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## **The belief system of the Italian Democratic Party: before, during, and after Renzi**

This article aims to explore why the ‘demolition’ of values promoted by Matteo Renzi had profoundly different effects on the factions within the Partito Democratico (Democratic Party, PD). While several studies have examined the PD’s political culture, few have investigated the changing attitudes of its factions. We help fill this gap in the literature by analysing the PD’s intraparty divisions on the main dimensions of party competition in the new millennium. We draw inspiration from Harmel and Janda’s (1994) theory of party change, arguing that changes in a party’s dominant coalition craft a new party image. Based on a unique dataset from PD delegates to national assemblies, this article offers new empirical evidence on intraparty cohesion. Our multivariate analysis offers fresh evidence that under Renzi intraparty divisions on economic issues widened, while cohesion on ethical issues increased. Our work indicates that opening the black box of party politics sheds light on new party images.

**Keywords:** party change, factional divisions, middle-level party élites, belief systems, Italian Democratic Party

### **Introduction**

Like a ‘spectre haunting Europe’ (Berman 2016), the continent’s social democratic parties are suffering from a profound identity crisis and lack any convincing message (Bremer 2018, Evans and Neundorf 2020; Newell 2021). In this context, the Italian Partito Democratico (Democratic Party, PD) is paradigmatic of a party with a weak cultural identity. The PD arose as a post-ideological party, i.e. a party without any clear belief system,<sup>1</sup> which has alienated members, activists, and voters with its shape-shifting image. At least three features of the PD are worth recalling here. First, it arose from the fusion of two parties with very different ideological, cultural, and organizational traditions: the Democratici di Sinistra (Left Democrats, DS) rooted in the history

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<sup>1</sup> Scholars define a belief system as a combination of attitudes, opinions, and beliefs relevant to politics (Brandt et al. 2019).

of the communist left, and La Margherita ('The Daisy', DL) anchored in democratic Catholicism. Second, it has pursued an unprecedented plebiscitary model, centred on voters rather than members. Finally, the PD has been profoundly influenced by the neo-populist leadership of Matteo Renzi, who removed it from the left-wing ideological space and left it in chaos. Renzi also became Prime Minister during his leadership. His government promoted innovative policies that challenged the Catholic values of ex-DL members (for example, concerning same-sex 'civil partnerships') while clashing with basic DS values (by pursuing – for example – the so-called 'Jobs Act' and revision of article 18 of the 'Workers' Statute'<sup>2</sup>). These policies radically changed the party's image and disoriented the main party factions.

This article aims to explore why the 'demolition' of values promoted by Renzi had profoundly contrasting effects on the party. Inspired by Harmel and Janda's (1994) theory of party change, our research question is why Renzi's decisions on ethical issues ('civil partnerships') failed to create party tensions, while those on economic issues widened factional divisions and destabilized the party. The main contribution of this article lies in investigating the impact of changing factional attitudes on the party's belief system. Our research is important because intraparty politics is a precursor to the policy proposals, manifestos and candidate selection of political parties (Polk and Kölln 2017).

The empirical analysis rests on positions expressed by the party's middle-level elites, long-standing activists who keep the party machine running by linking the leadership with party members, and the party with the local context. We draw on the responses to 1,000 questionnaires distributed at the last four national assemblies of the PD over a period of 10 years (2009-2019).

To define the dimensions of the PD's belief system – our dependent variables – we take our cue from the literature on political competition in Europe in the new millennium (Hooghe and Marks 2018; Kriesi *et al.* 2006). Specifically, we examine the political identities and values of the PD's middle-level elites on three key dimensions of party competition: economic, cultural, and transnational. The first is typical of old politics, and expresses the tension between liberalism and state interventionism; the second dimension captures non-economic issues; the third has to do with European unity and the migration crisis. To explore Renzi's influence on intraparty homogeneity, we focus on two groups of factions (our independent variables): 1) former-DS, former-DL and 'native'<sup>3</sup> members; 2) members of the party majority and minority.

Our findings show that pro-materialist, pro-EU, and pro-immigration attitudes were evenly spread among PD factions between 2009 and 2019. The data suggest that 'interventionism-liberalism' and 'libertarianism' were the most divisive issues. The results indicate that under Renzi divisions on 'interventionism-liberalism' widened in the main party faction (majority versus minority) whereas they gradually narrowed on libertarianism. The growing rift on economic issues between Renzi's supporters and

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<sup>2</sup> The 'Jobs Act' and reform of article 18 of the Workers' Statute stand for the labour-law reforms implemented by the Renzi government between 2014 and 2016 to deregulate the labour market.

<sup>3</sup> Respondents who were never members of another party before joining the PD.

non-supporters is important for understanding the failure of his leadership (and his decision to leave the PD) and the PD's recent disarray. This article indicates that insights into the recrafting of party image can be obtained by taking a look inside the black box of party politics. It offers a fresh approach, centred on intraparty dynamics, to analysing the crisis of left-wing parties in Europe. It also suggests that not even charismatic party leaders enjoy total freedom of manoeuvre within the party; rather, leaders' integration strategies may fail when they clash with factional identities.

