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This is the final peer-reviewed author's accepted manuscript (postprint) of the following publication:

Published Version:

Ventura, S. (2023). The Italian Democratic Party: the explanation for a 'quasi-failure'. JOURNAL OF MODERN ITALIAN STUDIES, 5, 1-16 [10.1080/1354571X.2023.2241258].

Availability:

This version is available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/11585/939495> since: 2023-08-25

Published:

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2023.2241258>

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The Italian Democratic Party: the explanation for a ‘quasi-failure’

Il Partito democratico: la spiegazione per un ‘quasi-fallimento’

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This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis:

Ventura, S. (2023). The Italian Democratic Party: the explanation for a ‘quasi-failure’. *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 28(5), 538-553.

available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2023.2241258>

The Italian Democratic Party: the explanation for a ‘quasi-failure’

The Italian Democratic Party (PD) has attracted scholarly attention for its low level of institutionalisation and its lack of a clear political identity since its inception in 2007. Additionally, its electoral support has been in a state of continuous decline since the 2008 general election, and it hit a new low in the September 2022 elections. This article draws on Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan’s analysis for explaining the breakdown of democratic regimes between the two world wars and applies it to the PD’s situation. The framework identifies three macro-factors that have significantly influenced the party’s nature and dynamics: (1) general problems faced by mainstream and socialist parties in Europe since the 1990s and 2000s and the unstable and fragmented Italian party system; (2) the PD’s origins and its organisational nature; (3) party leaders’ defensive choices aimed at maintaining their roles. The article concludes that the PD’s limitations and shortcomings can be attributed to a combination of these factors.

Keywords: Italian Democratic Party; cartel party; stratarchical party; party personalization; Matteo Renzi; Elly Schlein

Il Partito democratico: la spiegazione per un ‘quasi-fallimento’

Sin dalla sua nascita, nel 2007, il Partito democratico ha attirato l’attenzione degli studiosi soprattutto per la sua debole istituzionalizzazione organizzativa e l’assenza di una chiara identità politica. Inoltre, esso ha conosciuto un costante declino elettorale a partire dalle elezioni politiche del 2008, raggiungendo alle elezioni del settembre del 2022 il suo minimo storico in termini di numero di elettori. L’articolo analizza questa problematica evoluzione del PD ispirandosi allo schema interpretativo che Juan Linz e Alfred Stepan avevano adottato per interpretare il crollo delle democrazie tra le due guerre mondiali. Lo schema qui utilizzato identifica tre macro-fattori che hanno influenzato in modo significativo la dinamica e la natura del partito: (1) i problemi più generali incontrati dai partiti mainstream e da quelli socialisti in particolare in Europa sin dagli anni Novanta e Duemila, da un lato, e l’instabile e frammentato sistema partitico italiano, dall’altro; (2) Le origini del Pd e le caratteristiche organizzative assunte; (3) il comportamento dei leader e dirigenti del partito, di tipo difensivo e mirante soprattutto al mantenimento dei rispettivi ruoli. L’articolo conclude che i limiti e le deficienze del PD possono essere attribuiti a una combinazione di quei tre macro-fattori.

Introduction

The Italian Partito Democratico (Democratic Party, PD), founded in 2007, has attracted the attention of scholars primarily for its organisational deficiencies, lack of institutionalisation, and vague political identity, rather than for its accomplishments. Moreover, since its inception, the party has experienced a steady decline in electoral support, obtaining only 19% of the vote in the September 2022 elections.

However, despite its weaknesses and its failures, the PD was part of governing majorities from November 2011 to June 2018, and from September 2019 to October 2022. This included participation in a technocratic non-political government, the Monti government (from November 2011 to December 2012), and a ‘technocrat-led’ government consisting of politicians and non-politicians, the Draghi government (from February 2021 to October 2022), both formed due to the lack of a partisan majority and the need to respond to situations of emergency. The PD also led ‘political’ executives based on heterogeneous coalitions with prime ministers drawn from its ranks, including Enrico Letta, Matteo Renzi, and Paolo Gentiloni. The only clear (but unusual) majority in which the PD participated was the one supporting the Second Conte government (from September 2019 to February 2021), formed by the PD and the populist Movimento Cinque Stelle (Five-star Movement, M5s) – a party that claimed to be neither of the left nor of the right.

