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THE ITALIAN NATIONAL ELECTION

The Italian national election on 7 June will probably be the most important election anywhere in Europe over the last five years. At stake is the survival of the pro-American De Gasperi government, facing a challenge by the largest Communist party outside the Orbit in alliance with the Nenni Socialists and assisted by the Soviet Union's current "peace" gestures. Unlike similar groups elsewhere, this pro-Communist bloc has actually increased its voting strength over the past five years, polling 31 percent of the total vote in the 1948 elections and about 35 percent in the 1951 and 1952 local elections.

In recent weeks there have been various indications of dissension within the Communist party itself but this will probably be more than compensated for by a swing to the Nenni Socialists of depressed middle class elements exasperated by the government's failure to solve the country's economic problems. Unemployment, for example, is still close to the two million figure and the standard of living remains low, despite some \$1.5 billion of American aid which Italy has received since the 1948 election.

The government coalition (Christian Democrats plus the small Republican party) has, on the other hand, suffered both from its failure to improve Italy's economic situation and from the revival of the extreme right-wing parties since the

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1948 election. While the Christian Democrats and their electoral allies fell from 63 percent of the total vote in 1948 to a bare 51 percent in 1951-52, the Monarchists and the neo-fascists increased from 5 percent to about 12 in the same period -- mainly by attacking the government on ultra-nationalist grounds such as De Gasperi's failure to achieve a satisfactory Trieste settlement.

Though advocating a strong repressive policy toward Communism, the rightists are very lukewarm toward NATO and EDC, insisting that Italy's status in the European integration picture is second-rate and humiliating. They are evidently making every effort to prevent a clear victory by the government electoral bloc, thus giving themselves a balance-of-power position in the new parliament.

The government electoral bloc suffers further from its heterogeneous character, which has been one of the factors responsible for the government's failure to push needed economic and social reforms. The Christian Democratic party, which polled 37 percent in the 1951-52 elections, has suffered serious dissension between its right and left wings. The three small democratic parties, polling 14 percent of the 1951-52 voters, are suspicious of many government policies and tend to support De Gasperi only to defeat the Communists.

De Gasperi's chief hope of maintaining a stable government after the vote depends on the new election law, which will give his coalition nearly two-thirds of the seats in the

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lower house if it wins a bare popular majority. This law does not, however, apply to the Senate.

The American Embassy in Rome at present expects the De Gasperi bloc to attain a slim majority at the polls. Since the pro-Communist bloc has for some months been stressing the peace issue, his chances will, however, probably be much affected by the Western response to any Soviet overtures. De Gasperi's own recognition of this factor was strikingly illustrated in his remark to the Embassy on 16 April that President Eisenhower's speech would greatly assist him in his electoral campaign.

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