

## LIVING APART BUT TOGETHER. MEMBERS, SYMPATHIZERS, AND THE ITALIAN DEMOCRATIC PARTY

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### ABSTRACT

In this article, we investigate the case of the Italian Democratic Party (Partito Democratico – PD). We look at how members and sympathizers are integrated within the party and their respective role in selecting the leader. The PD applies a two-step procedure for selecting its party leaders. First, enrolled members are able to screen the candidates running for party leadership, so that only three candidates are entitled progress to the following step. Second, the party leader is selected via open primaries where all electors are admitted. We aim to assess if these highly inclusive procedures allowing party members and sympathizers to have a say together in leader selections may breed any strain between the two selectorates. To do so, we separately focus on the level of competitiveness of the races successively involving members and then sympathizers. We rely on four different datasets including aggregate data at the regional level about selections for the party leader organized in 2009, 2013, 2017 and 2019. Results show that the two selectorates have only partially converged along the same lines. In fact, a downward trend affects both closed and open primaries; instead, the vote by party members often results in competitive closed primaries, while open primaries are more likely to generate plebiscitary results. This may produce important consequences on the different role of members and sympathizers within the party.

### KEYWORDS

Closed Primaries; Italy; Open Primaries; Party Membership; Sympathizers.

## JUNTOS PERO NO REVUELTOS. MIEMBROS, SIMPATIZANTES Y EL PARTIDO DEMOCRÁTICO DE ITALIA

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### RESUMEN

En este artículo investigamos el caso del Partido Demócrata en Italia (Partito Democratico – PD). Observamos cómo los miembros y simpatizantes se integran dentro del partido y su papel respectivo en la selección del líder. El PD aplica un procedimiento de dos pasos para seleccionar a los líderes. Primero, los aliados seleccionan a los candidatos que se postulan para el liderazgo del partido, de modo que solo tres candidatos tienen derecho a pasar a la siguiente etapa. En segundo lugar, el líder se selecciona mediante primarias abiertas en las que se admite el voto de todos los electores. Nuestro objetivo es evaluar si estos procedimientos altamente inclusivos que permiten a aliados y simpatizantes tener voz y voto en la selección de líderes pueden generar alguna tensión entre los dos electorados. Para ello, nos centramos en el nivel de competitividad de las primarias que involucran, sucesivamente, a aliados y simpatizantes. Nos basamos en cuatro conjuntos de datos diferentes que incluyen datos agregados a nivel regional sobre los procesos de selección del líder nacional del partido organizados en 2009, 2013, 2017 y 2019. Los resultados muestran que los dos procesos solo han convergido parcialmente. De hecho, tanto las primarias cerradas como las abiertas se caracterizan por una tendencia a la baja; en cambio, el voto de los aliados a menudo permite primarias cerradas competitivas, mientras que las primarias abiertas tienen más probabilidades de generar resultados plebiscitarios. Esto puede producir importantes consecuencias sobre el papel diferente de los miembros y simpatizantes dentro del partido.

### PALABRAS CLAVE

Primarias cerradas; Italia; Primarias abiertas; Miembros de partidos; Simpatizantes.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The decline of party membership across European political parties has been largely documented in the literature (Van Biezen et al. 2012; van Haute and Gauja 2015). Several factors have been put forward to explain the shifting away of citizens from once well-regarded political organizations. These studies alternatively emphasize the role of a changing political culture (Dalton and Welzel 2014), of different political institutions (Sartori 1994), of party cartelization (Katz and Mair 1995), or of alternative instruments of political participation, such as social movements (Hutter et al. 2019).

Some scholars have raised concerns in this respect as these declining trends challenge the very future of political parties (Gauja 2015). Their role in the process of political representation is jeopardized. Not only are they nowadays hardly capable of attracting and mobilizing sympathizers, but they are also unable to identify, interpret and mediate societal demands (Van Biezen and Poguntke 2014), eventually fuelling anti-party feelings and dissatisfaction with democracy and politics in general.

