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# **The Italian Democratic Party at the Crossroad: Party Activism and the Middle-Level Élite**

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# **The Italian Democratic Party at the Crossroad: Party Activism and the Middle-Level Élite**

We examine the middle-level élite of the Italian Democratic Party (Partito democratico, PD) and its founding parties, Democrats of the Left (Democratici di Sinistra, DS) and The Daisy (La Margherita, DL), over fifteen years (2004-2019). Our original dataset on national delegates comes from 2373 questionnaires collected at eight national party congresses. Inspired by Whiteley and Seyd's concepts of low and high-intensity participation, we evaluate the relative weight of the various types of incentive in the two (internal and external) forms of party activism. Party activism is central to understanding the profound cultural, organizational, and electoral crisis that has put the PD at a crossroad and has led current secretary Letta to call for a 'Constituent Congress of the New PD'.

Keywords: party activism; party middle-level élite; low and high-intensity participation; internal activism; external activism; Constituent Congress of the New Italian Democratic Party

Studies on political participation show a striking waning in active citizens throughout the democratic world. This has fuelled much documented debate on changes in membership, party activism and intra-party democracy (Katz & Mair 1995; Dalton 2008; Mair & Van Biezen 2011) without reaching a satisfactory understanding.

The steep decline in party activism and membership may be studied in a macro-perspective, closely linked to the more general transformation of post-industrial societies into knowledge and information societies (Dalton & Wattenberg 2002; Whiteley 2011). It may also be studied at micro level through individual motivations and the dynamics of participation (Bruter & Harrison 2009). A decline in the voluntary base of parties in a

strong civil society has major implications for the future of democracy (Dalton & Wattenberg 2002; Scarrow & Webb 2013) and for the internal organisation of parties (Gauja & Van Haute 2015; Cross & Blais 2012).

Rather than looking at the causes underlying people's disengagement from politics, here we look at members of national party congresses. Known as the middle-level *élite*, they are always 'visibly in action' and are the 'muscle' of party organisation (Ignazi & Bordandini 2018), playing a central role in linking party membership, party leadership and civil society (Niedermayer 1986). We focus on different (external and internal) forms of party participation, showing that activists are driven by multidimensional motivations worth investigating. Notwithstanding disruptive concurrent processes, including the personalisation of politics and the fluidity of membership, profound changes have shaped the organisation of parties in the last 30 years and the middle-level *élite* continues to play a central role in making parties efficient organisations and in linking leadership to membership (Bordandini, Di Virgilio & Mulè 2011). In the context of increasing literature on the diversification of party activism and on multi-speed membership parties (Scarrow 2015), this study is concerned with those who actively participate in the internal life of the Italian Democratic Party (Partito democratico, PD).

Whiteley & Seyd (2002) showed that intra-party activism can be analysed through the lens of their 'general incentive model.' Using three analytical dimensions (contact, campaign and representation), we adapted and tested the model applied to Italy. The determinants of party activism are grouped into selective (elective or positional), social (relational or trust-based) and collective (policy or ideological) incentives. In line with recent studies in western Europe (Lisi & Cancela, 2017), USA (Costantini & King, 1984) and Asia (Koo 2020), we investigate the radical transformation in multidimensional

structure of incentives underlying party activism. Beyond the work and time dedicated by the middle-level élite in crucial political moments, such as electoral campaigns (Webb, Poletti & Bale 2017), we focus on the ordinary intra-party life of Italian centre-left party activists and its determinants. Overall, our aim is to evaluate the time trend of the relative weights of the various types of incentive in the two forms of party activism (external and internal participation) among national delegates of Democrats of the Left (Democratici di Sinistra, DS), Democracy and Freedom - The Daisy (Democrazia e Libertà - La Margherita, DL) and PD.

In the remainder of the article, we proceed as follows. Section 1 presents our theoretical framework on party transformations and incentives for middle-level élite participation, while section 2 supports selection of the PD as our case study. Section 3 describes data and methods and illustrates the two main hypotheses. Section 4 reports the main results leading to the final section on reflections for the study of party activism and the evolution of the main left-wing party in Italy (section 5).

### **Incentives for the middle-level élite**

Across the world, parties face increasing distances between the party élite and membership (Ignazi 2020b), with major implications for the middle-level élite at times of party transformation. Our theoretical framework anchors traditional explanations for intra-party participation to some general transformations affecting the party organisation model. Stemming from the influential work of Whiteley & Seyd (2002), we first outline different types of incentives for co-existing participatory styles in PD internal life. Second, we describe major accredited mechanisms linking incentives to party activism.

### ***Understanding political participation and party activism***

Differences in party activism are usually explained to a varying degree with reference to

the reasons for initial enrolment, focussing on individual resources, sociopsychological attitudes and rational choice arguments. First, individual resources are material and cognitive resources, such as income, time and information that lead to the development of specific civic skills, political knowledge and political efficacy correlated with involvement in public affairs. Gender also favours membership in voluntary associations, party membership and engagement in civic life (Sartori, Tuorto & Ghigi 2017). Initially known as the ‘resource mobilisation model’ (Verba & Nie 1972), this approach has developed into the ‘civic voluntarism model’ (Verba, Schlozman & Brady 1995) and has served as a reference ever since.

Second, certain theories identify social (private and public) norms as the main predictors of participation. Interpersonal trust and embeddedness in social networks, interest in politics and consumption of political information, along with a sense of political efficacy (individual and collective), form favourable sociopsychological attitudes for engagement.

