

The Italians think Obama is “simpatico”

By Dr. Francesco Nicotra

NOTE FROM ITALY



So how was the news that Barack Obama has been elected president of the United States received here in Italy? Articles in some of our national newspapers describing the country as delighted may be something of an exaggeration, but it is certainly true that the youthful candidate who has won the race for the White

House appeals to most Italians.

According to Renato Mannheimer, president of ISPO, a highly respected Italian polling organization, one interesting aspect of the U.S. presidential campaigns (as opposed to their aftermath), was that members of even Italy's most right-of-center parties expressed support for the young senator from Illinois.

Sixty-eight percent of the “Popolo della Libertà,” Premier Silvio Berlusconi's own party, and 60 percent of the “Lega Nord,” a party firmly rooted in the country's northern region whose popularity is on the rise, came out in favor of Obama in addition to 87 percent of the members of the “Partito Democratico,” formed largely by former communists, socialists and left-wing Catholics.

Obama's success, according to some political commentators, has been welcomed by the Italian Democratic Party almost as a victory over Premier Silvio Berlusconi, who has always claimed to be one of President George W. Bush's great friends and whose sympathies clearly lay with John McCain.

The president-elect's slogan, “Yes, We Can,” was adopted with great relish by the leader of the Italian Democratic Party, Walter Veltroni, during his own bid for power in the Italian elections held in April; however, it did not work as well for him, as the coalition led by his rival, Berlusconi, is now governing Italy with a solid majority. Berlusconi's party holds 340 seats in the Chamber of Deputies and 172 in the Senate compared with the 239 and 132 respectively held by Veltroni's opposition party.

Both during and after the spring election campaign here in Italy, our own Democrats have underlined that quite a few of the president-elect's declared policies are ones they share. Party Leader Walter Veltroni even wrote to Barack Obama, “Dear Senator, If you win, it could change the world....”

The response of their right-wing opponents was that the Italian and American democratic parties had practically nothing in common beyond their name. Their

background is different – the first having evolved from the largest communist party in the West and the other from the largest liberal party in the United States. There is also the fact that Veltroni has been in politics for more than 30 years, whereas Obama became a senator only three short years ago. Maurizio Belpietro, editor of Panorama, a weekly current affairs magazine often sympathetic with Berlusconi, summed it up with the comment that “the leader of the Italian Democratic Party does not represent the new, whereas the American President Elect does”.

Leaving policy out of the equation for a moment, I am certain that most Italians do indeed like Barack Obama thanks to the more youthful breath of fresh air he has breathed into both American and international politics. Age in politics has been a particularly thorny issue among Italians for some time now, as Italy probably holds the record for having the oldest politicians in the world. At 89, Senator for Life Giulio Andreotti leads the pack, having fought the good fight non-stop since the period immediately after World War II; he has been our head of government seven times.

Apart from Andreotti, who despite being the target of frequent criticism is also thought of as the “wise old man” of Italian politics and practically a historic character, there are quite a few other politicians who seem to have been around forever and who have, between them, been swapping the most senior political offices in government for decades.

This situation is why the “make way for the young” slogan was so prominent in the last Italian elections; in fact there are now several younger people in our government. Thirty-eight-year-old Angelino Alfano, for example, is the Minister of Justice, 36-year-old Maria Stella Gelmini is the Minister for Education, 33-year-old Mara Carfagna serves as the Equal Opportunities Minister and 31-year-old Giorgia Meloni is the Minister for Youth Affairs. Obviously the opposition responded with its own sprinkling of “youngsters,” including Pina Picerno, who at 26 is the youngest member of the Italian parliament. It is an absolutely new scenario on the Italian political stage.

The warmth that the dynamic and youthful president-elect of the United States has generated in Italy is yet more evidence that America is by far and away the foreign country that Italians love the most, whatever their political sympathies. It is partly because many, many families here have relations among the 26 million Americans of Italian origin and also because the many military cemeteries scattered throughout the land are a constant reminder of the high price paid by so many young Americans who fought to restore liberty and freedom to our country. ▲