



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Italy, including the islands of Sardegna (Sardinia) and Sicilia (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.

Italy surrounds two independent nations: San Marino and Città del Vaticano (Vatican City, or 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.

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, though in recent years the north has been experiencing more hot and humid weather.

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 Torino (Turin) declared national unification in 1861 and named Victor Emmanuel II king. The inclusion of Roma (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

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, a stagnating economy and the defeat of a constitutional referendum backed by Renzi led him to resign as prime minister in 2016. Political instability has continued to plague the country since, as have other problems, including illegal immigration, organized crime, corruption, high unemployment, and the economic disparity between southern Italy and the more prosperous north.

Recent Events and Trends

• **Political stalemate ends:** In June 2018, Italy ended a period of political deadlock with the swearing in of a new government. Italy had been without a central government since March elections failed to produce a majority winner. The populist Five Star Movement and the right-wing alliance led by the Lega Nord party won the most votes, but neither secured enough seats in parliament to govern alone. Representatives from both parties formed a coalition and reached an agreement to form a new government, tapping Giuseppe Conte as prime minister.

• **Migrant laws:** In November 2018, the government implemented a series of laws abolishing protections for migrants and making it easier for them to be deported. Interior Minister Salvini drafted the laws and deemed them necessary to make Italy safer. Like many other European nations, Italy has grappled with how to deal

with an influx of refugees and migrants from Africa and the Middle East.

• **Economic recession:** In December 2018, Italy's economy contracted, putting the economy into recession for the third time in the past decade. Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte indicated he expects the recession to last well into 2019, raising concerns that Italy, the third-largest economy in the eurozone, could default on its high public debt.

THE PEOPLE

Population

Rome is the capital and the largest city, with over 4 million people. Most of the country's inhabitants are ethnic Italians, but there are small groups of ethnic Germans, French, and Slovenes, as well as Albanians and Greeks. Although Italy historically has lost many citizens to emigration, the nation has experienced a large influx of immigrants in the last two decades. 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.

Language

Italiano (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.

Common Italian Phrases

English	Italian
Please	Per favore
Thank you	Grazie
You're welcome	Prego
Yes	Sì
No	No
Excuse me	Scusi
I'm sorry	Mi dispiace
Happy birthday!	Buon compleanno!
Numbers 1–10	Uno, due, tre, quattro, cinque, sei, sette, otto, nove, dieci

Meglio una gallina oggi, che un uovo domani. ("Better a hen today than an egg tomorrow.") This saying means it is better to accept what you have right now than to wait for a better tomorrow, or "live in the moment."

Personal Appearance

Italy is a major center of the European fashion industry. Most 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 introduced, they shake hands and say *Piacere di conoscerla* (Pleasure to meet you). 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.

Close friends often greet each other by hugging or by kissing on both cheeks—or rather, by brushing cheeks as they kiss the air. In northern Italy, men who are family members greet each other with a kiss on each cheek; male friends shake hands. In southern Italy, friends and family members alike greet each other by kissing both cheeks.

Friends and family members say *Ciao* ("Hi" or "Good-bye") as an informal greeting. More formal terms include *Buongiorno* (Good morning) and *Buonasera* ("Good afternoon"). Friends of the same gender often walk arm in arm in public.

Common Italian Greetings

English	Italian
Hello / Good-bye	Ciao
Good morning	Buongiorno
Good afternoon	Buon pomeriggio
Good evening	Buonasera
How are you?	Come sta?
Good, thanks	Bene, grazie

Some people may leave a small tip, but it is not common or expected.

LIFESTYLE

Family

Structure

Italians typically 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.

Parents and Children

Italian parents are usually 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. However, 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

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 was traditionally considered an important sign of adulthood for men, but as of 2005, military service is no longer required.

Death

In southern Italy, funerals can be highly elaborate affairs. After a death, 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, followed by a reception.

In the more urban north, funerals are simpler. The casket remains open for a few hours in a room of the hospital where the person died. After that, the coffin is sealed and taken to the church for the funeral service.

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. Cremation is rare.

The deceased are often remembered in masses offered a month and then a year after death. Every year on 2 November, people commemorate the loss of loved ones by laying flowers on their graves. 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

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 Firenze (Florence), Napoli (Naples), Roma (Rome), and Venezia (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 Sicilia (Sicily), is performed at many celebrations.

Holidays

Important religious and national holidays include New Year's Day (1 January); Epiphany (6 January); Easter (including Easter Monday); Liberation Day (25 April), 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 August); All Saints' Day (1 November); Immaculate Conception (8 December); Christmas (25 December); and Saint Stephen's Day (26 December). Nearly every city and town honors the local patron saint with an annual celebration, and various other festivals are held throughout the year.

Epiphany

traditional fish dinner and go to church for Midnight Mass. That night, *Babbo Natale* (Father Christmas) brings presents for children. On Christmas morning, the children wake up and open their presents. Christmas Day is celebrated with a large meal, and families spend time together playing games, watching TV, and going for walks. *Panettone* is one of the most famous traditional Christmas foods. Christmas markets, outdoor markets set up in Italian piazzas that open at the beginning of December 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 321-seat Senate) and a lower house (the 630-member Chamber of Deputies). In 2017, Italy's parliament passed an election-reform law that introduced a mixed electoral system in both houses. Under the new law, 36 percent of the seats go to the candidates with the most votes, while the remaining 64 percent are elected using a proportional system. Legislators in both houses are elected 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. The 2017 election-reform law is expected to encourage governing coalitions.

Some of the major political parties include the center-left Democratic Party (PD), the center-right Forza Italia (FI), the right-wing Lega Nord (LN), 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.

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. *Scuole superiori*, or high schools, prepare students for higher education; there are five types of *scuole superiori*: 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, and the government pays for most services. Individuals can choose their family physician. 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.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

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