Applying the framework developed by Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan (1978) to explain the crisis and collapse of democracies between the two world wars, we aim to present three sets of factors that account for the nature of the PD and its limitations. Linz and Stepan identified three sets of factors: contingent factors such as the First World War; long-term factors including the state-building process, and actors’ choices. Our analysis attributes contingent factors to the crisis of European socialist parties and their causes, also affecting the Italian left, and the unstable Italian political system, long-term factors to the party’s origins and its organisational nature, and actors’ choices to the decisions made by the PD’s leaders when facing internal and external challenges.

The contingent factors: the European Left and the Italian political system

Left-leaning parties in Europe share the characteristics of the ‘catch-all party’ (Kirchheimer 1966), meaning that they have weaker connections with their traditional voters and a more diverse electorate than did the earlier mass parties. Since the turn of the millennium, these parties have been experiencing a crisis of identity (Vampa 2009, 347-48) and support. Furthermore, scholars have noted that there was a sudden decline in support for left-wing parties from 2010, especially in continental Western Europe (Pasquino & Valbruzzi 2021, 100; Fasano & Natale 2019, 19-20; Mainwaring 2021, 198-202).

Political, economic, and social factors in European history may account for this crisis. George Menz (2023) identifies six factors, particularly since the 2008 financial crisis. These include 1) the decline of the working class and the rise of a precarious, non-unionised service-sector workforce; 2) the incoherent conceptualisation of this change by left-wing parties; 3) ruptures between trade unions and the working class; 4) challenges to welfare systems due to social and labour-market changes; 5) a stagnant economy and increased inequality, and, finally, 6) a reliance on market-based and supply-side solutions that fail to provide comprehensive protection or electoral benefits. According to Bremer (2018, 34-35), socialist and social-democratic parties since the 2007-08 economic crisis have become more focused on the welfare system and less attracted to neo-liberal solutions than in the pre-crisis period. However, these parties often still accept the need for fiscal consolidation and budgetary rigour, creating tensions within their platforms. Another point to consider regards the problems of immigration and the integration of newcomers. Left-wing parties in Europe have adopted an ‘open’ and welcoming attitude, one often inspired by multiculturalist commitments. However, in doing so, they have underestimated the consequences, in peripheral areas, of uncontrolled immigration of the

poor, further severing ties with the working class in direct contact with the ‘new poor’ resulting from immigration. Finally, for decades, European left and centre-left parties maintained a favourable position towards European integration, which enjoyed the silent support of national electorates – support commonly referred to as the ‘permissive consensus’.¹ As Euroscepticism began to spread among public opinion, particularly in economically and culturally marginal sections of society, they lacked a convincing narrative that could be both typical of European socialism and promote a more united Europe (Pasquino & Valbruzzi 2021).

The general factors affecting the European left have also had an impact on the Italian context (Del Panta & Guidi 2023, 114-118). The Italian left has suffered a decrease in the size of the working class and a reduction in the manufacturing and public sectors. Inadequate responses to structural changes in the economic sphere and labour market have further weakened the Italian left’s position. The focus on market-based solutions, rather than on traditional issues of inequality, has negatively affected the PD’s support in a country where income inequalities have worsened since the 2008 financial crisis (Diamond and Guidi 2019, 257), and – according to the Gini coefficient – are greater than those of other European countries.² The weakness of the Italian left has often benefitted the populist M5s, and it did so particularly in the 2013 and 2018 legislative elections (Fasano and Natale 2019, 26). Furthermore, since the 1990s, the populist Lega Nord (Northern League, NL) has attracted the working class away from the left-leaning parties, reducing their potential support (Zazzara 2018). Policies have been implemented since the 1990s to make the welfare system more economically sustainable in Italy, with a focus on a more flexible labour market. Since 2011, the PD has often been part of the governing majority, supporting successive governments implementing austerity measures, which have created tensions with the trade unions.

