Episode #560
What Makes An Italian?
1st Aug, 2025

<u>Transcript</u>

[00:00:00] Hello, hello, hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English, the show where you can listen to fascinating stories and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:21] I'm Alastair Budge, and today it's the start of another three-part mini-series, this time on the theme of citizenship and identity.

[00:00:32] In part one, today's episode, we are going to talk about the case of Italy and the country's recent **referendum**[1] on **easing**[2] the rules on citizenship.

[00:00:43] In part two, we'll talk about the Windrush **scandal**[3], a recent British political **scandal** in which tens of thousands of people, mostly from former British colonies in the Caribbean, found themselves treated as **outcasts**[4] in their own country.

[00:01:01] And in part three, we will talk about the battle between the Mediterranean island of Malta and the European Union, a battle for the right to sell citizenship.

[00:01:13] OK then, let's get right into it, and ask ourselves what makes an Italian.

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[1] a vote where people chose yes or no on a big issue

[2] making them less hard or strict

[3] an event that caused public feelings of shock and anger

[4] people who were not accepted by the rest of society

[00:01:21] Now I want to start this episode by telling you something about me.

[00:01:27] It's not a secret, and I'm certainly not **ashamed⁵** of it. But it's not something that everyone knows, and it's not something that's immediately obvious.

[00:01:38] It's not something that you would **guess⁶** by looking at me.

[00:01:41] It's not something that you would **guess** by hearing my voice.

[00:01:45] It's not something that you would **guess** if I told you about my parents, my brother and sister, my cousins, or anything about my childhood.

[00:01:54] It's this: I am Italian.

[00:01:58] I have an Italian passport; I am, legally speaking at least, as Italian as Giorgio Armani or Sophia Loren.

[00:02:08] And in fact, I am more Italian than tens of thousands of people who were born and raised in Italy, who speak no language other than Italian, know no other country but Italy, but are not Italian citizens.

[00:02:23] I have Italian citizenship through marriage. My wife is Italian, which allowed me to become an Italian citizen.

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⁵ feeling bad or guilty about it

⁶ think or assume

[00:02:32] There are a few **technicalities**[7] to this–different waiting periods depending on whether you live in Italy or not, and whether you have children, and then you have to pass a language test and not have a criminal record–but in my case at least, I was **eligible**[8] to become an Italian citizen after three years of marriage, despite not living or working in Italy or having any connection to Italy apart from my wife.

[00:03:01] Interestingly enough, for my wife, the reverse is not true; it is significantly more difficult and expensive for her to become a UK citizen than it is for me to become an Italian citizen.

[00:03:15] Now, especially for the Italians listening to this, you might think this is perfectly fair, you might think it is **grossly**[9] unfair, but it is the law.

[00:03:26] As you will know, a country has the right to set its laws on who is **entitled**[10] to citizenship.

[00:03:35] At birth, citizenship is typically **granted**[11] based either on jus soli, where a child becomes a citizen of the country they were born in, or jus sanguinis, where the

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[7] small rules or details

[8] allowed to do it

[9] in a very bad or wrong way

[10] having the right to get it

[11] officially given

child becomes a citizen by blood, because their mother or father was a citizen, or some combination of the two.

[00:03:54] Most countries in the Americas, like the US, Mexico and Brazil, **prioritise**[12] jus soli, where anyone born in the country is a citizen, **regardless of**[13] the citizenship of their parents, while most European countries–like Italy and the UK–are much more **restrictive**[14], and **prioritise** citizenship through descent; you become a citizen through **ancestry**[15], through blood.

[00:04:23] And globally, most countries also offer some form of **pathway**[16] to citizenship, even if you weren't born in that country or have no **ancestry** in that country.

[00:04:36] Typically, this is through either marriage, as it was in my case, or an extended period of time spent living in that country. But there are other ways, such as the topic we'll cover in part three of this mini-series: paying lots of money.

