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Reference and the election of the new Italian President

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After three inconclusive rounds in the preceding days, in which nobody secured the two-thirds majority needed to win, on the morning of 31 January 2015 a fourth round of voting was held in the Italian Parliament to elect the country’s President. This time, a simple majority of the 1,009 eligible voters (the members of both Chambers of the Parliament plus some delegates from the Regions) was enough to decide the election. To vote, the voters had to write a name on a ballot paper and insert it into one of the several ballot boxes. When the ballot boxes were opened, it turned out that 665 of the 995 ballot papers had the word “Mattarella” written on them, sometimes together with other expressions (e.g., “on. Mattarella”, “Mattarella S.”, “Mattarella Sergio”, “Sergio Mattarella”, “prof. Sergio Mattarella”, “S. Mattarella”, “on. S. Mattarella”, “on. prof. Mattarella”). *As a result*, the Constitutional Court judge Sergio Mattarella, a former member of the Parliament (from 1983 to 2008) and Minister of Education (from 1989 to 1990) and of Defence (from 1999 to 2001), was proclaimed the 12th President of the Italian Republic. As a President he’ll probably follow in his predecessor, Giorgio Napolitano’s, footsteps and act as an impartial arbiter and defender of the Constitution, not a bad thing in the present Italian political situation. Politics, however, is not the real subject of this post. Instead, I’d like to ask you to pause on the italicized phrase above, “as a result”. On the face of it, it sounds quite natural. It was used to state a connection between two indisputable facts, that concerning the ballot papers and what was written on them and that concerning the proclamation of Mattarella as President: given the constitutional background and various other things, the former fact, we meant to say, brought about the latter. But, even granting the background, how is it that the 665 ballot papers having the word “Mattarella” written on them determined the election of *that* particular person, Sergio Mattarella?

The natural answer is, of course: this is so because those 665 ballot papers counted as votes for *him*, and they counted as votes for *him* because of the scribbles the voters made on them. Here, however, is where the problems begin. What do those scribbles have to do with Sergio Mattarella? Well, they are *his* name, one could say: the ballot papers had *his* name written on them. But the fact is that there are a lot of other persons named “Mattarella” in Italy. And a quick search on the web suffices to verify that some of them have “Sergio” as their first name. Notice, moreover, that the eligible voters didn’t have to choose between listed candidates. Indeed, the Constitution of the Italian Republic states that “any citizen who has attained fifty years of age and enjoys civil and political rights can be elected President of the Republic” (art. 84). As a matter of fact, a number of surprising people -- e.g., the folksinger Francesco Guccini, the actress Sabrina Ferilli, the comedians Ezio Greggio and Enzo Iacchetti, and even the thirty-eight-year-old and hence non-eligible soccer player Francesco Totti -- received votes during the four rounds of these elections. (Just for the record, in the second round of the preceding elections (April 2013) Sophia Loren, Giovanni Trapattoni and the porn star Rocco Siffredi received one vote each, which may tell you something about Italy.) Why, then, shouldn’t we consider any of these other persons named “(Sergio) Mattarella” satisfying the conditions stated by the Constitution to be the new President?

“Wait a moment,” one might sensibly object, “isn’t it clear that the 665 voters who wrote ‘Mattarella’ on their ballot paper *intended* to vote precisely for the person who was proclaimed President?” Maybe so, although intentions are sometimes murky and not easily ascertainable. But, even granting that in this case the intentions to vote were indeed clear, it should be noted that there is sometimes a gap between intending to do something and doing that something, and voting doesn’t seem to constitute an exception: one can intend to vote for someone but actually vote for someone else. If someone intending to vote for Sergio Mattarella, for example, had by mistake written “Mastella” on his or her ballot paper, we would say that he or she did vote for another well-known Italian politician, the much discussed former Minister of Justice Clemente Mastella, in spite of his or her intentions. Hence, the problems mentioned above cannot be solved simply by appealing to intentions: to explain why exactly the Constitutional Court judge Sergio Mattarella is the new legitimate President we need to resort to something else.

In a nutshell, what we are looking at here is the problem of *reference*, which became central in the philosophy of the last century. What we should say, in fact, is that the 665 ballot papers having the name “Mattarella” written on them counted as votes for Sergio Mattarella because, on that occasion, the words written on them *referred* to him. But, again, what makes it the case that, on that occasion, the words referred to him? Nowadays, probably the majority of philosophers, influenced by the work in the late Sixties and early Seventies of Keith Donnellan, who has recently sadly passed away, and Saul Kripke, certainly one of the most important living philosophers, believe that the answer lies in some sort of *historical* (or, as many also like to say, *causal*) *connection* between those particular uses of the words and Sergio Mattarella himself. However, what this connection amounts to is still a matter of some controversy. This, of course, doesn’t mean that Sergio Mattarella is not the legitimate President of the Italian Republic. My perhaps surprising contention is merely that, for a complete and philosophically satisfying explanation of why he is so, we may have to wait for developments in the study of reference.

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