Regarding the immigration problem, the issue has become particularly relevant since the 2010s, as the Mediterranean has become a pole of attraction for migrants from the Balkans, Africa, and the Middle East. Populist parties have exploited the fear of immigration, negatively affecting the PD due to its more liberal positions. These positions mainly correspond to the sensibilities of an affluent and educated upper-middle class advocating multiculturalism, but they appear insensitive to the interests of the working class, which is most affected by the negative consequences of mass migration. Finally, since the first Prodi government (1996 - 1998) achieved Italy’s entry into the Eurozone, the mainstream Italian left has maintained a pro-European position. However, over the years, Italian public opinion has gradually shifted towards increasing Euroscepticism, which has been exploited by skilled populist political entrepreneurs.

One relevant consequence of these phenomena is the change in the composition of the PD’s electorate, with the party now having the most significant support among more educated and higher-income groups, so that it longer appears to be a party of the working class (Del Panta & Guidi 2023, 119; Natale & Fasano 2019, 27).

As for the political system, the PD was established in a context of party-system bipolarity that would shortly come to an end. The country’s political landscape had undergone a major transformation after the fall of the ‘First Republic’ and the subsequent emergence of bipolar competition between the centre-left and centre-right parties in 1994. However, the fall of Berlusconi’s government in 2011 and the formation of the technocratic government led by the former European commissioner for competition, Mario Monti, inaugurated a more complex period in the history of the Italian party system. The latter acquired a tri-polar nature, sanctioned by the success of the M5s at the 2013 elections. Born and built to acquire and maintain power in a context of bipolar competition, the PD soon found itself in a completely different situation.

The PD’s genesis and development. Oligarchy and personalisation

The PD possesses some distinctive organisational features. It originated as the result of a merger, ‘holding together the nomenklatura of the two co-founding parties’ (Fasano and Seddone, 2016, 86)

and, consequently, as the result of ‘a complex interplay between different contextual, intra-party and inter-party factors’ (Coffé and Torenvlied 2008, 12). It arose from the confluence of the heirs of the Partito Comunista Italiano (Italian Communist Party, PCI), that is, the Democratici di Sinistra (Democrats of the Left, DS), and the Margherita (the ‘Daisy’), a party with roots in the left of the dissolved Democrazia Cristiana (Christian Democrats, DC).

The political turmoil of the early 1990s in Italy, which was also influenced by international events, such as the fall of the Berlin Wall, resulted in the collapse of the major political parties of the so-called First Republic (1946-1994), including the DC. The former PCI faced the challenging task of adapting to the changing domestic and international landscape. In addition, at the beginning of 1994 a new right-wing coalition led by the tycoon, Silvio Berlusconi, emerged. As a result, the centrist and leftist political establishments struggled for many years to establish a new, stable, and effective political organisation that would also serve as a new political home.

The 2006 elections marked a victory for the centre-left coalition. The DS and the Margherita, among several other political and social groups, contested the elections under the same electoral banner, the Ulivo (the Olive-tree Coalition), for the Chamber of Deputies, where they obtained a clear majority. However, the centre-left coalition was unable to secure a majority in the Senate, which was elected under a partially different electoral system. Furthermore, the DS and Margherita ran separately in the Senate elections, as the leaders of the two parties had been for long reluctant to merge into a single party (Damilano 2013, 176).

The perception that the Ulivo was more competitive than the combined strength of the DS and Margherita lists provided impetus for the merger process. However, it was a series of difficulties within the left-wing camp that eventually led to the birth of the PD. Notably, the underwhelming results of the local elections in May 2006, coupled with the increasing difficulties encountered by the heterogeneous coalition supporting the centre-left government – led by the Catholic and leftist ‘technocrat’ Romano Prodi³ – prompted the leaders of the two political parties to accelerate their merger process. Despite operating in an unstable environment, they endeavoured to retain their pivotal role and carefully curtailed external interference from other factions or regional entities. (Tedeschi 2018, 157). For example, they insisted on the direct election of the party general secretary by sympathisers. Thereby they would exclude Romano Prodi, who was leading the government and would have instead wanted a simple coordinator at the head of the party.

