, dome, and vault to build larger, more structurally sound buildings. The country was also the birthplace of artistic movements such as the Renaissance.

Some of the greatest Western painters, architects, and sculptors were from Italy, including Giotto, Donatello, Michelangelo, Raphael, da Vinci, Titian, Bernini, Caravaggio, and Modigliani. Museums in Italian cities such as Florence, Naples, Rome, and Venice house internationally renowned art

collections. Modern fashion designers such as Gucci, Cavalli, Valentino, and Versace have also become part of the list of great Italian artists. The art of *orafo*, gold-jewelry making, is famous in Italy, and Italians take pride in their crafting of leather goods.

In music, Italians invented opera, musical notation, and the piano. Opera is highly regarded, and opera houses are found in many towns. Music festivals are popular as well. Italy has also made significant contributions to world literature, including the works of the medieval poet Dante. In film, Italian actors and directors, such as Federico Fellini, have achieved international recognition. Traditional folk arts are also practiced. The *tarantella*, a lively folk dance associated with Sicily, is performed at many celebrations.

### Holidays

Important religious and national holidays include New Year's Day; Epiphany (6 Jan.); Easter (including Easter Monday); Liberation Day (25 Apr.), which commemorates Italy's liberation by the Allied forces in World War II; Labor Day (1 May); the Anniversary of the Republic (2 June); the Assumption of the Virgin Mary (15 Aug.); All Saints' Day (1 Nov.); Immaculate Conception (8 Dec.); Christmas; and St. Stephen's Day (26 Dec.). Nearly every city and town honors the local patron saint with an annual celebration, and various other festivals are held throughout the year.

#### Epiphany

The celebration of Epiphany is largely a children's holiday in Italy; it commemorates the end of the Christmas holidays. According to Italian legend, *La Befana* was sweeping her house when the Three Wise Men stopped to invite her to come to Bethlehem with them. *La Befana* said no but later tried to catch up to the Wise Men and got lost. Every year, the old crone rides her broomstick through Italy as she continues to search for the *Bambino* (the infant Jesus). Children write letters to *La Befana* to ask her for specific presents, and she slides down the chimney on Epiphany Eve (5 Jan.) to fill their stockings with gifts. Children are told that they will receive candy if they behave well and pebbles, charcoal, or ashes if they do not. On Epiphany, parents often take their children to piazzas to buy candy and small gifts from the Christmas markets, where they watch jugglers and magicians perform.

#### Carnevale

*Carnevale* is an important festival that is usually celebrated in February or March, after Epiphany and right before Lent. Every city and town in Italy has its own festivities to mark this holiday. Most towns organize public parades with dancers, musicians, and people dressed in colorful costumes. Children love to dress up for *Carnevale*. Candy and small gift kiosks are set up in piazzas. Italy's most famous *Carnevale* celebrations take place in Venice, where the streets fill with masked revelers.

#### Easter

On Easter Sunday, many families eat chocolate for breakfast and attend a local Easter mass. The largest mass is given by the Pope in St. Peter's Basilica, in Vatican City. Families also have a large meal together, usually including lamb and artichokes. They also eat traditional cakes, such as a *colomba* (dove-shaped) cake, which is similar to *panettone* (a sweet

bread) but is only eaten at Easter. *La Pasquetta* (Little Easter), also known as Easter Monday, is celebrated the day after Easter. Traditionally, families and friends celebrate this holiday by picnicking together in the countryside and eating Easter leftovers. People often take the entire Easter weekend off to stay in the countryside.

#### Ferragosto

The Assumption of the Virgin Mary, or *Ferragosto*, is celebrated in August, and celebrations include some traditions dating back to the ancient Romans. Throughout Italy, families and friends come together on 15 August to share a big meal. Many Italians travel to the sea or the mountains during this holiday, and towns and villages plan festivities. For example, the village of Positano, on the Amalfi coast, sets off fireworks over the Mediterranean Sea, and the city of Siena holds the *Palio*, a horse race that dates back to medieval times.

#### Christmas

On Christmas Eve, children receive and open their presents. Italian families eat a traditional fish dinner and go to church for Midnight Mass. Christmas Day is celebrated with a large meal, and families spend time together playing games, watching TV, and going for walks. *Panettone*, a sweet bread, is one of the most famous traditional Christmas foods. Christmas markets, outdoor markets set up in Italian piazzas that open on Christmas Day and close on Epiphany, are full of kiosks selling sweets and small toys.

## SOCIETY

### Government

#### Structure

Italy's president is head of state and is chosen to serve a seven-year term by an electoral college consisting of representatives from different regions. The prime minister is head of government. The prime minister is appointed by the president, usually from the largest party in Parliament's lower house, and is approved by a parliamentary vote of confidence. Prime ministers can be removed from office at any time if Parliament passes a vote of no-confidence.

Italy's legislature consists of a bicameral parliament with an upper house (the 315-seat Senate) and a lower house (the 630-member Chamber of Deputies). Both houses are elected by a proportional representation system to five-year terms, unless Parliament is dissolved early for new elections. Either the lower or upper house can initiate a law, but it must be approved by both houses. This equal share in lawmaking power creates conflict in the implementation of laws.

The Italian Republic is divided into 20 regions, which are further divided into 31 provinces. Each region holds some autonomy over education, the environment, and taxation.

#### Political Landscape

Because numerous parties often hold seats in Parliament, it is difficult for one party to gain a majority. In 2015, Italy's Parliament passed an election-reform law that will give a majority of parliamentary seats to whichever party wins the most votes. If no single party wins at least 40 percent of the national vote, a run-off election will be held between the two parties with the most votes, and the winner will receive 340

out of 630 seats in Parliament. Reformers hope the law will give more longevity to governments and reduce the instability of ruling coalitions.