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[12] list or rate as the the most important thing

[13] without being affected by

[14] stopping people from doing things easily

[15] family members who lived a long time ago

[16] a way or plan

[00:04:53] In the case of Italy, the country has relatively **loose**[17] restrictions when it comes to acquiring citizenship through **ancestry** or marriage, but much **stricter**[18] rules regarding citizenship through residency.

[00:05:09] Or to translate that into plain English, I was able to become an Italian citizen after just three years of being married, but someone who was born in Italy and had lived in Italy their entire life but whose parents weren't Italian citizens, well unless they had applied for citizenship between their 18th and 19th birthdays, they might find it very difficult to become Italian.

[00:05:38] And it was this that was one of the key focuses of a **referendum** put to the Italian public in early June this year.

[00:05:47] The **referendum** actually had 5 questions, with 4 of them relating to labour laws, but the most important question was one on citizenship.

[00:05:58] The public was asked to vote on whether the time limit for non-EU citizens living in Italy to become Italian citizens should be reduced from 10 years to 5 years, which would bring it **in line with**[19] other European countries, such as France, Germany, and the UK.

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[17] not tight or strict

[18] having more rules or being harder

[19] in alignment or agreement with

[00:06:19] Now, as a quick **side note**[20], Italy has quite a strong tradition of holding

referendums[21], and an equally strong tradition of those **referendums** failing to reach

the required **turnout**[22] rate of 50%.

[00:06:32] So they are often used more like political tools to express unhappiness at

government policy and direction rather than genuine **vehicles**[23] of political change.

[00:06:44] So, who exactly was pushing for this **referendum**?

[00:06:49] And perhaps more importantly, why now?

[00:06:53] Well, the short answer is: the political left, **trade unions**[24], and a **coalition**[25]

of pro-immigration and civil rights groups.

[00:07:03] Italy, like much of Europe, has seen significant immigration over the past 30

years, and many of the children of these immigrants, these second-generation Italians,

have grown up in Italy, speak only Italian, go to Italian schools, and consider

themselves Italian in every way.

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[20] an extra thought or comment

[21] votes where people say yes or no on big issues

[22] the number of people who went to vote

[23] channels or ways of expression

[24] groups of workers who joined together to ask for better pay or work

[25] a group of different people or parties working together

[00:07:25] But, in the eyes of the law, they're not; they are foreigners.

[00:07:30] For years, there have been growing calls to make it easier for these people to obtain Italian citizenship, to officially recognise their Italian identity, not just socially or culturally.

[00:07:45] Supporters of the reform argued that the existing system is unfair and **out of touch with**[26] modern Italy.

[00:07:54] After all, they say, if someone has lived in Italy for most of their life, paid taxes, gone to school, speaks the language fluently, and calls Italy home, doesn't this make them Italian?

[00:08:07] And this question of citizenship has also become **wrapped up**[27] in wider debates about Italy's ageing population and its future workforce.

[00:08:18] The country, as you may know, has one of the lowest birth rates in Europe, with 1.24 births per woman, and hundreds of thousands of young people leaving for other countries.

[00:08:31] Its population is ageing and shrinking, with a quarter of the population aged over 65 and just 12% under the age of 14.

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[26] not informed or not having the same ideas as most people about it

[27] involved or engaged

[00:08:43] Its economy increasingly depends on migrant labour to keep key sectors running, everything from agriculture to elderly care to logistics.

[00:08:54] From this perspective, making it easier for long-term residents and their children to become citizens isn't just a question of fairness, so the argument goes; it's also a practical solution to a **looming**[28] **demographic**[29] crisis.

[00:09:10] In short, Italy needs more people, and many argue that it should start by giving citizenship to people who are already there.

[00:09:20] But, as you might expect, not everyone agrees.

[00:09:25] Opposition to the reform comes mainly from the right, where political leaders have consistently argued against any **loosening**[30] of the rules around citizenship.

[00:09:35] For these parties, citizenship is not simply an administrative label, a matter of residency, or a tool to secure economic growth.