Third, a rational-choice perspective explains membership and participation in terms of the expectations of individuals regarding the costs and benefits derived from engagement (Olson 1965). For our purposes, Olson’s argument that a rational actor has no interest in participating in a voluntary association like a party in the absence of selective incentives (Olson 1965, pp. 9-12) fits perfectly. Although rational choice still struggles to explain why people vote (the lower end of the participation ladder), selective incentives help justify high-intensity participation (Whiteley & Seyd 2002).

In addressing the shortcomings of other approaches, Whiteley & Seyd (2002) developed a ‘general incentive model’, stressing elements of individual rationality, group motivations and affective motives. More specifically, it understands political participation and the degree of activism in terms of selective and ideological incentives,

social norms and affection. Selective incentives are divided between process incentives (the inherent value of participation regardless of possible benefits such as leisure, sociality and personal connections), outcome incentives (such as access to paid positions or a political career) and ideological incentives (such as identity and policy goals). Group incentives and social norms (such as family traditions and community participation) and altruistic motivations (such as support, commitment and emotional attachment to a party) complement the model.

The above description is especially important when it comes to intra-party participation. Whitely & Seyd (2002) explicitly focus on high-intensity forms of participation on the grounds, whose importance is often overlooked. Political participation goes well beyond voting turnout, the minimum participatory effort in a democratic system. At the lower end of the participation scale, we find members who devote some time to the party, especially during election campaigns, when they may talk to friends and family, canvass the neighbourhood or participate at weekly meetings with campaign-related tasks. At the high end of the scale, running for office (inside or outside the party) is an essential activity that happens in the institutional framework of a political party. Not only are there behavioural differences between voters and members, but also disparities between simple members and the middle-level élite.

Whitely and Seyd's 'general incentives model' is heavily indebted to Panebianco's (1988, pp. 29-30) theoretical distinction between 'believers' and 'careerists'. The former are activists primarily satisfied with collective incentives (identitarian, ideological and partisan goals), while the latter are interested in selective incentives (elective, positional and status-oriented goals). With this in mind, we analyse delegates based on their external and internal forms of party activism, specifically the



multidimensional structure of incentives for participation of middle-level élites, which has changed radically in the last 30 years.

### *Linking incentives to party transformations*

As incentives fuel party activism in a composite way, profound transformations in party organisation and party politics have (dysfunctional) effects on redesigning the link with participation. These transformations include: 1) leadership transformation (professionalisation and personalisation); 2) the growing importance of organisational processes (party styles in incentive management, internal democratisation via intra-party procedures like primaries, disintermediation, multi-speed membership).

First, two-decade-long processes of professionalisation and personalisation of party life and politics (Calise 2000; Poguntke & Webb 2007; Blondel & Thiebault 2010) have profoundly changed the leader-voter-supporter-member relationship. Party images such as ‘party on the ground’, ‘ambassadors to the community’ and ‘collective enterprise’ have been challenged empirically. The personalisation of politics has important implications for intra-party involvement, as strengthening of leadership weakens the intermediate organisational structure and its internal cohesion and effectiveness. It also has implications for loyalty, especially when it comes to the middle élite. As personalised party leadership centralises control over the organisation, party membership becomes more fluid and multi-speed (Pizzimenti & Calossi 2020).

Second, regarding organisational aspects of party life, classic articles on party organisation (Katz & Mair 1995) have highlighted the connection between the role granted to members and the overall party model (Ignazi 2020b). New mechanisms of internal democracy – such as primaries and referendums – have spurred debate on radical changes in motivations (Seddone, Venturino & Sandri 2021; Whiteley 2011) and on benefits from active participation (Scarrow 1994; 1999). Scholars also argue about the

importance or marginalisation of members (Krouwel 2012) in internal party life. As a result, there is a clear shift away from the traditional model of delegation of power to the middle-level élite for the functioning of internal democracy (Mair 1997). In recent years, innovations in the types of party affiliation have challenged the dominance of formal party membership (Scarrow 2015).

At the same time, these recent organisational changes in intra-party procedures – a prime example being the introduction of (open or closed) primaries – intended to renovate the public image and increase outside participation, have instead lowered the mutual recognition and confidence of members (Ignazi 2020a). Implementation of such changes is deemed to atomize, verticalize and dilute the traditional deep-rooted logic of party activism (Ignazi 2020b), especially when primaries are used for leader selection. Openness and inclusiveness – the bright side of party reforms – clearly call for a reconfiguration of collective and selective incentives to counterbalance their negative impact. How parties define and construct membership through a ‘mix of costs and benefits’ moves the boundary between members, with loss of middle élite engagement. Whether or not primaries are meant to attract distant or neutral voters via a narrative of inclusion, they have the unintended effect of undermining the middle-level élite, the party ‘muscle’ on which party activism depends (Ignazi & Bordandini 2018). Moreover, research shows that open primaries introduce an unequal structure of incentives that ends up reducing middle-level élite engagement, blurring middle-level élite participation and making it resemble that of external supporters and occasional voters (Close & Kelbel 2019).

In a nutshell, members and the middle-level élite have long been a building block of party life, thanks to a feeling of mutual recognition and partisanship, and have distributed material and symbolic resources evenly. On such a background, our aim is to

evaluate the relative weight of the various types of incentive in the two (internal and external) forms of party activism among national delegates over the period 2004-2019

### **Case study: the Italian Democratic Party**

The PD is an interesting case, paradigmatic of changes in party organisation, intra-party democracy, party activism and membership, for two reasons (Ignazi 2020a, Ignazi 2020b; Sandri & Venturino 2020). First, the current PD has a longer history than its year of foundation (2007) suggests: it emerged from negotiations that led to the fusion of two previously existing parties, the DS and DL, linked to the Italian Communist Party (Partito comunista italiano, PCI) and Christian Democracy (Democrazia cristiana, DC), respectively. It therefore inherited contentious cultural and ideological traits of traditional Italian parties (Floridia 2019; Natale & Fasano 2017; Parigi & Sartori 2014). Second, research on general membership shows that the PD has different forms of member participation (Passarelli & Tuorto 2018) that blur and shift the boundary between external and internal participation, with implications for the middle-level élite. This tends to hollow out the traditional role of the party, making the adversarial effect of concurrent and conflicting types of incentive clearly visible in intra-party and leadership changes.