Less pessimistic points of view acknowledge that most parties have reacted to their challenging environment, actually implementing several innovations for preserving their organizations. As state public subsidies and free access to broadcasting public networks are the most frequent reactions, some argue that formal membership has become unnecessary for contemporary parties. However, active participation by ordinary people may continue to be useful for at least two reasons. First, members are still crucial for party activities – such as electoral campaigns – even now that digital campaigns promote the hybridization between online and offline activism (Römmele and Gibson 2020; Chadwick and Stromer-Galley 2016). Second, a (relatively) large membership base contributes to strengthening the legitimacy of the policy positions put forward by the party, both in office and in electoral campaigns. In addition, besides the usual formal enrolment based on the payment of a fee, innovative forms of ‘light’ membership have been recently developed. These initiatives offer less demanding modes of engagement in intra-party activities, thus reshaping the role of party members (Scarow 2015).

In this article, we aim to clarify the possible consequences brought by the coexistence of different types of party supporters. In particular, we look at the role and behaviours of members and sympathizers in a crucial intra-party process, namely the selection of the party leader. This is possible in the case of parties using open primaries for the selection of their top position, because this type of intra-party democracy instrument integrates both formally enrolled affiliates and more loosely

associated supporters. The Italian Democratic Party (Partito Democratico – PD) is thus one of the most pertinent empirical case studies to explore the way members and sympathizers are integrated in a party. While maintaining a prominent role for its formal members, this left-wing party also provides for the participation of ordinary people in internal decisions concerning candidate and leadership selection. Consequently, we investigate the role of registered affiliates and loosely engaged supporters in four open primary elections – where full members still maintain an important role – organised by the PD since 2009 to 2019 to select its party leader.

The article is structured as follows. The next section details the relevant literature on intra-party democracy, and the expectations that derive from its gaps in terms of membership role and functions. Then we outline the case of the PD through an analysis of its statutes and a descriptive analysis of members and supporters’ rights and obligations. We then provide details about our data and methods. Section 4 presents our analyses of four internal ballots in order to empirically assess the respective roles of members and sympathizers in our case study. The final section sums up the results of the analyses and discusses some implications for the existing theories about party organizations and political participation.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Political parties are struggling to recruit new party members. Even among those that are already affiliated, the degree of involvement and engagement in intra-party activities is shrinking (Van Biezen, Mair and Poguntke 2012). Some scholars have raised concerns in this respect as these declining trends challenge the very future of political parties (Gauja 2014).

In order to respond to such challenges, political parties have introduced some internal reforms. Most of these innovations are aimed at broadening the potential membership base, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, at strengthening the rights and powers of formal affiliates. More precisely, these initiatives are often intended to widen the range of participatory repertoires, by offering lighter, less stable – and to some extent less demanding – modes of engagement in intra-party activities. These organizational innovations reshaped the role of party members within political organizations. Moreover, Scarow (2015) points out that parties are increasingly promoting forms of multi-speed membership. While – at least nominally – individual members have been empowered with new rights, political parties have also lowered the financial costs and simplified the procedures for formally enrolling (van Haute and Gauja 2015). This implies that the

modalities of affiliations are extended beyond the mere party membership to other categories, such as registered party friends, supporters or sympathizers (Scarrows 2015).

This process towards internal inclusiveness re-defines the incentives for enrolment within political parties. Traditionally, literature has addressed this issue by referring to collective, selective and emotional incentives as the main motives underpinning (and driving) partisan involvement and commitment (Gomez et al. 2020). However, lowering the entry barriers for party membership attracts those that are seeking more flexible and less demanding forms of party membership (Poletti et al. 2019). Yet, despite the lower level of commitment, they often enjoy powers and influence on the party's decisions as much as full members (Kosiara-Pedersen et al. 2017). In other words, full members are losing the monopoly of membership rights (Sandri and von Nostitz 2021). Sharing their rights with less involved affiliates in the long run may frustrate their sense of partisan belonging, reducing the incentives for engagement in intra-party activities (Seddone and Sandri 2020).