The article is structured as follows. The next section presents our theoretical framework. The third section focuses on the history of the PD, while the fourth describes the research design, data, and results. The fifth discusses the main findings. We conclude with the theoretical implications of our findings, the limits of the study and avenues for further research.<sup>4</sup>

### **Triggers of party-policy shifts: the role of factional dynamics**

Scholarly work on party-policy shifts often examines the responses of elected representatives to voters' demands (Fagerholm 2016). Critics note that policy shifts do not 'just happen', but spring from changes in the dominant faction (Harmel and Janda 1994). Theoretical work on political parties has long argued that parties are not monolithic entities but are more usefully conceived as organizations with multiple and mixed preferences (Panebianco 1988)

One advantage of this approach is that it avoids endorsing artificial assumptions about preference homogeneity in party organizations (Laver and Shepsle 1990). There is no lack of conceptual approaches, typologies and hypotheses that can be used to advance systematic analysis of factionalism and its role in coalition building and office allocation (Boucek 2012; Ceron 2017; Giannetti and Benoi 2009; Mulè 2001). Thus, intraparty conflict is a multi-layered concept with horizontal and vertical dimensions, including different policy positions between factions (Close and Gherghina 2019).

The theory of party politics convincingly argues that differences in factional attitudes are fairly unproblematic during periods of relative electoral and political stability, but they attain greater significance in turbulent times (Harmel and Janda 1994). For instance, ideological cohesion may be a prerequisite for pre-electoral coalitions (Green and Haber, 2016). Comparative research shows that shedding light on intraparty dynamics contributes to our understanding of party organizations, government coalition formation, and party competition (Polk and Kolln 2017). Changes in intraparty policy positions are crucial for party identity, with major consequences for democratic political systems.

This line of argument has led to a renaissance of earlier insights into factional politics, generating a new wave of research on intraparty dynamics. Only a small portion of the literature can be discussed here

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<sup>4</sup> This article is the result of joint reflection by all the authors. However, Paola Bordandini wrote the introduction and section four, Rosa Mulè section two and the discussion, and Carlo Baccetti section three and the conclusion.

since a full review would require an article in itself. Close and Gherghina (2019) shed considerable light on this new research programme, while identifying a number of shortcomings in the literature concerning topics and research design. One shortcoming is the dominance of legislative perspectives in studies of intraparty conflict, as the bulk of scholarly work centres on MP switches and defections. Close and Gherghina (2019) lament a dearth of studies on intraparty politics in the other ‘faces’ of party organization, including middle-level party elites. To address this shortcoming, we offer fresh evidence on the attitudes of the PD’s middle-level elites.

Another shortcoming pertains to research design. Intraparty conflict at the individual level is usually examined as an ‘attitude’ or as a ‘behaviour’. A vast body of work deals with ‘behaviour’ as both a dependent and independent variable, but research designs on intraparty politics using ‘attitude’ as a dependent variable are few and far between (Close and Gheorghina 2019).

This article casts a sceptical eye over that position by endorsing a radically different approach, one suggested by the theory of party-policy shifts developed by Harmel and Janda (1994). These authors contend that the biggest party-policy shift takes place when a dominant faction is replaced by a faction having a different system of beliefs (Harmel and Janda 1994, 282). From this perspective, attitudes are a *dependent variable* of factional dynamics. Harmel and Janda maintain that when circumstances trigger a profound change in a party’s dominant coalition, the first aim of the new leader is to erase the party image of the dislodged leadership. If a new leader comes to power by virtue of being the head of a victorious faction, that leader is likely to pursue the changes closest to the hearts of that faction. A new dominant faction elbows out the old party image, purging the party identity connected with the old dominant faction.<sup>5</sup> When a political party acquires a new image it is evidence of the end of an era and the success of the new faces holding positions of responsibility in the party hierarchy. In shaping the party image, the leader of the new dominant faction aims to disrupt pre-existing factions and incorporate them by attracting many prior members of those factions. A new leader would also aim to preserve party unity to avoid the breakaway of internal minorities. A new leader may render a shift towards the rival faction’s attitudes on some dimensions more palatable to his/her faction.

To sum up, this article echoes the call by Close and Gheorghina (2019) for greater attention to middle-level party elites, as well as to research designs with ‘attitude’ as a dependent variable.

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<sup>5</sup> We are aware that the concepts ‘image’ and ‘identity’ have different connotations, however, we align with the literature that uses them interchangeably.

## **The PD before and after Matteo Renzi**

### ***2007-2012. The PD before Renzi***

The PD, founded in 2007, was a ‘party of factions’<sup>6</sup> with little intraparty cohesion. The rules it gave itself, especially open ‘primary’ elections at all levels and for all offices (party and institutional), made competition an unprecedented feature. The new method of selecting the leadership helped increase the space for competition and multiply the factions. At the same time, the formation of regional and national assemblies based on the corresponding electoral lists fortified a federal-type organisational approach, one that multiplied the weight of local oligarchies along franchising-like lines (Di Virgilio 2009, 33).

Differences in the PD’s identity did not seem great at first. The one significant exception concerned libertarian versus traditionalist values, which marked the genetic divergence between the two founding parties, specifically between the DS and the catholic component (the former Partito Popolare Italiano (Italian People’s Party, PPI)) of the DL (Pasquino and Venturino 2010).