The leading figures of the DS and the Margherita agreed on the name of the new general secretary for whom to vote: the mayor of Rome, Walter Veltroni (Ventura 2018). On 14 October 2007, 76 per cent of three and a half million PD sympathisers voted for him. For the leaders of the parties undergoing merger, he was their best hope of political survival (Funicciello 2012, 115). The party’s statute was ratified in February 2008, anchoring the party’s political agenda to direct election of the general secretary and the National Assembly. Accordingly, the party’s orientation was entrusted to the votes of its members and supporters. Party members voted in the first round, screening the first three candidates. Sympathisers voted in the second round dedicated to choosing the general secretary among the candidates nominated by party members. As has been stressed, such an arrangement reflected an ‘electoralistic’ vision of party democracy (Florida 2022, 52).

The slow attrition of Veltroni’s leadership that ensued after the PD’s defeat at the 2008 general election and at the regional elections in Abruzzo and Sardinia, exposed the extent of the new oligarchy’s grip on the party. Veltroni, chosen by that oligarchy, submitted to it by resigning in February 2009 and declaring that he was resigning in order to avoid endangering party unity. After his resignation, the leaders of the factions, which had multiplied during his tenure of office (Bordandini, Di Virgilio and Raniolo 2008, 318; Natale and Fasano 2017, 30-31), postponed the direct election of a new general secretary. The party assembly chose a transitional secretary, a prominent former leader of the Margherita, Dario Franceschini. Later, the party oligarchy partly converged on the name of Pierluigi Bersani, who won the office of party secretary in the October 2009 elections.

The rise of Bersani to the party leadership marked a significant shift in the PD's political outlook. In contrast to Veltroni's goal of a party with a 'majority vocation' capable of securing a parliamentary majority alone, Bersani advocated a party that would lead a broad coalition. Moreover, he abandoned Veltroni's preference for a lean party structure based on elected representatives, members and sympathisers, instead favouring a more inclusive 'community' party approach. The party's cultural outlook also underwent a transformation, shifting from a focus on a rehashed version of the Blairite Third Way to a more distinctly 'workerist' perspective.

The leadership of Bersani was not without its challenges: several prominent spokespersons resigned from the party, and powerful factions opposed him. However, the most significant challenge came from Matteo Renzi, the mayor of Florence, who competed against him in the 2012 primaries to choose the centre-left coalition leader. Despite being defeated, Renzi obtained a significant 40 per cent of the vote. In the 2013 elections, the coalition led by Bersani won a majority of seats in the Chamber of Deputies but failed to obtain an absolute majority in the Senate. This situation led to a troublesome phase, as Bersani's attempts to build a majority coalition with the M5s failed. His strategy to influence the election of the new President of the Republic also failed, resulting in a stalemate and the re-election of the incumbent President, Giorgio Napolitano. As a result of these circumstances, Bersani resigned on 20 April 2013. Once again, the party oligarchy postponed the competition for a new party leader. After a transitional phase presided over by the former trade unionist, Guglielmo Epifani, the general secretary elections were held in December 2013 and saw the victory of Matteo Renzi.

During Veltroni's and Bersani's tenures as party general secretaries, organised factions with their own journals, foundations, funders, and leaders acquired increasing influence over the party's operations. Initially, these factions worked cooperatively, but later they triggered a form of 'competitive factionalism' in which divergent preferences and polarized opinions created centrifugal pressures and weakened intra-party ties (Boucek 2009, 473). Additionally, the party's structure became increasingly stratified and confused due to inconsistent management of central-local relations, which often involved ad hoc exchanges and compromises between national and local leaders (Massari, 2013: 194). Although Bersani introduced a reform of the party's statute designed to give members a greater role in local elections, this move ultimately increased the incoherence of the party's organisation.