Political parties have also empowered traditional members with unprecedented privileges, giving them a say in intra-party decisions such as the selection of candidates and party leaders (Cross and Katz 2013). Primary elections, in this respect, certainly constitute one of the most common examples of this process of strengthening the openness and inclusiveness of party internal procedures (Rahat and Hazan 2001; Pilet and Cross 2014; Cross and Pilet 2015). The growing interest in these forms of intra-party democracy is related to the crisis of legitimacy threatening political parties. The promotion of procedures of intra-party democracy could be interpreted as an attempt to respond (and possibly reverse) the feelings of disaffection with politics and dissatisfaction with political parties in particular (Sandri et al. 2015). Suffering from a loss of legitimacy, new participatory repertoires are introduced in the attempt to (re-)vitalize intraparty life and (re-)gain trust from supporters. In this respect, literature has underlined that the emphasis on the participatory and inclusive aspects of primaries may contribute to the improvement of the public image of the party itself (Bobba 2016). Likewise, some studies point out that these peculiar mechanisms for selecting political elites are often promoted as a way to reacting to a temporary crisis such as, for example, a response to electoral failure or leadership crisis (Pilet and Cross 2014).

However, scholars are quite sceptical about whether these mechanisms are truly capable of triggering processes of transparency and democracy within political parties (Ignazi 2020). In this respect, two dimensions have to be taken into account: the type of

nomination at stake and the degree of inclusiveness. As concerns the latter, when talking about primaries two main bodies may be involved in the selection process: party members, in case of closed primaries, and party sympathizers, in case of open primaries when participation does not require any formal enrolment. Executive party bodies, middle-level elites, delegates in congress that are usually involved in more exclusive selection procedures have no role or power – at least not formally – in the process. With regards to the kind of nomination at stake, primaries may be implemented for selecting both electoral and party offices. While in terms of process and rules the differences are little Ware (2018) and Kenig et al. (2015) underline that in case of primaries for party leadership, the potential impact on party organization is greater. Candidates who get their nominations through primaries must then take part in election of common law. When party leadership is at stake, instead, primaries are the main (and definitive) event. Primaries for party leadership take on the meaning of a direct election, and it is precisely at this point where scholars argue that inclusive selections of party leaders may entail the risk of integrating plebiscitary dynamics into party structures. Leaders may rely on legitimacy coming directly from a wider (and external) selectorate, and they would thus be freed from the control by the party organization.

Furthermore, some scholars have pointed out that primaries may also entail the risk of disappointing the most active party members. Indeed, the very principle of primaries is inclusiveness, where all party members (in case of closed primaries) or even sympathizers (in case of open primaries) are allowed to have a say in intra-party decision-making (Bernardi et al. 2017). Primaries put all selectors on an equal footing. In the end, empowering those who are less interested in committing to intra-party activities could trigger dissatisfaction among the most engaged members. This dynamic is even more emphasized during open primaries where sympathizers are entitled to participate in crucial party decision-making just as party members (Seddone and Sandri 2020). In addition, party members' voice ends up diluted within the larger selectorate composed of sympathizers not formally enrolled and not even willing to be involved in partisan activities. This may contribute to further frustrating their sense of party belonging and – eventually – to facilitating exit.

The recent literature on transformations of party grassroots theorizes that the variation in modes of party affiliation affects not only elites' strategies for recruiting but also the participatory behaviours of each type of affiliate (Scarrows 2015). However, the literature has mostly focused on the effects of modes of affiliation on the degree of internal activism, or on other dimensions of intra-party democracy (Ignazi 2020; Achury et al. 2020; Kosiara-Pedersen et al.

2017). What remains understudied is how these forms of multi-speed membership interact with other internal party processes and in particular on the relationship between members and party elites. We aim at addressing this empirical and theoretical gap in the literature by exploring whether party members and sympathizers in internally democratic parties have aligned on participatory and electoral patterns in internal ballots or, conversely, their diverse commitment in party organization also implies diverse voting strategies. This would allow us to assess whether different types of affiliates interact differently with party elites and whether the blurring of party societal boundaries affects membership behaviours.