Overall, the PD is a prime example of blurred membership, experimentation with novel mechanisms of internal democracy, transformation of the middle-level élite and strong personalisation. The major aspects of change boil down to the central role of leadership and its instability due to the continuous parade of leaders. To date, five congresses and five open primaries have been held (2007, 2009, 2013, 2017, 2019). The next congress and primary are scheduled for 2023 and have the goal of modifying and rebooting a party that has failed to deliver its promises over the last 15 years. Since its foundation, the PD has been guided by eight different leaders, four elected by open primaries and four by the national assembly of the party.

Natale & Fasano (2017) divide the first ten years of the PD into three major phases, identified by the first three primary-elected secretaries: Walter Veltroni, Pier Luigi Bersani and Matteo Renzi.

The first phase (2007-2009) identifies an "amalgam" party that attempts to unite in a new political culture the different souls related to the post-PCI and post-DC experiences for the purpose of becoming a reformist party with a majoritarian vocation and a political programme for the XXI century. Veltroni, former mayor of Rome, was elected with 76% of the vote in the primaries of 14th October 2007. He resigned in February 2009, after the PD was defeated in the general and regional elections. Dario Franceschini was elected *pro-tempore* by the National Assembly, pending new primary elections.

The second phase (2009-2013) identifies a "social-democratic" party led by Bersani, ex-communist and leading figure in the DS, elected with 53% of the vote on 25th October 2009. Abandoning its majoritarian vocation, the PD deployed a strategy of alliances that would place and keep the party at the centre of all government alliances. However, Bersani's PD failed to broaden its electoral target, and suffering electoral competition from the Five-star Movement (M5S), Bersani resigned in April 2013. Former CGIL union secretary Guglielmo Epifani was elected secretary *pro tempore* by the PD National Assembly until 8th December 2013, when Renzi – a prior figure in the DL, catholic, in his forties and mayor of Florence – won his first primary with almost 70% of the vote (Pasquino & Venturino 2014)..

This opens a third phase (2013-2019) of the “pragmatic party” that governs through reforms and makes a clean break with the past, particularly on social-economic issues. Renzi's career reached its peak in this period: in February 2014 he became Prime Minister, in May 2014 he led the PD to success (40.8%) in the European elections, after

which he promoted the Cirinnà law (same-sex civil unions were approved in May 2016) and the so-called Jobs Act (labour law reforms passed in October 2016). His downward trajectory began on 4th December 2016, when the constitutional referendum that he had promoted as a touchstone, failed (Natale & Fasano 2017). He resigned as head of the government and shortly after as party secretary. On 30th April 2017, he convened a new congress and new primary elections, which he largely won again (70%), albeit with almost one million fewer voters than in 2013. However, the PD suffered a heavy setback in the March 2018 general election, gaining only 18.8% of the vote. This led to Renzi's second resignation. He left the party in chaos and unprecedented internal conflict, divorced from its electorate, and without inspiration or ambition to build a shared political culture (Fasano, Martocchia Diodati & Natale 2018; Baccetti et al. 2022).

After Renzi's resignation, another *pro-tempore* secretary, Maurizio Martina, guided the party until the next primary election in March 2019, when Nicola Zingaretti, ex DS and president of the region Lazio, won with 66% of the vote, opening a fourth "restorative" phase of the party (since 2019). Zingaretti tried to rebuild a relationship with the traditional social actors of a centre-left party and to return the PD to a pro-labour position after the centrist, pro-market twist imposed by Renzi. Yet he failed to tackle internal divisions or to counter the political line that continued to be dictated *de facto* by Renzi and his supporters in the party. On 4th March 2021, after a year of vain attempts to restore clear strategic party leadership and a recognisable political identity, Zingaretti resigned. A few days later, the PD National Assembly elected Enrico Letta, ex-DC and ex-prime minister, as secretary.

Today the PD is on the cusp of yet another transformation that in February 2023 will culminate in a new constituent congress and a new secretary. This makes it even more interesting as a case study of the middle-level party élite.

Current features of the PD include weak institutionalisation, frail interdependence between organisational levels and little central control over the use of party resources by the periphery. The PD was founded with the strategic objective of ‘going beyond’ the ideological, cultural and organisational heritage of the two great parties that opposed each other for nearly half a century. Set free from ideologies and uprooted from its original family of parties, the PD unsuccessfully aimed to be a modern European centre-left harbinger of ‘new reformism’ that transcended twentieth century political and cultural traditions. It has often been referred to as the ‘failed party’, since it failed to meet its aspirations and deliver its initial promises (Natale and Fasano 2017). To substantiate this failure, we refer to three founding myths of the party (Florida 2019).

- (1) The myth of the ‘open party’ is reflected in its statute, defining the PD as a party of ‘members and electors’ with the primary election as its hallmark. In line with the literature on the procedures of internal direct democracy, the introduction of primaries led to an overlap between the rights of members and the undifferentiated body of electors.
- (2) The myth of the ‘contestable party’ builds on the idea of the circulation of its élite. Perversely, this led to a proliferation of closed oligarchies, which have impeded the development of instruments and spaces for true political debate in the party. Acute divisions in the leadership and its intermediate levels, which bear on questions of identity and strategy, shaped it as a stratarchical party (Carty 2006) that inherited and consolidated the stratarchical organisation of the Margherita (Baccetti 2007). Party internal life is sharply differentiated and based on relations between the centre and periphery, organised according to the logic of political franchising (Bordandini, Di Virgilio & Raniolo 2008), where the different expressions of the party are held together by factions.