During Matteo Renzi's two terms as party general secretary (December 2013 - February 2017/May 2017 - March 2018), a process of party personalisation was initiated, particularly in the domains of governance and communication (Rahat & Kenig 2018). After Renzi replaced Enrico Letta as head of the coalition government in February 2014, he became the direct interlocutor of numerous factions within the PD, thereby departing from the traditional 'horizontal' oligarchic model. However, Renzi's leadership did not address the party's strataarchical (Carty 2004) and weakly coordinated organisation. Despite the 'institutional centralisation' that he imposed on the party at the national level, he still negotiated with local and regional potentates, as his predecessors had done. Furthermore, many internal conflicts within the party intensified, leading to several instances of defection (Ventura 2018).

Under Renzi's leadership, the Democratic Party underwent a detachment from the party type established by Bersani, including a shift in ideological outlook. Renzi adopted a 'reformist' perspective inspired by the Third Way and Veltroni's idea of a party with a majority vocation. The PD enjoyed momentary success under Renzi's leadership, achieving 40 per cent of the vote in the 2014 European elections. However, after Renzi's enthusiastically pursued constitutional reform failed in the December 2016 referendum, in February 2017 he resigned from the government and later from the party secretariat. He returned as party general secretary in May 2017 but ultimately resigned again in March 2018 after the party's worst electoral result in its history.

Renzi left the Democratic Party in a state of deep crisis, with prominent party leaders like Bersani and D'Alema having already departed. Additionally, the party's institutionalisation failed to advance – either along the centre-periphery dimension or at the national level. Renzi, like other

leaders with a considerable media appeal, represented an added value for his party in the short term, but ultimately he left it in a state of disarray. As has been noted of Renzi and the former French President, Nicolas Sarkozy,

both leaders revolutionised their parties' functioning, leading to heightened centralisation at the national level, careers linked to the leader's benevolence, vague party rules and neutralisation of the powers of internal bodies. After the leader's defeat, confusion and internal conflicts continued, with the leader's strength no longer able to neutralise or balance them (Ventura 2019).

After Renzi's departure, the PD appointed a new transitional general secretary, Maurizio Martina, through an informal agreement. On 17 March 2019, Nicola Zingaretti, President of the Lazio region, with strong support from the party's leftist groups, won the PD's general secretary elections. However, the party's ideological oscillation between social-democratic and democratic-reformist outlooks continued under Zingaretti's leadership (Natale 2019, 230). The new party leader rejected Renzi's personalised model, favouring collegial and consensual party management (Valbruzzi 2019, 218). An example of Zingaretti's vision of leadership was a significant change to the party's statute, which ended the identification between party leader and prime minister (Valbruzzi 2019, 225-226). This initiative signalled the intention to move beyond the idea of the 'democracy of the leader', which had characterized both Veltroni's and Renzi's visions.

Zingaretti also implemented a novel approach to separating the process of formulating the party agenda from the election of both the general secretary and the National Assembly. However, this innovation proved to be primarily a formal one, as no mechanism was established to integrate the agenda-setting phase with the electoral process. Thus, the process by which the leader was selected continued to play a central role in the PD's conception of party democracy (Florida, 2022, 56-59). Additionally, the party reduced the number of leadership candidates whose appointment would be determined by the vote of sympathisers, from three to two.