[00:09:46] It's about identity, history, culture — and, in their eyes, about protecting what it means to be Italian. They argue that Italian identity is something **inherited**[31] through

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[28] about to happen and regarded as ominous or worrying

[29] relating to the structure or characteristics of populations

[30] making them less tight or less strict

[31] received from one's parents or ancestors

blood and tradition, not simply acquired by living in the country for a few years and being able to correctly identify the difference between an espresso macchiato and a cappuccino.

[00:10:13] There's also the question of control. Like in much of Europe, in Italy, immigration has been one of the most **polarising**[32] political issues for years, particularly since the European migrant crisis of 2015.

[00:10:30] The right argues that relaxing citizenship rules could act as a **pull factor**[33], encouraging more immigration, and that the system should remain strict to prevent abuse and protect the country's "social **cohesion**[34]".

[00:10:46] And beyond ideology, there is, of course, political calculation.

[00:10:52] The issue of citizenship divides public opinion quite neatly along political lines.

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[32] making people split into two opposite groups

[33] something that would make people want to come

[34] forming a united whole, sticking together

[00:10:59] For the right, opposing reforms like this is a way to **mobilise**[35] their **base**[36], to present themselves as defenders of tradition, of the nation, of Italian values, however you might define those.

[00:11:13] And while supporters **framed**[37] this reform as modern, inclusive, and **pragmatic**[38], opponents presented it as rushed, dangerous, and as something that could **erode**[39] and **dilute**[40] Italian identity.

[00:11:29] So, what happened?

[00:11:32] Well, the **referendum**, in the great tradition of Italian **referendums**, was declared **void**[41] after only around 30% of the **eligible** population turned up to vote.

[00:11:43] Of those who voted, around 65% voted to reduce the term limit, with 35% voting against it, but this was to be expected; the Prime Minister, Giorgia Meloni, who

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[35] bring people together to take action

[36] the group of people who support them

[37] showed or explained in this way

[38] doing what works best, not just what sounds good

[39] slowly take away or break down

[40] make it weaker

[41] not valid or legally binding

was one of the major critics of the proposal, encouraged her supporters to **boycott**[42]

the **referendum**, so it was hardly surprising that more "yes" supporters turned up to

vote than the "no" side.

[00:12:10] And anyway, legally, a minimum turnout of 50% is required for a **referendum**

to be **binding**[43], so the entire thing was declared **null and void**[44].

[00:12:22] The result was met with **cheers**[45] by Meloni and her supporters on the right,

and with **dismay**[46] by those who had campaigned for the **referendum**, who were

mainly on the political left.

[00:12:34] Now, without getting too **dragged into**[47] the topic of Italian politics, I think

it's useful to look at this **referendum** and the case of Italy as an example of the

question of citizenship.

[00:12:46] What makes one person Italian and another not?

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[42] not take part in it, as a protest

[43] involving an obligation that cannot be broken, conclusive

[44] not valid or legally binding

[45] expressions of encouragement, praise, or joy

[46] a feeling of sadness or worry

[47] pulled into

[00:12:50] What does this mean, and what **implications**[48] does it have for the future of the country?

[00:12:56] In the case of Italy, the country has historically had very generous rules on citizenship by **ancestry**, by descent. In other words, there was a strong preference for the idea that citizenship is something that is passed down from generation to generation, not easily acquired by cultural **assimilation**[49].

[00:13:20] In fact, until May of 2025, there were no **generational**[50] limits for jus sanguinis citizenship.

[00:13:29] Let's say someone emigrated from Italy in 1861–the year of unification–to America, and they and all of their descendants lived in the US, never setting foot in Italy again and never speaking a word of Italian, and to make it even more dramatic, let's say they renounced all Italian culture and traditional Italian food, and to make it even worse, their favourite pizza was Hawaiian.

[00:13:57] Their descendant born in 2011, 150 years later, could, if there was an unbroken chain of direct relatives who had claimed Italian citizenship, also apply for Italian citizenship.