Some of the major political parties include the center-left Democratic Party (PD), the center-right People of Freedom party (PdL), and the populist Five Star Movement (M5S) party. Coalitions are usually necessary but often fall apart during disputes, power struggles, or scandals; most governments last less than two years. Parties that combine to form coalitions usually are grouped as rightists, centrists, or leftists, although some coalitions have combined opposing forces. The government's priorities include passing constitutional reforms to revive the stagnant economy.

#### ***Government and the People***

The constitution protects freedom of speech, assembly, press, and religion. Elections are generally considered free and fair. Voter turnout is usually high, though participation has been lower in recent elections. Citizens may vote in senatorial elections at age 25. The voting age for all other elections is 18.

#### **Economy**

Italy's economy is based on industry in the north and agriculture in the south. Small- and medium-sized businesses in the north are a strong driving force in the economy. Agriculture employs less than 4 percent of the labor force, but agricultural products are important and allow Italy to be nearly self-sufficient in food production. Italy is one of the world's largest wine producers and a major producer of cheese. Other important crops include wheat, potatoes, corn, rice, fruits, and olive oil.

Italy is a major steel and iron producer; industry accounts for almost one-fourth of the gross domestic product (GDP). The service sector, which includes tourism, comprises nearly three-fourths of Italy's GDP. The country's major trading partners include other European Union (EU) nations such as Germany, France, and the United Kingdom.

Most people enjoy a standard of living consistent with Italy's position as one of the world's seven major industrialized countries and as the third-largest economy in the eurozone. However, the economy started to stagnate in 2002, when the euro replaced the *lira* as Italy's currency. Many felt the resulting price hikes hurt the economy.

In 2008, Italy's economy fell into recession as a result of the global financial crisis. The government enacted a series of austerity measures in late 2011 that included tax increases, pension reforms, and cuts to public administration. Economic growth remains slow and the country's public debt is very high. Unemployment is high, especially among the youth.

#### **Transportation and Communications**

Buses and trains, the principal means of public transportation, are usually punctual but have become increasingly expensive since the introduction of the euro and are not always adequate to meet the needs of commuters. Subways operate in Rome, Milan, Naples, and Turin. Most households have at least one car. For the first time in over a decade, Italians bought more bikes than cars in 2011. A domestic air system operates between major cities. People and goods are also transported

on the seas surrounding Italy.

The communications system is modern and extensive but not always well maintained. Mail delivery is also unreliable at times. Cellular phone use is widespread; there are more cellular phones in Italy than telephone landlines. Numerous radio and television stations broadcast on a regional basis, and Italians have access to many daily newspapers. Most newspapers are privately owned and are often connected to a political party. Broadcasters have also traditionally been subject to political influences. Silvio Berlusconi's Mediaset owns a large concentration of Italy's media. The mafia occasionally influences the media, forcing journalists to report their stories carefully. The internet is commonly used by both businesses and individuals.

#### **Education**

##### ***Structure and Access***

School attendance is free and compulsory for students between the ages of six and sixteen. Italians are proud of their country's school system, and the majority of students go to public schools. Private schools are mostly run by religious groups. The public school system is comprised of primary school (five years), middle school (three years), and high school (three to five years). At the completion of middle school and high school, students must pass exams in order to advance to the next level.

Students can choose which type of high school they would like to attend. *Licei*, or high schools, prepare students for higher education; there are five types of *licei*: classical, scientific, human sciences, linguistic, and artistic. Students can also choose to go to a technical institute, which lasts five years and prepares students for a vocation and for university studies. Students who wish to enter the work force directly after high school may attend a professional institute for three to five years.

##### ***School Life***

Classes are held Monday through Saturday in most regions. Education is a serious matter, and most young people spend a great deal of time doing homework. Classes are taught in Italian. Students may take English, German, or French classes in middle school. The main teaching method used in primary and secondary schools is rote memorization. Cheating on exams is commonplace. Students who wish to attend university must receive a passing grade on the high school exit exam. Graduation from high school takes place around age 19.

##### ***Higher Education***

Both private and public universities are available in Italy. The cost of higher education is cheaper than in countries like the United States. La Sapienza, in Rome, is the largest university in Europe. The University of Bologna was founded in the 12th century and is one of the oldest continuously operating universities in the world.

#### **Health**

Healthcare services are coordinated through government agencies. Individuals can choose their family physician; the government pays for most services. Private care is also available, but the patient must pay for it. Smoking is

common, but the law bans smoking in enclosed public spaces such as restaurants. Many Italians refuse to wear seat belts when driving, although a 1998 law made it mandatory.

## **AT A GLANCE**

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### **Contact Information**

Embassy of Italy, 3000 Whitehaven Street NW, Washington, DC 20008; phone (202) 612-4400; web site [www.ambwashingtondc.esteri.it](http://www.ambwashingtondc.esteri.it) Italian Tourist Board, web site [www.italia.it](http://www.italia.it).

### **Country and Development Data**

|                         |                          |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| Capital                 | Rome                     |
| Population              | 62,007,540 (rank=23)     |
| Area (sq. mi.)          | 116,348 (rank=71)        |
| Area (sq. km.)          | 301,340                  |
| Human Development Index | 26 of 188 countries      |
| Gender Inequality Index | 16 of 188 countries      |
| GDP (PPP) per capita    | \$35,700                 |
| Adult Literacy          | 99% (male); 99% (female) |
| Infant Mortality        | 3 per 1,000 births       |
| Life Expectancy         | 80 (male); 85 (female)   |
| Currency                | Euro                     |