The PD was founded top-down by the sum, not the synthesis, of two pre-existing parties. The PD leadership was modelled on the US Democratic Party and *liberal* culture, whatever that may be; it became a ‘party of the Nation’ without any precise social reference group. After the PD was defeated in the 2008 national elections, the then leader, Walter Veltroni, resigned. Dario Franceschini, the new leader, led the PD at the 2009 European elections, where the party scored 26.1%: five percentage points less than the DS and DL had, with their allies in ‘Uniti nell’Ulivo’, scored in 2004. On 25 October 2009, at the PD ‘primaries’, another ex-communist, Pierluigi Bersani, was elected party general secretary. Bersani was unable to give the party momentum and energy. There was a fall in membership and activism. The party made little impact on national policy and performed poorly in local and regional elections. The reaction to the party’s degeneration into factions and its electoral failures was mobilised by two 30-year-olds: regional councillor Giuseppe Civati and the mayor of Florence, Matteo Renzi, who launched the evocative watchword *rottamazione* (‘demolition’) in connection with the old party hierarchy.

### ***2013-2018. The PD under Renzi***

The second life of the PD began when Renzi was elected party leader at the 2013 ‘primaries’. An excellent media communicator, Renzi became popular by promising novelty and political renewal. However, Renzi’s leadership, so divisive in many ways, introduced a new unifying element on the ethical dimension of value orientation and shifted the PD towards libertarianism. Renzi made a decisive contribution to overcoming the genetic poles that gave rise to the PD by introducing same-sex ‘civil partnerships’ (despite being a practising

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<sup>6</sup> By ‘factions’ we mean groups of party members who act as distinct blocs within the party to achieve particular objectives (Zariski 1960).

Catholic with a background in the PPI and DL). While, not long before, libertarianism had seemed the most divisive question, Renzi was able to bring the PD together on this question, introducing a unifying element. Since 2016, the PD has been identified as the party of the so-called Cirinnà Law: the law that provided for same-sex ‘civil partnerships’.

Renzi also promoted change on another important political and cultural dimension: a change, this time, that was divisive. In his dual role as party general secretary and Prime Minister, Renzi forced the PD to abandon its consolidated and agreed pro-labour positions on the liberalism versus interventionism dimension, and to support liberal, pro-market, measures (never debated in the party): measures such as the ‘Jobs Act’ (reducing employment protection), and the ‘Buona Scuola’ (‘Good School’) reform (obliging schools to adopt business models).

Although in Europe Renzi brought the PD under the umbrella of the Party of European Socialists (for tactical reasons), his plan had been to detach the PD from the history of the left, as from any other political history. According to Renzi, it now was anachronistic to fight for social justice and equal opportunities because these battles had already been won, during the course of the 20th century, by the left and the welfare system it imposed on democratic regimes. Renzi was more in favour of the neo-individualism successfully introduced in the United Kingdom by Tony Blair, while he downplayed the capital-labour dualism. The economic policy of the Renzi government was clearly liberal (Ignazi 2018, 250).

In short, under Renzi, the PD simply ceased seeking an identity, or even a programme and embraced a pragmatic course aimed at strategic political action: saying and doing whatever was necessary to win elections. After its initial success, this approach alienated the party rank-and-file and the electorate. Renzi resigned as secretary after the national elections of 2018 when the party’s share of the vote sunk to an historic low (18.7%).

### ***The PD after Renzi***

The PD inherited from Renzi by Nicola Zingaretti in 2019 was therefore a party on its knees, still largely under the influence of Renzi. Zingaretti – a former member of the Partito Comunista Italiano (Italian Communist Party, PCI) – tried from the beginning to rebuild ties with the classic social referents of a centre-left party and to restore the PD to a pro-labour position. However, he was unable to heal the internal divisions or combat the party line imposed by Renzi. After vain attempts to give the party clear strategic leadership and a recognisable identity, in a context of great tension between the party institutions (the leader and National Assembly elected in the 2019 ‘primary’ election) and the party in Parliament (an expression of Renzi’s leadership at the time of the 2018 general election), Zingaretti resigned. In 2021, Enrico Letta – a former member of the Democrazia Cristiana (Christian Democratic Party, DC) and a prior prime minister abruptly removed by Renzi – took the place of Zingaretti.



Thus, the PD's history is dominated by factions, by a tension between the majority and minority, and by the specific role of its leader. The next section demonstrates that these elements help explain the presence/absence of homogeneity in the political values of the PD, the degree of internal agreement, and their change over time.

### The empirical foundation: data, variables, and results

Delegates to national assemblies of the PD are elected in open 'primaries' through closed lists linked to the candidates for the position of general secretary.<sup>7</sup> They can be considered the 'ambassadors' of members and followers to the top echelons, and thus they link leaders with the grassroots. Given their experience, they are privileged witnesses of the party's belief system (Ignazi and Bordandini 2018). The data were gathered within the framework of the Italian National Party Delegates Project.<sup>8</sup> The project had its origin in an inter-university research programme co-funded by the Italian Ministry for Education, Universities and Research and four universities (Florence, Bologna, Cosenza, and Trieste). Data were collected using a structured self-completion questionnaire distributed at the following four conventions: the second PD National Assembly, held in Rome on 7 November 2009 (PD09); the third PD National Assembly, held in Milan on 15 December 2013 (PD13); the fourth PD National Assembly, held in Rome on 7 May 2017 (PD17); the fifth PD National Assembly, held in Rome on 17 March 2019 (PD19). The questions analysed in this article were the same in all four surveys.