(3) The myth of the ‘post-ideological party’ has led to an absence of any precise social references on which to base identity and strategy. The post-ideological party arises from the belief that agreement on a programme suffices to hold the new party together. Indeed, the political line of the secretary elected at the primaries was considered equivalent to the general line of the party. This mechanism promoted a direct link between leadership and membership, but also between leadership and electors (Poguntke 2002).

These three founding myths are the PD's “original sin”, the reason for the complex relationship between incentives, party transformations and models of political participation. In the next section, we investigate these aspects from the perspective of the participants at national congresses of the PD and its two founding parties.

### **Data, methods and hypotheses**

The data presented here is the outcome of the Italian National Party Delegates Project, conceived in an inter-university research programme co-funded by the Ministry for Education, Universities and Research and four universities (of Florence, Bologna, Cosenza and Trieste).<sup>1</sup> The data was collected with a structured self-compiled questionnaire, distributed at eight national party assemblies. The dataset draws on 2373 questionnaires collected at the last two DS national congresses,<sup>2</sup> the last two DL national congresses<sup>3</sup> and the last four PD national assemblies.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For details on the Italian National Party Delegates Project, see Bordandini & Di Virgilio (2009–2013) and <https://centri.unibo.it/osservatorio-sui-partiti-aldo-di-virgilio/en/national-delegates>

<sup>2</sup> Third DS National Congress, Rome, 3rd–5th February 2005 (DS05); Fourth DS National Congress, Florence, 19th–21st April 2007 (DS07).

<sup>3</sup> Second DL National Congress, Rimini, 12th–14th March 2004 (DL04) and Third DL National Congress, Rome, 20th–22nd April 2007 (DL07).

<sup>4</sup> Second PD National Assembly, Rome, 7th November 2009 (PD09), Third PD National Assembly, Milan, 15th December 2013 (PD13), Fourth PD National Assembly, Rome, 7th

Table 1 shows the sample distribution of our dataset. It shows that the share of survey respondents over the total number of participating delegates varied from a maximum of 35% to a minimum of 19%. At the four national assemblies of the PD, the percentage of natives who attended rose from 16% in 2009 to 41% in 2019. By contrast, the percentage of former DS members – those who came from the DS – fell from 49% in 2009 to 35% in 2019, while that of former DL members – those who came from La Margherita – fell from 28% to 11%.

### ***Dependent variables***

Our analysis of party activism of national delegates begins by relabelling ‘low-intensity participation’ and ‘high-intensity participation’ as ‘external’ and ‘internal’ political participation, respectively. We define ‘external participation’ as all forms of political and social participation not linked to party activities in the strict sense, i.e. forms of participation that can be conducted by activists irrespective of party membership, such as signing petitions, donating money to a party or taking part in a demonstration. We define ‘internal participation’ as all activities that keep the party organisation going, such as attending party meetings, canvassing voters or running for party office. Table 2 shows a descriptive analysis of our dependent variables.

### ***External participation***

The index of external participation is built on the following four questions: Have you ever taken part in a street demonstration? Have you ever signed petitions or taken part in campaign activities? Have you ever taken part in a strike? Have you ever occupied a

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May 2017 (PD17) and Fifth PD National Assembly, Rome, 17th March 2019 (PD19). The absence of data from the first PD national assembly held in Milan on 27th October 2007 is partly mitigated by the fact that many of the national delegates who took part in the PD constituent assembly were also present at the last two congresses of the DS and DL just six months earlier (Bordandini & Di Virgilio 2009-2013).



public building? The answers to the questions could be yes (coded 1) or no (coded zero). Since national delegates often have a long history of political activism, we decided to build an index of external participation (high- vs medium-to-low-level participation) in three steps: a) we verified the congruency of our four indicators by Principal Component Analysis (PCA);<sup>5</sup> b) we used a new variable with a range of 0-4 to sum up the answers to the four questions; c) we built a dichotomous index, assigning value 1 when respondents scored 3 and 4 and zero otherwise. Table 2 shows the percentages of high-level external participation among those who attended the eight national assemblies.

With regard to the distribution of the index in relation to time, in the last 15 years the Italian centre-left middle party élite recorded external participation percentages almost always over 50% (the only exception was PD17). Three aspects are worth underlining: 1) in the first decade of the 2000s, DS delegates showed participation that was 15-30 percentage points higher than that of DL delegates; 2) external participation among members of the PD national assembly in 2009 was about halfway between those recorded among DS and DL delegates to the previous congresses; 3) the level of external participation of members of the PD national assembly fell sharply during the two periods when Renzi was secretary (especially in 2017).

### *Internal participation*

The internal participation index is based on three questions: How many hours a week do you dedicate to political activity? What office do you currently hold in your party? How often do you take part in local branch meetings of the party?

All variables were dichotomised as follows: 1) value one was assigned to respondents who dedicated more than 20 hours a week to politics (the median was 20),

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<sup>5</sup> The factor extracted by PCA explained 40% of the variance.

and zero otherwise; 2) value one to delegates who took part in weekly party meetings, and zero otherwise; 3) value one to respondents holding party office at least at province level, and zero otherwise. To construct an index of internal participation we: a) checked the internal congruence of these three dichotomous variables by PCA;<sup>6</sup> b) added them to create a new variable with range 0-3. We built the index assigning value 1 when respondents scored 3 in that variable and zero otherwise. Table 2 shows that the pattern of the index of internal participation is similar to that of external participation: DS delegates recorded higher levels of internal participation than DL delegates, while attendees of PD09 recorded higher levels of internal participation than those of PD13.

