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# A Moving Experience: is voting easier when you do it twice?



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Voting in one country can be complicated. Remember Florida's hanging chads in the 2000 US presidential election? So what happens when a civic-minded individual with two passports tries to vote in both? It's perfectly legal to do so in a number of sovereign states, including the United States and Italy, where I am entitled to vote.

When I headed a US political group in Italy, the most important thing we did was to help Americans vote from abroad. Our organization had a website with that name:

[www.votefromabroad.org](http://www.votefromabroad.org). The people who set it up worried about it constantly, and we, charged with driving people to that website, fussed about it quietly, wondering how complicated it might appear. Was filling out a form online such a unique challenge, akin to the level of rocket science?

Naturally we wanted our expats in Italy to believe that it was easy-peasy.

 Jeremy L..

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Our *raison d'être* was to get people to vote, so we had to make them believe it was really simple, fast, uncomplicated. The fact is, it wasn't all that difficult, but there were a few steps involved, so it wasn't QUITE as straightforward as we wanted people to believe.

The website addressed most variables. You put in your state and then choose from a series of questions: Do you want to register? Find out if you have already registered? What is the deadline for registration in your state? What is on the ballot in your state? How to return your ballot? The information changed, depending on the state, but you were always given an email and/or a phone number to call for your voting district. Plus, the website itself had a pop-up for questions, and the organization I represented was an additional resource for Q & A.

We knew that our registration work for a US election the first Tuesday of

November should be completed, signed, sealed, and delivered to the post office no later than September 20. Any paperwork not completed by that date ran the risk of arriving too late to count in the November election. Now, the exact deadline varies from state to state and jurisdiction to jurisdiction, and it is also changing dramatically from election to election as technology advances AND political parties support restrictive policies designed to game the system, but, by and large, if you snail-mailed a ballot from Italy to the US by the end of September, your chances of having your ballot arrive on time were pretty good. Sophisticated states such as California and New York could tell you if your ballot had been received, which was very helpful for down-to-the-wire mailings. (Whether ballots would be *counted* or not depended on the state and the level of corruption of local officials — out of our control).

But Italy OMG. I had no idea what

*complicato* meant until I received an email from the Italian Embassy in Washington DC. You see, Italy has a national election on September 25, and the Embassy was telling me what I had to do to register to vote in Italy ONE MONTH from the election? It wasn't simply the ridiculously short amount of heads-up time; it was what I was expected to DO during that time frame.

I received the mail on August 20. I was told that I had to download, fill out, and return two documents to the Italian Embassy AND to my former voting district (called a *comune*) in Italy by August 24. WTF (= Why This, Flisi)?

Plus, these instructions were clear as *fango*. In the first paragraph I was told that, while the election was September 25, I had to return my ballot by September 22 to the closest consular office in the country where I was currently residing. I had to make sure I was registered with AIRE

(Anagrafe Italiani Residenti Estero, or Registry of Italian Residents Abroad). I had to declare that I had been residing abroad for at least three months before the election and that I had announced to my Italian comune no later than August 24 my intention to vote from abroad.

The second paragraph reassured me that if I were duly registered with AIRE, I would receive an envelope with my ballot and voting instructions. It then warned me that I had to communicate *tempestivamente* (immediately) if my address had changed . . . but not clear to WHOM I was supposed to communicate — or reconfirm — my address. It offered several options:

1. A portal called FAST (Farnesina servizi telematici per Italiani all'estero = Telematic Services of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for Italians abroad). I activated an account on this portal but there was no indication of what I was supposed

to DO with it.

2. A certified email address, which I tried. But my note bounced back with the message that I was “uncertified.”

3. Another email address, which I also tried.

4. The snail mail address of the Italian Embassy in DC. Good luck with THAT. I have called the Embassy numerous times in the last year, and no one ever answers the phone. Each time, I left messages and hoped for the best. An office that doesn't bother to answer its own phone will never get around to opening envelopes.

The next paragraph provided a link with more information about registering with AIRE and changing my address, as if the previous two paragraphs were irrelevant.

Then the warning that if I had not received my ballot information by September 11, I needed to contact the

Embassy. Probably the author of the letter knew that the Embassy doesn't answer the phone so it offered two emails similar to those of paragraph two. I already knew that one would bounce back and was useless. The other had a glaring typo (the word "Washington" was spelled incorrectly) so it would not have worked as given, but fortunately I do know how to spell "Washington." Does anyone read these things?

The final paragraph gave two websites for more information about the Embassy and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The signature was of the consular office of the DC Embassy, including address (correct) and email (the word "Washington" was again spelled incorrectly).

The *pièce de resistance* in Italian elections is the ballot itself — not that I am likely to see one in coming weeks, given the obstacles. Ballots in

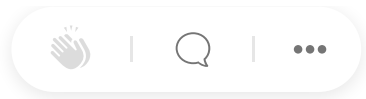


Italy look like kindergarten coloring books, especially in this election when there are 75 (not joking) different symbols representing parties, political groups, and coalitions. A voter has to make a big black circle around his or her symbol of choice. No names, no descriptions, just pictures, harking back to the time when most Italians were illiterate. (Note: Italy today has a notably higher literacy rate than the US).

This antiquated system is hard enough for the voter; imagine trying to tally the votes from such a ballot. I was an inspector in one Italian election; my impression was that corruption was the least of the problems. The system is so ridiculous that results are untenable no matter how many times votes are counted.

At this point hanging chads feel like the quintessence of organized democracy.

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