Table 1. Description of the samples

	PD 2009 National Assembly	PD 2013 National Assembly	PD 2007 National Assembly	PD 2019 National Assembly
Respondents (N)	205	352	215	228
Sample coverage	21%	35%	22%	23%
Secretary elected	Pier Luigi Bersani	Matteo Renzi	Matteo Renzi	Nicola Zingaretti
Gender: % male	52%	51%	57%	55%
Age: % over 49	47%	36%	45%	46%
Education: % with university degree	73%	73%	79%	72%
Sector: % public sector	42%	42%	44%	40%
Union membership: % yes	48%	40%	46%	42%
Region of residence: % centre and north Italy	68%	71%	73%	73%

Table 1 shows the principal characteristics of our four samples (1,000 respondents in total). The share of survey respondents in the population of participating delegates ranged between 35% and 21%. Regarding

<sup>7</sup> The names included in the closed lists supporting each candidate are generally determined locally by the candidate's local representatives.

<sup>8</sup> For details of the Italian National Party Delegates Project, see Bordandini and Di Virgilio (2009–2013) and <https://centri.unibo.it/osservatorio-sui-partiti-aldo-di-virgilio/en/national-delegates>

the characteristics of the four samples of respondents, we found a constant middle-level elite profile. Delegates to PD national assemblies were largely graduates (>70%), residents of central or northern Italy (almost always >70%), fairly old (over 49s were almost always 45% of the sample), largely civil servants (>40%) and union members (>40%).<sup>9</sup>

### *The dimensions of the belief system: our dependent variables*

Our analysis of delegates' belief systems focuses on three dimensions – economic, cultural, and transnational – that we transformed into five indices (our dependent variables): one for the economic dimension, two for the cultural dimension, and two for the transnational dimension.

In Table 2, the economic dimension index combines respondents' answers to three questions regarding their positions on the liberal-interventionist continuum, pro-labour attitudes and pro-market attitudes:

- 1) Respondents were asked their position on a continuum from 1 to 6, representing two opposite poles: 'The State should be concerned with law and order and let the market provide social services' versus 'The State should provide essential and other social services'.
- 2) Respondents were asked to score their agreement (range 1-4, where 1 = not at all and 4 = strong agreement) with the following statement: 'Jobs should be defended at all costs'.
- 3) Respondents were asked to score their agreement (range 1-4, where 1 = not at all and 4 = strong agreement) with the following statement: 'The privatisation of public services should be stopped'.

The economic dimension index sums the replies to these three indicators after making the range of the questions uniform and inverting the polarity of the question on stopping the privatization of public services. Before creating the index, we checked the congruence of the three indicators by factor analysis.<sup>10</sup>

Table 2 shows that respondents were largely in favour of a Keynesian agenda for market regulation. However, the proportion of neoliberals increased greatly over the ten years of the study, showing a non-linear trend. The percentage of interventionists fell by 8% between 2009 (Bersani secretary) and 2013 (Renzi secretary I) and by 14% between 2013 and 2017 (Renzi secretary II). Between 2017 and 2019 (the start of Zingaretti's incumbency), the percentage of respondents in favour of state intervention increased by ten percentage points. The percentage differences under different secretaries were even greater among 'strong

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<sup>9</sup> The PD's statute requires that half the delegates to national assemblies be female, although in our samples males were slightly over-represented.

<sup>10</sup> Factor analysis explained 52% of the variance and had loadings in the range 0.608-0.766. Table 2 shows an analysis of the additive index of the economic dimension rather than of the factorial index because the former is more descriptive than the latter. The factor score index was used as a dependent variable of the economic dimension in the regression models presented in the next section. The same goes for the dependent variables related to the cultural and transnational dimensions illustrated in Tables 3 and 4.

interventionists’: this percentage fell by 15 points between 2009 and 2013, and by 20 points between 2017 and 2019.

Table 2. The Economic Dimension. Percentage distribution on the economic dimension additive index (and its indicators) by national assemblies.

National Assemblies	‘The State should be concerned with law and order and let the market provide social services’ versus ‘The State should provide essential and other social services’ (1- 6)		Jobs should be defended at all costs (1-4)		The privatisation of public services should be stopped (1-4)		Pro-market versus State intervention Additive Index: (1-4)	
	% totally interventionist (6)	% interventionist - leaning (3.5-6)	% agree strongly	% agree strongly or quite a lot	% agree strongly	% agree strongly or quite a lot	% very high state intervention (3.25-4)	% state intervention (2.5-4)
PD09	40%	90%	41%	86%	29%	77%	48%	83%
PD13	37%	87%	33%	69%	18%	63%	33%	75%
PD17	32%	83%	25%	68%	12%	59%	25%	61%
PD19	45%	89%	38%	81%	23%	73%	45%	71%

Regarding the cultural dimension, our analysis – inspired by the so-called GAL-TAN scale (Hooghe *et al.* 2002) – was based on a post-materialist and a libertarian index (Table 3). The first is focused on three aspects of the post-materialist view of the world (Inglehart 1977): ecology, peace and freedom. This first cultural dimension index is based on combination of the answers to the following three questions:

- 1) The respondent is asked to choose one of six positions between two contrary statements: ‘Freedom and security are important, but freedom is more important’ versus ‘Freedom and security are important, but security is more important’.
- 2) The respondent is asked to choose one of six positions between two contrary statements: ‘Peace is a value that cannot be subordinated to specific interests’ versus ‘Peace is not a value in itself but a condition to pursue even by non-peaceful means’.
- 3) The respondent is asked to score their agreement (range 1-4, where 1 = not at all and 4 = strong agreement) with the following statement: ‘To solve the energy problem it is necessary to build new nuclear power stations irrespective of their environmental impact’.