### *Independent variables*

The literature examined in Section 1 helps identify our independent variables. The reasons explaining the different levels of external and internal participation among national delegates can be narrowed down to three incentives: selective, social and ideological (Table 3). These are incentives that in time may vary in force and role for both types of participation.

#### *Selective incentives*

Here, our selective incentives reflect the ‘outcome incentives’ of Whiteley & Seyd (2002) concerning rational motives for participation, mostly linked to material or positional rewards. Since the party on the ground and the party in the central office play an increasingly marginal role in Italy with respect to the party in public office (Morlino & Tarchi 2006), we considered holding or not holding elective institutional office to be a rational motive for party activism of national delegates. The person elected locally is the

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<sup>6</sup> The factor extracted by PCA explained 43% of the variance.

most prone to political participation because she needs to extend and strengthen her contacts with other activists and because she needs active and efficient local party branches. We assigned value one to respondents who claimed to hold an institutional position, and zero otherwise. Table 3 shows the distribution of respondents with institutional positions by national congress.

### *Social incentives*

Delegates' desire to belong to the local community, or their sense of moral duty towards fellow citizens (Cartocci 2007), are considered social incentives to participation. The corresponding index is built over mostly classical indicators of social capital (Putnam 1993) and concerns the following aspects: 1) trust in others;<sup>7</sup> 2) participation in voluntary (lay or religious), environmental or cultural associations or unions;<sup>8</sup> 3) holding or not holding leading roles in such associations.<sup>9</sup> Our additive index of social incentives (range 0-3) was computed after dichotomising the above three variables and checking their congruence by Principal Component Analysis.<sup>10</sup> To compare our three main independent variables, we dichotomised this index, assigning value 1 to the scores 2 and 3, and zero otherwise. Table 3 shows this dichotomous index by national congress.

### *Ideological incentives*

Since we are dealing with centre-left national delegates, for ideological incentives we built an index that could combine propensity for state intervention in the economy<sup>11</sup> and

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<sup>7</sup> The variable was measured on a 1 to 6 scale and recorded as a dichotomous variable by assigning value one to respondents who scored 5 or 6, zero otherwise.

<sup>8</sup> National delegates who answered that they were active in at least 2 associations out 4 were active in the local associations.

<sup>9</sup> The wording of the question was: Do you hold or have you held steering roles in the associations listed above? Answers were: yes (coded 1) or no (coded zero).

<sup>10</sup> The factor extracted by PCA explained 42% of the variance.

<sup>11</sup> Agreement with the idea of state intervention in the economy was measured on a 1 to 6 scale and recorded as a dichotomous variable with a value of one for respondents who scored 5 or 6, and zero otherwise. Note that this question was slightly different in the questionnaire used at the DL04.

claiming to embrace left- or radical left-wing positions.<sup>12</sup> The additive index resulting from combining these two variables can be considered a ‘left’ ideological incentives index (range 0-2). We dichotomised this index by assigning value 1 to the score 2, and zero otherwise.

Table 3 shows the distribution of the three types of incentive among delegates at the eight national congresses, together with their principal socio-demographic features (our control variables): sex, age, percentage of graduate delegates and percentage of respondents working in the public sector. It emerged clearly that our (left) ideological incentives index was more common among DS than among DL delegates. In the PD, values of the index were intermediate between the two and were particularly low in 2017 (during the Renzi period). By contrast, the social incentives index was higher in DL than DS delegates. Again, the PD was halfway between the two, but showed an increasing trend after 2009. As regards our selective incentives index, Table 3 shows that the percentage of delegates holding elective positions varied in the range 42-53%, reaching or exceeding 50% on three occasions: at DL07, DS07 and PD17.

With regard to the socio-demographic profile of the delegates, four aspects can be underlined: 1) mean age was substantially constant at about 46 years at the various congresses, with two exceptions: DL04 (mean age 50 years) and PD17 (mean age 43.8 years); 2) the percentage of graduates was high and showed an increasing trend; 3) many delegates worked in the public sector (more than 55% among DS delegates); 4) there was a progressive increase in the percentage of women at DS and DL congresses (the PD

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<sup>12</sup> Position on the political spectrum was measured on a 1 to 7 scale and recorded as a dichotomous variable by assigning value one to respondents who scored 1 (radical left) or 2 (left). It should be noted that the percentage of respondents who scored 1 was 4% at DL04, 66% at DS05, 3% at DL07, 56% at DS07, 29% at PD09, 40% at PD13, 21% at PD17 and 37% at PD19.

statute envisages gender parity). Overall, the profile of PD national delegates stabilized in the course of time.

In an attempt to adapt the Whiteley & Seyd model to Italian centre-left parties and to combine it with Panebianco's contribution, we evaluated the relative overtime weight of the various types of incentive in the two (internal and external) forms of party activism among DL, DS and PD national delegates. The literature examined in Section 1 allowed us to formulate two hypotheses to test the empirical analysis of our original dataset by logit regression models.

**HYPOTHESIS 1:** Since the high levels of external participation of the middle-level party élite are largely sustained by social and ideological incentives, we expect the highest levels of external political participation to be found principally among national delegates having left-wing political orientation and/or who are relatively rich in social capital.

**HYPOTHESIS 2:** Since high levels of internal participation of the middle-level party élite are guided principally by selective incentives (strategic maintenance of elective positions), we expect the highest levels of internal political participation to be found principally among national delegates who currently hold elective positions.