Zingaretti's mandate ended prematurely when he resigned in March 2021, denouncing the attacks directed at him from within the party.⁴ Enrico Letta was elected as his successor by the party's National Assembly, rather than through direct open elections. Letta's mandate was strongly conditioned by the party oligarchy, which had chosen him.⁵ This became evident during the election of the parliamentary group leaders.⁶

Following the PD's electoral defeat on 25 September 2022, Enrico Letta announced that he would not seek re-election. In February 2023, the Party Congress was held, and a new secretary was elected. This election marked an historic moment in Italian politics as Elly Schlein became the first woman to win the leadership of the country's most significant left-wing party. She defeated Emilia Romagna's President, Stefano Bonaccini, in the race. Schlein was a well-known leftist leader who had previously served as a member of the European Parliament and the Chamber of Deputies as well as vice-president of the Emilia Romagna Region. Despite becoming a PD member only a few weeks before the leadership contest, she was able to compete thanks to an amendment to the party's statute adopted in November 2022. In the first round of voting, Schlein received only one-third of the party members' votes. However, in the second round, which was open to the participation of party sympathizers, she won with 53.75% of the vote, supported by leading party members and the PD's 'workerist' wing.

In summary, the organisational history of the PD since its inception has been marked by both the oligarchy's persistent attempts to maintain a central role in the party and by weak institutionalisation. The former is evidenced by the oligarchy's ongoing efforts to control the selection, actions and dismissal of party leaders. The latter is characterised by factors such as a muddled stratarchy, frequent turnover of the party leadership, varying party visions and perspectives, and a high level of permeability of the party's organisational boundaries, which have enabled numerous departures, entries, and ascensions of external actors to the party leadership. The personalisation phase represented by Renzi's tenure as party leader, rather than establishing a new equilibrium in the party organisation, introduced new destabilising dynamics.

The choices

The third element of our theoretical framework concerns actors' choices. In 2011, due to international pressures and its inability to manage the economic crisis, the Berlusconi government fell. The PD eschewed demanding fresh elections and, together with Berlusconi's party and a number of small centre parties, agreed to support the technocratic government led by Mario Monti. This decision had a significant impact on the PD's political strategy. All groups within the party accepted the decision to support the technocratic executive rather than immediately demanding early elections. They saw it as a gesture of responsibility aimed at addressing the country's difficult economic situation. However, by sharing the responsibilities of the Monti government, the PD had to bear the burden of its unpopular decisions, and joining Monti's majority prevented the PD from presenting itself at the next general election as a party of opposition (Tedeschi 2018, 119).

Despite the PD's predicted victory in fresh elections according to the polls, the party leadership preferred to share governmental responsibility in a heterogeneous coalition rather than taking the risk of competition and assuming direct governmental responsibility. However, at the 2013 election, due to the growing anti-political climate and the unpopular measures of the Monti technocratic government, the M5s obtained 25.56 per cent of the vote in the Chamber of Deputies contest, narrowly surpassing the PD, which fell from 33.18 per cent in 2008 to 25.43 per cent. Even so, while the centre-left obtained an absolute majority in the Chamber of Deputies it had only a relative majority in the Senate. Bersani's attempts to seek an agreement with the M5s failed, and President Giorgio Napolitano called upon Enrico Letta to form a government based on a large and heterogeneous coalition, including the PD. The responsibility of the PD was more significant than the one it had assumed in supporting the previous Monti government, for now it was the largest party and it supplied the head of government.

In the spring of 2014, during Renzi's period of leadership, another significant choice was made when Prime Minister Letta's position was taken over by the new PD general secretary. Due to the difficulties with which the Letta government was attempting, with limited success, to get to grips, almost all the party oligarchy supported this move. Although never able to form its 'own' majority, the PD remained in government. After Renzi resigned (in December 2016), the government was led by another PD spokesperson, former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Paolo Gentiloni, until the 2018 elections.

The 2018 election results reinforced the tri-polar character of the party system, thanks to the further electoral success of the M5s. This result led to the birth of the unusual populist majority formed by the M5s and the Lega (League), Matteo Salvini's right-wing party. Due to the premature end of this so-called 'yellow-green' executive (in August 2019), the PD found itself at another crossroads. It could choose between early elections or a new governing agreement. Many PD leaders pushed for an agreement with the M5s, but Zingaretti opposed this solution for a long time. Finally, Zingaretti changed his mind under strong pressure from Renzi (who was to leave the party in September) and other faction leaders, most notably Dario Franceschini, and agreed to form the new 'yellow-red' coalition. He even accepted that Giuseppe Conte, who had already led the 'yellow-green' executive, would retain the leadership of the new government.