Before constructing our post-materialist index, we standardized the range of the three questions mentioned above; we inverted the polarity of the question about promoting the construction of nuclear power stations, and we checked the congruence of the three indicators by factor analysis:<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Factor analysis explained 44% of the variance and had loadings in the range 0.598-0.751. Table 3 shows the first cultural dimension additive index.

Table 3. First and second cultural dimensions. Percentage distribution on the materialism versus post-materialism additive index (and its indicators) and on the traditionalism versus libertarianism additive index (and its indicators) by national assemblies.

First cultural dimension: Materialism versus Post-materialism								
National Assemblies	To solve the energy problem, it is necessary to build new nuclear power stations (1-4):		'Peace is a value that cannot be subordinated to specific interests' versus 'Peace is not a value in itself but a condition to pursue even by non-peaceful means' (1-6)		'Freedom and security are important, but freedom is more important' versus 'Freedom and security are important, but security is more important' (1-6)		Post-materialism versus Materialism Additive Index (1-4)	
	% disagree strongly	% disagree strongly or quite a lot	% totally absolute pacifist (1)	% absolute pacifist-leaning (1-3.5)	% totally pro-freedom (1)	% pro-freedom-leaning (1-3.5)	% Very High Post materialism (1-1.75)	% Post materialist (1-2.4)
PD09	73%	97%	63%	89%	29%	85%	61%	99%
PD13	57%	91%	59%	90%	27%	87%	60%	98%
PD17	43%	90%	53%	81%	18%	79%	51%	93%
PD19	51%	84%	67%	89%	37%	84%	54%	94%
Second cultural dimension: Traditionalism versus Libertarianism								
National Assemblies	Equal rights for same-sex couples (1-4)		Abortion should be more difficult to obtain (1-4)		Legalisation of soft drugs (1-4)		Traditionalism versus Libertarianism Additive Index (1-4)	
	% agree strongly	% agree strongly or quite a lot	% disagree strongly	% disagree strongly or quite a lot	% agree strongly	% agree strongly or quite a lot	% Very High Libertarianism (3.25-4)	% Libertarianism (2.5-4)
PD09	50%	78%	61%	84%	23%	57%	52%	78%
PD13	68%	92%	64%	86%	31%	67%	67%	86%
PD17	65%	92%	69%	88%	35%	74%	69%	87%
PD19	73%	93%	84%	95%	40%	70%	71%	87%

Table 3 shows that there was a clear prevalence of post-materialists. Post-materialist-leaning delegates constituted almost all of our respondents, whereas those with a very high level of post-materialism always exceeded 50%. However, among the latter, there was a slight decline over time, especially after 2013 when the effects of the economic crisis began to be felt.

The second cultural dimension index concerned the distinction between traditional and libertarian attitudes. To capture the positions of delegates we asked respondents to score (range 1-4) how much they agreed with three statements concerning: 1) the legalisation of soft drugs; 2) the legalisation of abortion; 3) equal rights for same-sex couples. The traditionalism versus libertarianism additive index was constructed by summing the answers to the above three questions, using the same scoring. In this case too, we first checked the congruence of the indicators by factor analysis.<sup>12</sup> Table 3 indicates a very different trend from that described for materialism/post-materialism. Among delegates in the four samples, there was a clear and constant increase in support for libertarian values during the study period.

<sup>12</sup> Factor analysis explained 66% of the total common variance. The factor extracted had loadings in the range of -0.792 to 0.800.

Table 4. The first and second transnational dimensions. Percentage distribution on the pro-EU additive index (and its indicators) and the pro-immigration index (and its indicators) by national assemblies.

First transnational dimension: Pro-EU										
National Assemblies	The common currency is positive for Italy (1-4)		The EU should have a foreign policy independent of that of the USA (1-4)		EU expansion to the east was a good idea (1-4)		The EU inspires trust (1-4)		Pro-EU Additive Index (1-4)	
	% agree strongly	% agree strongly or quite a lot	% agree strongly	% agree strongly or quite a lot	% agree strongly	% agree strongly or quite a lot	% agree strongly	% agree strongly or quite a lot	% Very High pro-EU 3.25-4)	% pro-EU (2.5-4)
PD09	88%	98%	52%	91%	32%	87%	30%	91%	80%	100%
PD13	56%	92%	50%	91%	26%	86%	16%	75%	60%	96%
PD17	61%	98%	51%	90%	14%	59%	14%	82%	54%	96%
PD19	77%	96%	51%	88%	13%	62%	37%	92%	68%	96%
Second transnational dimension: Pro-immigration										
National Assemblies	Immigrants are a resource for economic development (1-4)		Legally resident immigrants should be able to vote in local elections (1-4)		Immigrants are a threat to law and order (1-4)		Immigrants are a threat to Italian culture (1-4)		Pro-Immigration Additive Index (1-4)	
	% agree strongly	% agree strongly or quite a lot	% agree strongly	% agree strongly or quite a lot	% disagree strongly	% disagree strongly or quite a lot	% disagree strongly	% disagree strongly or quite a lot	% strongly pro-immigration (3.25-4)	% pro-immigration (2.5-4)
PD09	61%	100%	81%	98%	49%	94%	81%	100%	90%	100%
PD13	56%	97%	78%	97%	61%	95%	78%	98%	90%	100%
PD17	44%	94%	70%	95%	46%	94%	69%	97%	82%	97%
PD19	59%	97%	71%	95%	60%	97%	82%	99%	91%	98%

Regarding the transnational dimension, we constructed two indices: a pro-EU index and a pro-immigrant index (Table 4). The pro-EU additive index was obtained by summing respondents' replies to the following four statements (each scored 1-4), after evaluating their congruence by factor analysis:<sup>13</sup> 1) the common currency is positive for Italy; 2) the EU should have a foreign policy independent of that of the USA; 3) expansion of the EU to the east was a good idea; 4) the EU inspires trust.