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[48] possible effects

[49] when someone becomes part of a new group or culture

[50] connected with the relationship between generations

[00:14:12] If this sounds theoretical, it really isn't.

[00:14:16] An estimated 1.2 million people in Argentina are Italian citizens, including the President, Javier Milei, who has never lived or worked in Italy.

[00:14:28] Now, contrast this with the estimated 2.5 million foreigners who have been living and working in Italy for more than 5 years.

[00:14:38] The recent **referendum** was about the question of whether they should have the right to Italian citizenship, and indirectly, whether their children should also become Italian citizens.

[00:14:51] To give you an example, let's say a couple from China have been living and working in Rome for the past 9 years. They have no Italian **ancestors**[51] or **heritage**[52], but they speak fluent Italian, they also have a couple of kids who were born and raised in Italy, and they can correctly tell you what kind of pasta goes with what kind of sauce, and they would never **dream of**[53] using cream in a **carbonara**[54].

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[51] family members from a long time ago

[52] the culture and history received from their family

[53] think of or accept

[54] an italian pasta dish with eggs, cheese and bacon

[00:15:16] If the **referendum** had passed, the couple would have been able to apply for Italian citizenship, and their children could become Italian, rather than having to wait until they were 18 to apply.

[00:15:30] As you heard, the **referendum** didn't pass; it failed badly, and there are even suspicions that there will be another **referendum** on whether to raise the limit from 10 to 12 years, making it even more difficult to become a citizen by naturalisation.

[00:15:49] And of course, Italy isn't the only country **grappling with**[55] these kinds of questions.

[00:15:54] Take Germany, for example.

[00:15:57] Up until the year 2000, German citizenship law was based almost entirely on jus sanguinis, on **ancestry**.

[00:16:06] But in 2000, things started to change.

[00:16:11] Children born in Germany to foreign parents can now receive German citizenship, as long as their parents have been legal residents for a certain period of time.

[00:16:22] And the limit for citizenship by residency was reduced from 15 years to 8, and in 2024, it was reduced again, to 5 years.

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[55] trying hard to deal with

[00:16:33] In fact, my sister, who lives in Germany, is in the process of becoming a German citizen.

[00:16:40] France, for its part, has long operated under a more inclusive model, with automatic or semi-automatic citizenship for children born in France to foreign parents who have lived in the country.

[00:16:53] Even countries like Switzerland, which are traditionally seen as quite restrictive, have **gradually**[56] **eased**[57] their naturalisation rules for second-generation immigrants.

[00:17:04] Italy, by contrast, has held on tightly to the idea that citizenship is primarily something passed down through blood.

[00:17:13] And in many ways, this reflects the country's own history.

[00:17:18] For most of its modern existence, Italy was a country of emigration, not immigration.

[00:17:25] Millions of Italians left for North and South America, for Australia, for parts of Europe.

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[56] slowly, over time

[57] made less hard or strict

[00:17:33] The Italian state made a conscious choice to maintain legal ties to these people and their descendants, even generations later — hence the extremely **generous** **58** rules on citizenship by descent.

[00:17:47] But now, as Italy has become a country of immigration, with millions of people from Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East settling and raising children in the country, this old legal framework is starting to show its **cracks**[59].

[00:18:05] And at its **core**[60], this is a debate about what citizenship really means.

[00:18:12] Is it a legal status passed down from your ancestors, even if you've never set foot in the country?

[00:18:19] Is it a reflection of cultural belonging, of language, school, work, and daily life?

[00:18:27] Or is it something else entirely, a contract, a symbol of participation, of being part of a shared national project?

[00:18:37] In the case of Italy, these questions remain unresolved.

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[58] willing to help, not strict

[59] problems or weak parts in the system

[60] the most important or central part

[00:18:42] And, if the result of the **referendum** is anything to go by, they are likely to remain unresolved for some time to come.

[00:18:51] OK, then, that is it for today's episode on the question of Italian citizenship. To everyone, and especially to the Italians listening, I hope it was an interesting one and that you might have learnt something new.

