



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Italy, including the islands of Sardinia and Sicily, covers 116,348 square miles (301,340 square kilometers) and is slightly larger than 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 (up to 104°F, or 40°C). The rest of the country usually experiences moderate summers, but they have been quite hot recently.

Italy surrounds two independent nations: San Marino and Vatican City (Holy See). San Marino has been independent since the fourth century. 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

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.

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.

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).

Political instability in Italy has continued, with more than 57 successive governments since World War II. Attempts to stabilize the country's tricky coalition politics have been largely unsuccessful. Silvio Berlusconi, who was elected 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.

Italy continues to face ongoing problems such as illegal immigration, organized crime, corruption, high unemployment, and the economic disparity between southern Italy and the more prosperous north. It must also combat a recession caused by the global financial crisis of 2008. Early 2010 saw significant election wins for Prime Minister Berlusconi's ruling coalition government.

THE PEOPLE

Population

Italy's population is nearly 58.1 million and is declining slightly. There is increasing concern about the country's birthrate, one of the lowest in Europe, because Italy's population is expected to decline significantly in the coming decades. Around 68 percent of Italians live in urban areas. Rome is the capital and the largest city, with more than 2.7 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 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 prefer 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

Nearly all Italians are Roman Catholic, although many do not participate on a regular basis. Attendance at services is not high, and secularism is 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). However, the Catholic Church does wield 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.

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, Italians still refer to one another by their city of origin (Milanese, Roman, Florentine, etc.) and some regional attitudes remain. 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 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

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 dirty, worn, or sloppy clothing. Although attitudes vary among the younger generation, many people base their opinions of others on how they dress. In many cities, clothing and shoe shops are more plentiful than bakeries. Italy is a major center of the European fashion industry. Youths throughout the country follow the latest fashion trends, often wearing expensive, brand-name clothing. Older women generally wear dresses. It is becoming more common to see people of all ages wearing casual shoes such as sneakers, while young people often wear jeans.

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. 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. Italian gestures are so numerous that foreigners sometimes find gesture dictionaries useful. 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 (in odd numbers) as a gift for the hosts.

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, southern guests may leave some food on the plate if they have been served large portions. Guests wait for the host to offer second or third helpings.

If visiting before supper, guests generally are expected to stay for the meal. Not staying may be considered impolite, especially in the south. In the evening before supper 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 supper (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 for the server is also appropriate.

LIFESTYLE

Family

Italians enjoy strong family ties, and when being together or helping each other is possible, they honor their family obligations. Parents are willing to offer financial assistance to their adult children when necessary. Many parents will help their children buy a home or pay for an apartment—even if it means significant financial sacrifice. Young Italians seek to be economically independent of the family, although high unemployment rates in the south complicate matters. Grandparents frequently help with child care. Single adult children tend to live with their parents, even into their thirties. Most families in the north live as nuclear units, and the average family has one or two children. Southern families are traditionally larger, and many generations often live in the same house or town. Extended families throughout the country get together often and frequently live near each other, although there is some indication that this custom is changing.

Housing

The dream of most Italians is to own their own home. However, the high price of a new house effectively ensures that—at least in the big cities—many 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 have balconies on which, especially in the center and south of the country, 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

As in other Western countries, Italians date either in groups or as couples. Dancing and going to movies are frequent activities. Women usually marry by age 26, while the average age for men is 29. A man will rarely marry before he has finished his education and found employment. Therefore, engagements can last several years. Some couples live together before marrying. Marriage ceremonies most often follow Catholic traditions. Divorce is granted only after three

or more years of legal separation. Nevertheless, the divorce rate is growing and the marriage rate is slowing as more couples live together instead of marrying (especially in northern Italy). Even in the more traditional South, single parents are becoming more accepted.

Life Cycle

As a predominantly Catholic country, most Italians baptize their children as infants. Babies were traditionally given the name of one of their grandparents, but, today, young couples tend to call their children whatever they want. Legally, adulthood comes at 18, when Italians can drive and vote. In southern Italy, funerals can be highly elaborate affairs. In the more urban north, they are simpler. The casket typically remains open in the home for 24 hours, after which there is a church service. Cremation is rare. Wealthy families tend to bury their dead in family tombs. Every year on 2 November, people commemorate the loss of loved ones by laying flowers on their graves. The deceased is often remembered in Masses offered a month and then a year after death.