Table 4 shows a clear pro-EU attitude among respondents. We can consider all our respondents as pro-EU in 2009, while in subsequent years 96% were pro-EU. Indeed, it seems that the disenchantment with the EU expressed by most Italians after the economic crisis of 2010 did not affect the PD's middle-level élites (Biolcati *et al.* 2021).

A pro-immigrant attitude was also well established. The pro-immigration additive index was derived from the sum of responses to the following four statements, each scored 1-4: 1) 'Immigrants are a threat to our culture and identity'; 2) 'Immigrants are a threat to law and order and personal security'; 3) 'If immigrants are legally resident and pay their taxes, then they should be able to vote in council elections in the municipalities where they live'; 4) 'Immigrants are a resource for economic development'. In this case too,

<sup>13</sup> Confirmatory factor analysis produced a total explained common variance of 40%. The factor loadings ranged from 0.441 to 0.742.

before constructing the index we assessed the congruence of the indicators by factor analysis.<sup>14</sup> Table 4 indicates that more than 80% of respondents were highly favourable regarding immigration. In short, pro-EU and pro-immigration attitudes are common among the PD's middle-level elites.

### *Our key factions: our independent variables*

The PD factions were identified through two variables: party origin and majority/minority (our independent variables). The first variable distinguishes between former DS, former DL and 'native' members. This variable is important because the PD arose from the merger of heirs to the former PCI and the former DC; therefore the variability of its belief system may have been influenced by the contrasting political socialization of its middle-level elites (i.e. their party origin). Our second independent variable is dichotomic and concerns the distinction between the 'majority' (respondents who voted for the winning general secretary candidate) and 'minority' (respondents who voted for a candidate who was not elected general secretary). Since we analysed the four samples of respondents separately between 2009 and 2019, it is useful to recall that in 2013 and 2017 Renzi's supporters were the 'majority' and in 2019 they were the 'minority'. Renzi supporters were not a 'majority' until 2012, when he contested the primaries to select the centre left's 2013 prime ministerial candidate, challenging the former PD secretary Bersani (see section 3).

Table 5. Percentage distribution of delegates by party origin and majority/minority status, by national assemblies.

	PD 2009	PD 2013	PD 2017	PD 2019
	N=205	N=352	N=215	N=228
<i>Majority/minority:</i>				
Majority	50%	59%	79%	71%
<i>Party origin:</i>				
DS	53%	39%	40%	40%
DL	30%	16%	23%	13%
Native	17%	45%	37%	47%

Table 5 shows the distribution of these two independent variables in our four samples. It should be noted that the percentage of 'natives' rose from 16% in 2009 to 41% in 2019. The percentage of former DS members dropped from 49% in 2009 to 35% in 2019, while that of former DL members fell from 28% to 11%. The percentage of 'majority' respondents was around 50% in 2009 and 2013, and more than 70% in 2017 and 2019.

<sup>14</sup> The factor analysis explained 51% of the variance. Factor loadings were in the range 0.667-0.757.

## **Results**

Our regression models estimate the impact of the independent variables on the PD's belief system between 2009 and 2019. They investigate whether intraparty attitudes became more or less homogeneous during and after Renzi's leadership. To facilitate the interpretation of our results, we considered an attitude of the belief system (i.e. one of our dependent variables) homogeneous in a party faction when the regression coefficients were not significant, while we considered an attitude of the belief system heterogeneous (in a party faction) when the regression coefficients were significant (and the corresponding  $r$  squared was high). In other words, we tested whether the variability of the belief system is embedded in the party factions.

Table 6 presents a series of multiple regression analyses (five for each sample of delegates) based on the same Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) model. The dependent variables are our five factorial indices:<sup>15</sup> the state intervention factor score index; the materialism factor score index; the libertarianism factor score index; the pro-EU factor score index, and the pro-immigration factor score index. We regressed these five factor score indices on 'majority' (1 for majority, 0 otherwise) and on 'party origin' (1 for DL, 2 for DS, and 3 for 'native' with DL as reference category). We included the following control variables in the model (see Table 1): a) gender: 1 for male, 0 for female; b) age: 1 for over 49, 0 otherwise; c) education: 1 for university degree, 0 otherwise; d) occupational sector: 1 for public sector, 0 otherwise; e) union membership: 1 member, 0 otherwise; f) region of residence: 1 central and northern Italy; 0 otherwise.

In choosing our control variables, we aligned with the literature to select respondent characteristics that could be related to our dependent variables (see, among others, Erickson and Laycock 2002). We aimed to examine the main regressors' effect on the variability of the dependent variables, thus avoiding confounding factors.