[00:19:04] As always, I would love to know what you thought of this episode.

[00:19:07] What do you think is "the right" way to define who becomes a citizen or not? Do I deserve my Italian citizenship, or is the country handing out passports too **liberally**[61]?

[00:19:19] I would love to know, so let's get this discussion started.

[00:19:22] Let me know in the comments below, if you're listening to this somewhere where you can comment, and for the members among you, you can head right into our community forum, which is at community.leonardoenglish.com and get chatting away to other curious minds.

[00:19:36] And as a final reminder, this is part one of a three-part mini-series. Next up we'll be talking about the Windrush Scandal, and in part three we'll be looking at a country that wants to keep selling its passports to the highest bidder, and talk about Malta's battle with the European Union.

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[61] in a free or open way

[00:19:54] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds by Leonardo

English.

[00:19:59] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF EPISODE]

Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Referendum	a vote where people chose yes or no on a big issue
Easing	making them less hard or strict
Scandal	an event that caused public feelings of shock and anger
Outcasts	people who were not accepted by the rest of society
Ashamed	feeling bad or guilty about it
Guess	think or assume
Technicalities	small rules or details
Eligible	allowed to do it
Grossly	in a very bad or wrong way
Entitled	having the right to get it
Granted	officially given
Prioritise	list or rate as the the most important thing
Regardless of	without being affected by

Restrictive	stopping people from doing things easily
Ancestry	family members who lived a long time ago
Pathway	a way or plan
Loose	not tight or strict
Stricter	having more rules or being harder
In line with	in alignment or agreement with
Side note	an extra thought or comment
Referendums	votes where people say yes or no on big issues
Turnout	the number of people who went to vote
Vehicles	channels or ways of expression
Trade unions	groups of workers who joined together to ask for better pay or work
Coalition	a group of different people or parties working together
Out of touch with	not informed or not having the same ideas as most people about it
Wrapped up	involved or engaged
Looming	about to happen and regarded as ominous or worrying

Demographic   relating to the structure or characteristics of populations

Loosening   making them less tight or less strict

Inherited   received from one's parents or ancestors

Polarising   making people split into two opposite groups

Pull factor   something that would make people want to come

Cohesion   forming a united whole, sticking together

Mobilise   bring people together to take action

Base   the group of people who support them

Framed   showed or explained in this way

Pragmatic   doing what works best, not just what sounds good

Erode   slowly take away or break down

Dilute   make it weaker

Void   not valid or legally binding

Boycott   not take part in it, as a protest

Binding   involving an obligation that cannot be broken, conclusive

Null and void   not valid or legally binding

Cheers   expressions of encouragement, praise, or joy

Dismay   a feeling of sadness or worry

Dragged into   pulled into

Implications   possible effects

Assimilation   when someone becomes part of a new group or culture

Generational   connected with the relationship between generations

Ancestors   family members from a long time ago

Heritage   the culture and history received from their family

Dream of   think of or accept

Carbonara   an italian pasta dish with eggs, cheese and bacon

Grappling with   trying hard to deal with

Gradually   slowly, over time

Eased   made less hard or strict

Generous   willing to help, not strict

Cracks   problems or weak parts in the system

Core   the most important or central part

Liberally   in a free or open way

Language spotlight

1. Out of touch with

- **Meaning:** not understanding or knowing what is happening in a situation or what people feel

- **Synonyms:** unaware of, disconnected from

- **Antonyms:** aware of, in tune with

- **Examples:**

  - The government seems **out of touch with** what young people really need.

  - He's completely **out of touch with** modern technology.

2. Wrapped up (in something)

- **Meaning:** too busy or too focused on something, often forgetting about other things

- **Synonyms:** absorbed in, caught up in

- **Antonyms:** detached from, paying attention to everything

- **Examples:**

    - She was so **wrapped up in** her work that she forgot to eat lunch.

    - Don't get too **wrapped up in** the details, just start writing.