In the wake of the resignation of former Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, due to the decision of Matteo Renzi's new party, Italia Viva, to withdraw its support for the executive, President Sergio Mattarella called on former European Central Bank President, Mario Draghi, to form a new government (February 2021). Once again, a large and heterogeneous majority, including the PD, supported the government. However, the Draghi technocratic government was short lived and fresh elections were held on 25 September 2022. As a result of the electoral victory of the right-wing coalition consisting of the League, Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy, FdI), and Forza Italia, the PD found itself in opposition for the first time (if we exclude the 'yellow-green' parenthesis) in eleven years.

Conclusions

The birth of the PD in October 2007 occurred during a difficult period for European social democracy, and its leadership had to navigate the complexities of a changing political landscape. The party struggled to find solid ideological and organisational reference points due to the organisational and cultural dilemmas faced by many social democratic parties in Europe (Mainwaring 2021, 215-220). The Italian party system, with its constant fragmentation and change, further complicated matters. As Panebianco noted (1982), parties in unstable political environments face heightened internal conflict and deepening divisions. The PD's nature as a 'merger party' reflected such an environment as well as a search on the part of leftist and centrist political establishments for the means of survival after the dissolution of the PCI and the DC.

The party's organisational 'openness' made it more dependent on the turbulent political environment. The party was born during the centre-left government's period in office from 2006 to 2008 – a period marked by sharp conflicts between the coalition partners. For the DS' and the Margherita's elites, the merger was seen as a means to ensure their political survival and the acquisition of power (Marland & Flanagan, 2013). However, the leading officials from the two original parties sought to maintain control over party dynamics, including the formation of the dominant coalition, leadership selection, and party alliances. Efforts to control the party led to alliances and conflicts between organised factions and their respective leaders. Initially, the factions reflected the original distinction between the DS and the Margherita, but later cross-cut the original two groups and co-opted the PD's 'natives'. The PD introduced democratising reforms like many other European left-wing parties, and this also favoured personalising dynamics. Under Renzi's decidedly personalised leadership, the process of party personalisation did not affect the local level and left room for prominent local leaders and micro-personalisation. In addition, Renzi's exclusive focus on his governmental role and his lack of interest in consolidating the party organisation paved the way for factionalism after his departure. Factionalism marked the periods of leadership of Zingaretti and Letta as well.

Moreover, the PD was born with the aim of it coming to constitute one of the two pillars of a bipolar, if not a two-party system. The original merger decision favoured an 'open' party that could adapt to a 'bipolar model'. However, the complicated and tri-polar Italian party system that subsequently emerged probably accounts for the different party models pursued by the different leaders, as well as the inconsistencies between the various party reforms and the internal political dynamics. It can also be suggested that the 'open model' undermined party institutionalisation, identity and internal coordination, and fuelled factional competition rather than durable alliances.

Finally, the choices made by the PD establishment over the years can be interpreted as mainly defensive ones. Party leaders defended their role in the party and in legislative and governmental contexts, often preferring to avoid early elections and the risks linked to competition. The oligarchy's grip on the party made it an exemplar of the cartel party model (Katz & Mair, 1995), entrenching it in the political institutions and distancing it from its traditional social groups. Populist parties exploited this detachment.