For the sake of simplicity, Table 6 does not present control variable coefficients but only the statistically significant standardized coefficients of our two main independent variables. The table is nevertheless quite complex because it shows separate analyses of our four samples, summarizing 20 regression models. This last choice was necessary to interpret the meaning of our second independent variable (majority/minority) and describe in detail how the relationship between the PD's internal factions and its belief system changed between 2009 and 2019. As we mentioned, Renzi supporters were a majority in 2013 and 2017, but a minority in 2019.

Table 6 begins with the PD 2009 national assembly when Bersani was elected general secretary. The table shows two interesting results. For four out of five factor indices, the adjusted  $r$ -squares were very low (-0.004 to 0.091), indicating that faction-related differences accounted for a small proportion of the variance in the PD belief system. The only dimension that showed a somewhat higher  $r$  squared (adjusted  $r$  squared 0.216)

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<sup>15</sup> As mentioned in note 10 we used our factor score indices instead of the additive indices for the OLS regression models.

was libertarianism. As expected, the regression model showed that being a former DS (rather than DL) member was the strongest predictor positively related to libertarianism.

At the national assembly in 2013, when Renzi was elected general secretary for the first time, the picture was more complex. Table 6 shows many significant coefficients: in particular, being in the 'majority' or otherwise was a determinant of all dimensions of the belief system. Delegates who voted for Renzi were less interventionist, less post-materialist, less libertarian, less pro-EU, and less pro-immigration than his opponents. Unlike the pattern in 2009, in 2013 the economic dimension emerged (adjusted r squared 0.178) and this created major divisions in the party. 'Majority' members, males, those living in the north, and graduates, in that order, were significantly more liberal. Libertarianism also showed greater and more complex internal divisions (adjusted r squared 0.272). Indeed, former DS (with respect to former DL) members, 'minority' members and 'natives' (with respect to former DL members) were significantly more libertarian.



Table 6. Multiple linear regression analysis of belief system indices by party factions and control variables in four samples of PD national assembly members. Control variables are not reported. <sup>(1)</sup>

<b>PD 2009</b>	State Intervention Factor Score Index	Materialism Factor Score Index	Libertarianism Factor Score Index	Pro-EU Factor Score Index	Pro-immigration Factor Score Index
Majority (1 for majority)	-	0.166* (0.139)	0.519*** (0.158)	-0.196* (0.223)	-0.193* (0.137)
Party provenance: DS <sup>(2)</sup>	-	-	-	-	-
Party provenance: Native <sup>(2)</sup>	-	-	-	-	-
Observations (N)	142	142	144	145	149
Adjusted R square	-0.004	0.084	0.216	0.091	0.072
<b>PD 2013</b>	State Intervention Factor Score Index	Materialism Factor Score Index	Libertarianism Factor Score Index	Pro-EU Factor Score Index	Pro-immigration Factor Score Index
Majority (1 for majority)	-0.341*** (0.130)	0.205** (0.115)	-0.370*** (0.094)	-0.156* (0.155)	-0.221** (0.122)
Party provenance: DS <sup>(2)</sup>	-	-	0.391*** (0.120)	0.171* (0.199)	-
Party provenance: Native <sup>(2)</sup>	-	-	0.219** (0.124)	0.186* (0.202)	-
Observations (N)	225	227	229	227	234
Adjusted R square	0.178	0.083	0.272	0.087	0.026
<b>PD 2017</b>	State Intervention Factor Score Index	Materialism Factor Score Index	Libertarianism Factor Score Index	Pro-EU Factor Score Index	Pro-immigration Factor Score Index
Majority (1 for majority)	-0.384*** (0.212)	0.193* (0.211)	-	0.184* (0.192)	-0.191* (0.227)
Party provenance: DS <sup>(2)</sup>	-	0.239* (0.226)	0.338** (0.153)	-	-
Party provenance: Native <sup>(2)</sup>	-	-	0.379** (0.170)	-	-
Observations (N)	128	132	134	136	139
Adjusted R square	0.193	0.078	0.095	0.009	0.036
<b>PD 2019</b>	State Intervention Factor Score Index	Materialism Factor Score Index	Libertarianism Factor Score Index	Pro-EU Factor Score Index	Pro-immigration Factor Score Index
Majority (1 for majority)	0.428*** (0.164)	-0.208* (0.211)	-	-	-
Party provenance: DS <sup>(2)</sup>	-	-	0.275* (0.143)	-	-
Party provenance: Native <sup>(2)</sup>	-	-	0.239* (0.151)	-	-
Observations (N)	149	147	151	151	154
Adjusted R square	0.257	0.087	0.053	0.111	0.015

<sup>(1)</sup>Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients, figures in parentheses are standard errors.

<sup>(2)</sup>For 'Party provenance', DL is the reference category.

Significance: \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

In 2017 we detected two differences with respect to 2013: 1) the dimension liberalism/interventionism became stronger; 2) in 2017 being in the 'majority' ceased to be a significant independent variable in relation to the libertarian dimension, which among other things began to lose strength in the regression model (adjusted r squared 0.095).

In 2019 the real contrast between ‘majority’ and ‘minority’ mainly concerned the liberalism/interventionism continuum (adjusted r squared 0.257). Delegates who voted for Zingaretti were less liberal than other delegates. ‘Minority’ members also seemed slightly more materialist than those of the ‘majority’, and the same was true for union versus non-union members. Our regression model shows that in 2019 libertarianism was less divisive (adjusted r squared 0.053), but remained stronger among former DS members and ‘natives’ (with respect to former DL members).