### **Reasons for party activism: internal and external participation**

Table 4 shows the determinants of external participation of delegates in the period 2004-2019 to test our first hypothesis about the strong role of social and ideological incentives in supporting external participation.

To test our hypothesis, we apply a logistic regression model – one for each national congress<sup>13</sup> – using our dichotomous index of external participation as dependent

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<sup>13</sup> As underlined in note 11, the key question about state intervention in the economy, used to construct our ideological incentives index, did not have the same wording in all questionnaires, supporting the choice of separate models.

variable. This index took value 1 for high levels of external participation, zero otherwise (see Table 2). The model regressed the three types of incentive using the dichotomous index of social incentives and the dichotomous index of ideological incentives (see Table 3). In this way we aligned the ranges of our three main independent variables: selective incentive (1 = holding elective position, 0 otherwise), social incentives index (1 = high, 0 otherwise), ideological incentives index (1 = high, 0 otherwise). We included the following control variables in the model: a) gender: 1 for male and 0 for female; b) age of respondents; c) level of education: 1 for university degree, 0 otherwise; d) occupational sector: 1 for public sector, 0 otherwise. For the sake of simplicity, Table 4 shows only statistically significant Exp (B) coefficients of our three main independent variables. As expected, the findings show that the probability of high external participation was greater if delegates had a high social or ideological incentives index. More in detail, Table 4 shows that the social incentives index (i.e. trust in others, activity in the social sphere and manager position in civic associations) was always a positive statistically significant predictor of external participation among delegates at DL05, DL07, DS05 and DS07. Moreover, the ideological incentives index (i.e. left-wing orientation and attitude in favour of state intervention) was the strongest predictor (positive and statistically significant) of external participation among delegates at PD09, PD13 and PD17.

In 2019, the determinants of external participation changed. At PD19, the only statistically significant predictor of external participation was holding an elective position (selective incentive). Our first hypothesis is therefore confirmed, but only until 2017. Note that between 2004 and 2007, the odds ratios (exp (B)) of the social incentives index varied from 2.004 to 4.964 and that between 2009 and 2019, the odds ratios of the ideological incentives index varied from 3.721 to 4.300. This means that:

1. DL04 delegates with a high social incentives index are 396% ( $\exp(B) = 4.964^{***}$ ) more likely to have high external participation than delegates with a low social incentives index;
2. PD13 delegates with a high ideological incentives index are 330% ( $\exp(B) = 4.300^{***}$ ) more likely to have high external participation than delegates with a low ideological incentives index.

Table 5 shows the determinants of internal participation of delegates to test the second hypothesis about the exclusive role of selective incentives in supporting internal participation. For the logistic regression, we used our dichotomous index of internal participation as dependent variable. It took value 1 with high levels of internal participation, zero otherwise (see Table 2). The model includes the independent variables we used to regress external participation. Table 5 indicates the statistically significant coefficients.

Our findings show that among DL, DS and PD delegates in the period 2004-2013, holding elective office (our selective incentive) was a stronger predictor of internal participation than social and ideological incentives. Indeed, in this period, the  $\exp(B)$  odds ratios of selective incentives were all statistically significant and varied in the range 2.768 to 9.252. For example, we see that at PD13, delegates with elective positions had higher odds of a high internal participation index than delegates without elective positions (+246% since  $\exp(B) = 3.463^{***}$ ).

The results were completely different at PD17 and PD19. In the first case, the only significant incentives were social,<sup>14</sup> whereas at PD19, none of our main independent

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<sup>14</sup> It should be noted that social incentives were also significant and positively correlated with internal participation at PD13.

variables reached statistical significance.<sup>15</sup> This means that our second hypothesis is only supported empirically until 2013.

### **Conclusions: towards a constituent congress**

Our results show that among DL, DS and PD national delegates, external participation is largely determined by social and ideological incentives, whereas internal participation is driven by a specific type of selective incentive: holding elective office. Significantly, we showed that the approach of Whiteley & Seyd (and their followers) to the analysis of party activism, tailored to the Italian context, is still useful in explaining different participation levels of the centre-left middle-level élite. However, after 2017, party activism in the PD shifted profoundly away from the classic schemes proposed by the literature.

In this last section we endeavour to explain the reasons for this change. By examining the ‘original sin’ (the structural characteristics of the PD) with incentive-based models, we advance a ‘chaos party’ formula, stemming from the difficulty of interpreting the transformations undergone by Italian centre-left party activism.

### ***The original sin***

To understand the change in party activism, we must go back to the ‘original sin’ of the PD, namely two discontinuities with the past, substantiated by its three founding myths. First, the myths of open party and contestable party were built on open primary elections.

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<sup>15</sup> In Table 5, the control variable results indicate that: a) men were more likely to have a internal participation index than women at 5/8 congresses (gender was not statistically significant at DL07, PD09 and PD17); b) age was associated negatively with internal participation at 5/8 congresses (age was not statistically significant at DL04, PD09 and PD19); c) delegates who worked in the public sector were more likely to have a internal participation index than delegates who worked in the private sector at DL04, DL07 and PD09. Education was marginally relevant in the present model.