The new leader of the PD, Elly Schlein, who was elected in February 2023, campaigned on a promise to end factionalism within the party, despite enjoying the support of leading faction spokespersons. While the role of these spokespersons in Schlein's party remains to be seen, her election and early actions demonstrate a number of distinctive characteristics. First, in terms of her social profile, Schlein reflects that of the contemporary PD electorate, which is mainly urban, upper-middle class and primarily concerned with post-materialist issues. Moreover, the profile of voters participating in the PD open general secretary election differs significantly from the PD electorate itself, the Italian electorate, and non-voters. Consequently, the question of how to attract voters from the more marginalised sectors of society remains open, even if Schlein is the most left-wing leader in the PD's history.⁷

In addition, Schlein's election confirms the 'open' nature of the PD and its weak institutionalisation. She built her popularity as a member and leader of political movements and competed as an independent candidate within the party's ranks. Schlein formally entered the PD only a few weeks before the election, and for the first time in the party's history, an elected secretary lacked a majority of votes among party members, while winning in the second round open to the participation of sympathisers. Schlein's victory in this round indicates the loosening and permeability of the boundaries of the party organisation. In this regard, it is important to emphasise Schlein's appointment of external personalities to important roles – personalities such as Igor Taruffi, a long-standing activist in a small radical leftist party, who has been given responsibility for the party's organisation – and to membership of her 'cabinet'.⁸

Moreover, despite Schlein's emphasis on collegiality, there are many indicators that suggest that the PD is undergoing a new process of personalisation. For instance, Schlein publicised the secretariat on her Instagram page instead of holding a press conference. Additionally, she declined to appoint any deputy general secretaries, as her predecessors had usually done, and relegated well-known figures from her entourage to peripheral roles.⁹ As the personalisation process tends to lead to de-institutionalisation, a new party personalisation process will most likely weaken further an already weak organisation.

Despite this, Schlein has generated enthusiasm among many leftist voters and rekindled the support of those who had previously abandoned the party, as indicated by opinion polls. Nonetheless, it remains uncertain whether Schlein's leadership will facilitate the reorganisation of the problematic party established in 2007, or simply represent another transitory phase, given the numerous unpredictable factors. These concern the role of the party's factions, the consolidation of the party organisation – which is challenged by the personalised and 'party-movement' approach of Schlein's leadership – and the development of a clear and culturally robust party vision, which the PD currently lacks.¹⁰ This question is critical because the possibility of alternation in power is a necessary condition for democracy (Pasquino 2018). In other words, the answer to this question will determine the feasibility of developing a viable left-wing programme for government in Italy, as an alternative to the programme of the right.

Notes

¹ According to this thesis, 'at least until the late 1980s the process of European integration was accompanied by a so-called "permissive consensus" on the part of the European citizenry. The technical nature of the European project and its marginal impact on the individual lives of citizens created a scenario in which an ill-informed, disinterested, and generally favourably disposed public gave political elites free reign in pursuing integration' (Edwards 2005).

² <https://data.oecd.org/inequality/income-inequality.htm>

³ In October 2005, Romano Prodi, who had already served as Prime Minister from 1996 to 1998, emerged as the winner of the open primary elections held to choose the centre-left coalition's prime ministerial candidate. These primary elections represented a concession made by the DS and Margherita party establishments to Prodi and his close collaborator, Arturo Parisi, both convinced of the need to create a single centre-left party. This was the counterpart of their decision to present themselves separately in the Senate for the 2006 legislative elections (Damiano 2013).

⁴ *Corriere della Sera*, 5 March 2021.

⁵ *La Stampa*, 6 March 2021; *Corriere della Sera*, 21 March 2021.

⁶ *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 29 March 2021.

⁷ M. Valbruzzi, Il paradosso del Pd e la rivoluzione digitale, *Politica/il Domani*, 8 April 2023

⁸ Taruffi: "Appena iscritto, vengo da Sel. Ora tocca a me riorganizzare il partito", *Repubblica*, 8 April 2023, p. 10; L. De Cicco, Sinistra, face nuove e poche correnti, l'impronta di Schlein sulla segreteria Pd, *Repubblica*, 8 April, p. 10.

⁹ F. Martini, Elly Schlein, una donna quasi sola al comando, *Huffington Post Italia*, 7 April 2023; S. Canettieri, *L'Avvelenata di Elly*, *Il Foglio*, 8 April 2023.

¹⁰ A. Floridia, La vera partita del Pd comincia adesso, alla prova i nuovi assetti, *Il Manifesto*, 8 April 2023.

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