3. Drag someone into (something)

- **Meaning:** to make someone become involved in something they don't want to be part of

- **Synonyms:** involve, pull into

- **Antonyms:** leave out, exclude

- **Examples:**

    - I don't want to be **dragged into** your argument with the manager.

    - The media **dragged him into** the scandal even though he had nothing to do with it.

4. Grappling with (something)

- **Meaning:** trying hard to understand or deal with something difficult

- **Synonyms:** struggling with, dealing with

- **Antonyms:** ignoring, avoiding

- **Examples:**

    - The country is **grappling with** how to handle immigration.

    - She's still **grappling with** the loss of her job.

5. Pull factor

- **Meaning:** something that attracts people to move to a new place or situation

- **Synonyms:** attraction, draw

- **Antonyms:** push factor, reason to leave

- **Examples:**

    - A strong economy is a major **pull factor** for immigrants.

    - High-quality education can be a **pull factor** for international students.

Quiz

Listening Comprehension Multiple Choice Questions

1. What is one reason opponents gave for rejecting the reform?

a) It was too expensive

b) It would create confusion about education

c) It would weaken national identity

d) It would reduce school quality

2. Why was the referendum seen as controversial?

a) It proposed banning immigration

b) It gave citizenship to everyone

c) It changed who could become a citizen

d) It removed voting rights

3. What is mentioned as a reason why the current law feels outdated?

a) Italy's population is growing quickly

b) It includes too many legal steps

c) It gives automatic citizenship to too many people

d) It doesn't match modern life and migration

4. What does the podcast suggest about the political effect of the referendum?

a) It helped far-right parties strengthen their position

b) It had no political impact

c) It brought all parties closer together

d) It made the left more powerful

5. What does the speaker say about Italy's current citizenship law?

a) It is very open and flexible

b) It's similar to laws in many countries

c) It was just changed last year

d) It's one of the strictest in Europe

True or False

6. Only children born in Italy to Italian parents can become citizens easily. (True/False)

7. The referendum result automatically changed the law. (True/False)

8. Some Italians are worried that loosening citizenship laws might dilute Italian culture.

(True/False)

9. Children of immigrants who are born in Italy automatically become citizens at birth.

(True/False)

10. The speaker says that most Italians were strongly in favour of the change.

(True/False)

Fill in the Blank

11. As you will know, a country has the right to set its laws on who is _____ to

citizenship.

12. The public was asked to vote on whether the time limit for non-EU citizens living in

Italy to become Italian citizens should be reduced from 10 years to 5 years, which would

bring it in _____ with other European countries.

13. Now, as a quick _____ note, Italy has quite a strong tradition of holding referendums,

14. And anyway, legally, a minimum turnout of 50% is required for a referendum to be

binding, so the entire thing was declared _____ and void.

15. And at its _____, this is a debate about what citizenship really means.

Vocabulary Practice

16. What does "**referendum**" mean?

a) A type of passport

b) A public vote on a specific issue

c) A school programme

d) A rule for immigration officers

17. What does "**eligible**" mean?

a) Too young

b) Not interested

c) Allowed or qualified

d) Born abroad

18. What does "**loosen**" mean in the context of laws?

a) Make something tighter

b) Cancel it

c) Change it completely

d) Make it less strict

19. What does "**cohesion**" mean when talking about society?

a) Separation

b) Sticking together

c) Legal documents

d) Political parties

20. What does "**boycott**" mean?

a) Vote in favour

b) Join a group

c) Refuse to take part

d) Run for election

Answers

1. c) It would weaken national identity

2. c) It changed who could become a citizen

3. d) It doesn't match modern life and migration

4. a) It helped far-right parties strengthen their position

5. d) It's one of the strictest in Europe

6. True

7. False

8. True

9. False

10. False

11. entitled

12. line

13. side

14. null

15. core

16. b) A public vote on a specific issue

17. c) Allowed or qualified

18. d) Make it less strict

19. b) Sticking together

20. c) Refuse to take part