The PD was the first party in Europe to extend the choice of its leader to voters. This mechanism favours the participation and involvement of normal citizens but does not seem particularly appreciated by PD party members.<sup>16</sup>

Although primaries are often seen as a tool to re-legitimise the leadership in a context of verticalisation (Ignazi 2014), the election mechanism proposed by the statute creates perverse links within the party because it binds members of the National Assembly to candidates for party secretary from the outset. Through the primaries, partisanship legitimately precedes party membership, creating deep internal rifts which also concern political culture. The result is a party without common elements of identity and belonging, a party one enters not for activism or intrinsic reasons but to compete for management positions and elective office: a ‘Pál Street’ party in which there are many officials and almost no soldiers, as in the novel by Ferenc Molnár. In such a party, the connecting role of the middle-level élite (between society and the party, and between the party ranks and its top echelons) is distorted. Selection of delegates from provincial lists sustaining the various candidates for party secretary occurs by co-optation from above. Thus, delegates are almost never chosen for their capacity to represent the local community: faithfulness to the leader-candidate becomes the pivot for selection of the party leadership and candidates for elective positions.

It is therefore not surprising that the main incentives for internal participation among national delegates in such a situation are what our theoretical framework called selective incentives. Those holding elective positions are more likely to commit themselves to party life in order to keep positions in which they represent the leader of the moment, control local branches and consolidate their own elected roles. As our results

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<sup>16</sup> Research shows that PD membership has been greatly penalised by the institution of open primaries (Sandri & Venturino 2020, Seddone, Venturino & Sandri 2021).

show, this held true for PD delegates in 2009 and 2013, but no longer in 2017 or 2019. The reason may have to do with the fact that people have progressively attributed less importance to the party organisation for promotion of their political careers (Natale & Fasano 2017).

Second, another discontinuity lies in the conscious choice of making the PD a post-ideological party, i.e. of creating a party without any agreed political culture: a pragmatic party in which it is no longer necessary to encourage debate and discussion on values and policies in order for the ‘grass roots’ to influence strategic decisions. It suffices to take part in the election procedure for party secretary. This approach is clearly reflected in our data: ideological incentives (left orientation or being in favour of state intervention in the economy or less pro-market) had relatively little influence on internal participation. By contrast, ideological incentives were strong for political and civic participation, which we defined as external participation. The most active middle-level élite in such forms of participation were persons with a left-wing ideological orientation, active in local associations.

Incentives for party activism are therefore still important but changed profoundly as the PD underwent its different phases. By refurbishing the concept of participation of Whiteley & Seyd and distinguishing internal and external participation, we were able to highlight an involution in the mechanisms of internal democracy.

### ***Chaos Party?***

Despite its 15-year history, the PD continues to be a party in constant organisational crisis, at the crossroads of further transformation. As described above, the Renzi secretariats – the longest in the history of the PD – left their imprint on the party: there was no consolidation of any spirit of identity or belonging, shared values or belief system of reference for supporters, members and the middle-level élite. Renzi cut the

umbilical cord with the parties of origin: the party no longer had any organisation or ideology: the 'original sin' culminated in the final chaos. The party that Zingaretti inherited from Renzi was a chaos party reduced to an all-time electoral low.<sup>17</sup> After two years, Zingaretti abandoned his attempts to restore a political identity that could overcome internal struggles (Baccetti et al. 2022).

Letta tried to patch up the damage by building on the few values shared by party members, supporters and the middle élite: a clear pro-European stance, reception of migrants and consolidation of more sensitive civil rights, such as ethics and personal sexual orientation. Letta shaped the party as one of civil liberties, upholding equalising measures (e.g. inheritance tax) and inclusiveness (e.g. *jus soli*-based citizenship). At the same time, he sought to revitalise centre-periphery governance with solid local roots through 'Democratic Agora', while promoting social mobility of the lower classes. In their few months of activity, these forums managed to produce 700 initiatives involving a community of more than 100,000 people, but with the fall of the Draghi government, their journey came to a halt. The national elections of 25th September 2022 were a total debacle for the party and its secretary,<sup>18</sup> so much so that Letta called a constituent congress of the PD and declined to stand again for secretary.

We summarise the complex constituent process to help readers grasp its importance for party activism and the middle-level élite. The two phases concern drafting and approval of a Manifesto of Values and Principles of the PD to replace the Charter of

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<sup>17</sup> In the national elections of 2018, the PD obtained 18.8% of the vote, the worst result in the history of the Italian left and centre-left, and well below the 25% obtained in 2013 and the 33% obtained in 2008.

<sup>18</sup> The PD actually won 19.1% of the vote (+0.3% with respect to 2018), while losing about a million votes in absolute terms. In the 2022 national elections, Italy recorded the lowest voter turnout in its history (63.9%).

Values drafted in 2007; the second phase concerns the congressional process that will lead, primaries, to the election of both new secretary and national assembly.

- (1) The first phase (the constituent process, ongoing at the time of the writing), involves opening the party to all interested citizens, from PD supporters to current members, from members of other parties to civil society, who are called to discuss critical 'political nodes' of the PD, either in open assemblies at local level or through a web survey (called “la bussola”) organized by the party. The results of these meetings and the web survey will be sent to the National Constituent Committee, composed of 94 sages chosen from the PD members and civil society, who will consign the Manifesto of Values and Principles by 22nd January 2023. The Manifesto will then be approved by the National Assembly.
- (2) The process leading to election of the secretary consists of three steps scheduled for 2023: a) 27th January: submission of nominees to the party's national secretariat; b) 12th February: local selection of two candidates to stand in the primary elections; c) 19th February: primary election of the new party secretary.

The new secretary is faced with the double challenge of renovating and reforming the party: he/she needs to strengthen its relationship with the electoral base and the middle-level élite to promote party reputation, electoral competitiveness and the trust of party members and the electorate. It seems certain that the traditional models used to explain party activism based on incentives ceased to work for the PD, precisely because of the profound transformations that the party had undergone.

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# The Italian Democratic Party at the Crossroad: Party Activism and Middle-Level Élite

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Table 1. National party conferences: samples description.