Diet

Breakfast is traditionally light, consisting of a cup of coffee or cappuccino (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. 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). The standard salad dressing contains olive oil and vinegar, and salt and pepper. *Pomodoro* (tomato sauce) and *ragù* (sauce with meat) are popular with various types of pasta; however, there are many more types of sauces that vary by region. Veal, beef, and lamb are favorite meats. Wine commonly accompanies meals and also is used widely in cooking. Italian pizza is not the same as pizza in the United States and differs from region to region. Contrary to popular belief among North Americans, spaghetti and meatballs is not a typical Italian meal. While some pasta sauces have small amounts of meat in them, Italians usually eat the main meat dish after the pasta course. Italians enjoy hundreds of cheeses, including mozzarella and Parmesan.

Recreation

Leisure time is very important to Italians; hobbies, vacations, and recreation are high priorities. For recreation, Italians go to the beach, countryside, movies, dances, or sporting events. Soccer is by far the most popular sport, and teams wear the colors of their home city's flag. Avid fans follow the World Cup competition, which Italy's national soccer team has won four times. Bicycling, horse racing, skiing, tennis, boxing, fencing, swimming, and track-and-field are also popular. *Bocce*, a favorite game, is similar to lawn bowling.

During the day, Italians often go to bars to socialize. Bars, which are more like coffee shops, have a light, open atmosphere and serve both coffee and alcoholic drinks.

The Arts

Italy has been a birthplace and center of the arts for centuries, shaping art movements throughout Europe and the world. The Renaissance began in Italy. Some of the greatest Western painters, architects, and sculptors are from Italy, including Giotto, Donatello, Michelangelo, Raphael, da Vinci, Titian, Bernini, Caravaggio, and Modigliani. The Romans also 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. Museums in Italian cities such as Florence, Naples, Rome, and Venice house internationally renowned art collections.

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. In film, Italian actors and directors 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 also held throughout the year.

SOCIETY

Government

The Italian Republic is divided into 20 regions, which are further divided into provinces. A constitutional referendum in October 2001 gave increased autonomy to these 20 regions on such issues as education, the environment, and taxation. Italy's president (currently Giorgio Napolitano) is chosen by an electoral college and acts as chief of state. The prime minister (currently Silvio Berlusconi) is head of government. The prime minister is usually the head of a majority party or a majority coalition of parties but can also be chosen from other parties. In all cases, a proposed prime minister must be appointed by the president but 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 upper legislative chamber is the 315-seat Senate. Eleven senators are appointed for life by the president and the others are elected to five-year terms. The 630 members of Italy's Chamber of Deputies also hold office for five years unless Parliament is dissolved early for new elections. Citizens may vote in senatorial elections at age 25. The voting age for all other elections is 18.

Because numerous parties often hold seats in Parliament, it is difficult for one party to gain a majority. 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.

Economy

Italy's economy is based on agriculture in the south and industry in the north. Small- and medium-sized businesses in the north are a strong driving force in the economy. Agriculture employs less than 10 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-third of the gross domestic product (GDP). The service sector, which includes tourism, comprises about two-thirds of Italy's GDP. The country's major trading partners include other European Union (EU) nations such as Germany, France, and the United Kingdom. Italy was granted membership in the European Monetary Union in May 1999, but continued fiscal discipline is needed to reduce Italy's public debt and lower unemployment, particularly in the south. Most people enjoy a standard of living consistent with Italy's position as one of the world's seven major industrialized countries. 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.

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. A domestic air system flies 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 phones are common; there are more cell phones in Italy than telephone lines. Numerous radio and television stations broadcast on a regional basis, and Italians have access to many daily newspapers.

Education

School attendance is free and compulsory for students between the ages of six and sixteen. Classes are held Monday through Saturday. Education is a serious matter, and most young people spend a great deal of time doing homework. The adult literacy rate is somewhat lower in the south. Italy has more than 50 universities and institutes of higher learning. One of the oldest universities in Europe was founded in Bologna in the 12th century.

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 has decreased somewhat since a 2005 law banned 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

Contact Information

Embassy of Italy, 3000 Whitehaven Street NW, Washington, DC 20008; phone (202) 612-4400; web site www.ambwashingtondc.esteri.it. Italian Tourist Board, 630 Fifth Avenue, Suite 1565, New York, NY 10111; phone (212) 245-5618; web site www.italiantourism.com.

POPULATION & AREA

Population	58,090,681 (rank=23)
Area, sq. mi.	116,348 (rank=72)
Area, sq. km.	301,340

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	23 of 182 countries
Gender inequality rank	9 of 155 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$29,900
Adult literacy rate	99% (male); 98% (female)
Infant mortality rate	5 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	77 (male); 84 (female)

*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2010 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

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