On the whole, our regression results show that pro-materialist, pro-EU and pro-immigration attitudes were evenly distributed among the party factions in the study period. The r-squares never exceeded 0.111 for pro-EU, 0.087 for post-materialism, and 0.072 for pro-immigration attitudes. Our findings suggest that the most controversial issues in the PD were interventionism-liberalism and libertarianism. However, the data show that these divisions took different trajectories: under Renzi, interventionism-liberalism divisions widened and libertarianism divisions gradually narrowed. Since 2013, attitudes on interventionism have been much more heterogeneous, and were the only truly divisive issue by 2019. By contrast, libertarianism was conflictual in 2009 and 2013, but became much less divisive in 2017 and especially in 2019.

## **Discussion**

Our results indicate that under Renzi internal divisions in the PD deepened on ‘interventionism’ and narrowed on ‘libertarianism’. When Renzi rose to the PD leadership in 2013, delegates’ attitudes on state interventionism became much more heterogeneous. By 2019, interventionism was the only truly divisive issue. The imposition of a liberal Blair-style view on the PD created another split between the new party majority and the minority faction. This split gradually worsened, especially after the ‘Jobs Act’. Regression results clearly demonstrate that there was no intraparty strife on pro-market or pro-labour attitudes in 2009, while under Renzi this was the most heated issue. As we argued in the third section, Renzi initiated and carried forward this fracture with great determination.

Consistent with Harmel and Janda’s theory, leaders of new dominant coalitions impose their image of the party in order to erase the party image associated with the losing faction. Renzi established his leadership by preaching division rather than unity in the party, campaigning for generational turnover and ‘demolition’ of the old dominant coalition. The break was essentially due to Renzi’s decisive pro-market stance. Renzi embraced the liberal ideology also to gain approval as a reliable politician among the leaders of the Euro-community and the economic-financial elites who supported his rise to the PD leadership (Revelli 2017).

The problem was that Renzi’s faith in the virtues of the market was not reflected in the assumptions of members of the PD’s parent parties, which believed instead in interventionism and market regulation. Renzi’s liberal ideology was therefore unacceptable to most of the cadres, despite their different affiliations. Interestingly, attitudes on ‘libertarianism’ showed a reverse trend. Though conflictual in 2009 and 2013, these

attitudes became much less divisive in 2017 and especially in 2019. The initial division on ‘libertarianism’ between ex-DL and ex-DS members was gradually reabsorbed after the ‘civil partnerships’ law in 2016. This convergence on libertarianism between the two parent parties can be accounted for in several ways. It may reflect the shrinking numbers of ex-DL delegates, but also the secularisation of Italian society, which relinquished some of the ethical issues promoted in the past by the DL. However, Renzi’s more liberal and libertarian party image eventually prevailed in his role as ‘demolition man’, though the consequences differed in terms of attitude divergence and convergence between factions.

## **Conclusions**

This article contributes to the academic debate by investigating a surprisingly under-researched topic: the impact of factional dynamics on party image. Our study aimed to look inside the black box of party politics to understand why Renzi’s demolition of values had radically different effects on the party, increasing divisiveness on state interventionism and prompting convergence on ethical issues. Our results indicate that factional identity should not be ignored because political parties are first and foremost organizations of factions. And even a young charismatic ‘demolition man’ like Renzi acts within the limits of party oligarchy.

Our results highlight the fact that no matter how much power a leader wields, s/he is still the ‘leader of a party’. Clearly, Renzi went too far in shaping a new party image that was ‘neither right-wing nor left-wing’ and that he supposed would be totally dependent on his leadership. His strategy led him to underestimate the strength of intraparty opposition to his pro-market and anti-labour ideology.

It seems fair to say that the party inherited by the new PD leader, Enrico Letta, has a complex and fragile internal political identity. Though our findings indicate that the PD is ostensibly open to immigrants, is post-materialist, and certainly pro-EU, Renzi has also made it libertarian. Our results show weak cohesion among the party’s middle-level elites on the liberalism-interventionism dimension, which is a crucial dimension for a European centre-left party. In this context, the initiatives Letta promoted as soon as he became PD secretary seem particularly appropriate. Letta relaunched the PD as a partner in a broad centre-left coalition and endeavoured to define a coherent belief system and party identity. These themes characterise the PD as a civil liberties party (promotion of the so-called Zan law against discrimination of homosexuals), open to a post-materialist cultural dimension (the vote for 16-year-olds), and champion of redistributive interventionism (an increased inheritance tax to finance an endowment for 18-year-olds) and inclusion (citizenship for immigrant children born in Italy). Perhaps one way for the PD to escape the cross-fire of faction vetoes that persist in the party is to re-motivate its voters, members and middle-level elites.

In conclusion, by indicating that the shifting policy positions of parties may reflect intra-party politics, our results show the limits of models that view parties as unitary actors. Like any research design, our study has its limitations. It is a case study and focuses on party delegates, which could limit generalization of our

findings. We therefore do not claim to have said the last word on the link between change in dominant coalitions and party policy shifts. However, we venture that a theoretical framework for intraparty politics may shed light on these aspects. One important avenue for future research is to compare delegates' attitudes across countries. The study of intraparty politics offers promising strategies for the growing body of work on party-policy shifts in modern democracies.

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