	National party delegates and members of national assemblies	Sample cover %	Native PD %	National secretary elected
DL04: DL National Conference (Rimini, March 12–14, 2004)	310	22	-	Francesco Rutelli
DS05: DS National Conference (Rome, February 3–5, 2005)	434	28	-	Piero Fassino
DL07: DL National Conference (Rome, April 20–22, 2007)	305	19	-	Francesco Rutelli
DS07: DS National Conference (Florence, April 19–21, 2007);	324	24	-	Piero Fassino
PD09: PD National Assembly (Rome, November 7, 2009)	205	21	16	<i>Pier Luigi Bersani</i> Guglielmo Epifani:
PD13: PD National Assembly (Milan, December 15, 2013)	352	35	41	<i>Matteo Renzi</i> Matteo Orfini
PD17: PD National Assembly (Rome, December 15, 2017)	215	22	33	<i>Matteo Renzi</i> Maurizio Martina
PD19: PD National Assembly (Rome, December 15, 2019)	228	23	41	<i>Nicola Zingaretti</i> Enrico Letta
Total observations	2373			

Source: Bordandini and Di Virgilio (2009-2013) and Observatory on Political Parties 'Aldo di Virgilio' (National Delegates Project)

Note: In italics, the names of national secretaries elected in primary elections.

Table 2. Dependent variables: external and internal participation indexes by national conferences.

	Index of external participation: high level %	Index of internal participation: high level %
DL04	60	47
DS05	87	65
DL07	52	53
DS07	83	70
PD09	77	59
PD13	66	45
PD17	41	43
PD19	63	48

Source: Bordandini and Di Virgilio (2009-2013) and Observatory on Political Parties 'Aldo di Virgilio' (National Delegates Project)

Notes: A high level of the index of external participation (range 0-4) means a value of 3 or 4. A high level of the index of internal participation (range 0-3) means a value of 3.

Table 3. Independent variables by national conferences.

	DL04	DS05	DL07	DS07	PD09	PD13	PD17	PD19
<i>Selective incentive: holding elective position %</i>	42	47	50	50	47	45	53	43
<i>Social incentives index: high %</i>	59	51	53	46	43	53	50	59
<i>Ideological incentives index: high %</i>	4	58	3	42	25	34	16	33
<i>Socio-demographic profile:</i>								
Male %	86	63	78	58	52	51	57	55
Mean age	50.0	47.0	45.6	45.5	46.7	43.8	46.6	46,7
Graduates %	58	52	66	60	73	73	79	72
Employed in public sector %	44	56	44	58	42	42	44	40

Source: Bordandini and Di Virgilio (2009-2013) and Observatory on Political Parties 'Aldo di Virgilio' (National Delegates Project)

Notes: A high level of the Index of social incentives (range 0-3) means a value of 2 or 3. A high level of the index of ideological incentives (range 0-2) means a value of 2.

Table 4. Determinants of the index of external participation by national conference: logit regression models.

	DL04	DS05	DL07	DS07	PD09	PD13	PD17	PD19
<i>Selective incentive</i> (1=holding elective office)								2.895* (0.419)
<i>Social incentives index</i> (1=high)	4.964*** (0.344)	2.004* (0.345)	2.272** (0.306)	1.923 + (0.377)			2.325* (0.405)	
<i>Ideological incentives index</i> (1=high)		2.455** (0.344)			4.299+ (0.816)	4.300*** (0.373)	3.721* (0.545)	
Gender (1=male)								
Age					1.050+ (0.026)			
Sector (1=public sector)					4.331* (0.715)	1.997* (0.334)		
Education (1=degree)	1.836+ (0.349)							
Constant								
N	186	286	188	213	113	210	122	122
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.235	0.096	0.074	0.054	0.233	0.166	0.166	0.149

Source: Bordandini and Di Virgilio (2009-2013) and Observatory on Political Parties 'Aldo di Virgilio' (National Delegates Project)

Note: Dependent variable: External participation index (1=high 0=low). Entries report Exp (B), SE in parentheses.

Significance: + $p < 0.1$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ . Only statistically significant Exp (B) are shown.

Table 5. Determinants of the index of internal participation by national conference: logit regression models.

	DL04	DS05	DL07	DS07	PD09	PD13	PD17	PD19
<i>Selective incentive</i> (1=holding elective office)	2.768** (0.336)	3.25*** (0.291)	2.994** (0.340)	3.052** (0.363)	9.252*** (0.605)	3.463*** (0.342)		
<i>Social incentives index</i> (1=high)						2.211* (0.344)	2.682* (0.455)	
<i>Ideological incentives index</i> (1=high)					4.963* (0.665)			
Gender (1=male)	3.376* (0.538)	1.815* (0.294)		1.896+ (0.365)		2.080* (0.342)		2.600* (0.425)
Age		0.979+ (0.012)	0.970* (0.015)	0.968* (0.015)		0.966* (0.017)	0.961+ (0.021)	
Sector (1=public sector)	2.301* (0.352)		1.978+ (0.356)		0.314+ (0.597)			2.208+ (0.455)
Education (1=degree)				0.494+ (0.391)	0.069*** (0.742)			
Constant	0.166+ (0.959)			4.010+ (0.788)				
N	172	256	164	181	102	179	104	108
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.182	0.132	0.147	0.187	0.417	0.234	0.158	0.102

Source: Bordandini and Di Virgilio (2009-2013) and Observatory on Political Parties 'Aldo di Virgilio' (National Delegates Project)

Note: Dependent variable: Internal participation index (1=high 0=low). Entries report Exp (B), SE in parentheses.

Significance: +p<0.1; \*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001. Only statistically significant Exp (B) are shown.