While our analysis is purely explorative and not inferential, some expectations from the above-mentioned literature could be drawn. We expect tensions arising between party supporters and formal affiliates in the case of open primary elections (Seddone and Sandri 2020) would lead to different patterns of engagement within the party by members and sympathizers, in terms both of internal ballots' turnout and voting choices. In addition, these tensions would affect the degree of competitiveness of the internal elections, with closed primaries producing a smaller margin between candidates and open primaries resulting in more plebiscitary outcomes.

### 3. THE CASE STUDY: THE ITALIAN PARTITO DEMOCRATICO

#### 3.1 The PD's grassroots organizations: from affiliates to supporters

The Italian PD is well suited for exploring the above-mentioned questions since it has involved its affiliates and supporters in open primaries for almost two decades now, and the party involves both party supporters and enrolled members in internal decision-making (Pasquino and Valbruzzi 2016; Sandri and Seddone 2015). Also, the PD is the only Italian party that adopted both democratization reforms and primary elections during the past few years. The PD was created in 2007 with the merger of the leftist, post-communist party 'Democrats of the Left' (Democristiani di Sinistra, DS, previously called 'PDS') and the centre-left party 'The Daisy' (La Margherita) (see Bordandini et al. 2008). What makes the PD case particularly interesting for the purposes of this paper is the fact that the party is the heir of both the Catholic and communist political cultures and of their mass-based organizational settings. Moreover, the PD is currently the most important left-wing Italian party. Its central offices operating at national level are organized quite traditionally, adapting the old mass-

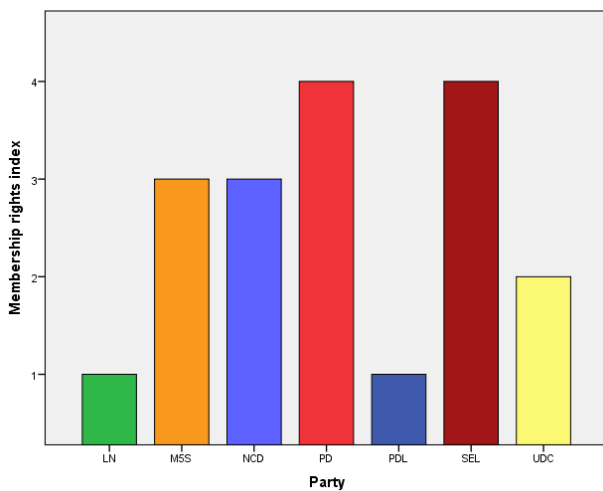
based party structures to the 21<sup>st</sup> century context. In fact, the party is led by a national secretary, the National Assembly is a large board in charge for the main decisions, while the National Direction and the executive committee are smaller councils appointed to manage the routine party life.

If compared to other Italian parties, the PD has not only reserved a broad set of rights and privileges for its formally enrolled members, but also attributes a few important rights to the above-mentioned 'electors', which correspond to the category of 'supporters' or 'sympathizers' in other European parties (Scarrow 2015). While no Italian party provides the possibility for its members to directly participate in party conventions nor in the selection of party central executive bodies, the PD's affiliates can select the delegates for the party convention. In addition, the PD's statutes provide the possibility for party members to select – via closed primaries – representatives for the National Assembly, the legislative body of the party. Moreover, the PD's enrolled members are endowed with the right to directly participate in the formulation of the electoral manifesto or other policy positions. The PD's statutes also entail the possibility of holding internal referenda on specific policy issues. The party similarly gives its members the right of receiving on a regular basis information on party activities, strategies and mandates. Concerning members' obligations, the PD also details the duties of its affiliates in its statutes, such as the obligation for all members to get involved in internal and electoral campaign activities. Comparatively speaking, while Italian parties feature significant variations in their organizational settings, especially regarding the role of members and intra-party democracy patterns, the PD is the party that gives more privileges to its members (at least until the recent revisions to the Five Star Movement's internal statutes). Using 2015 data from Sandri and von Nostitz (2021) on five Italian parliamentary parties<sup>1</sup> we evaluated the extent of the PD's affiliated members' rights and obligations. Figures 1 and 2 show the two indexes for measuring rights and obligations allocated to full-members: these variables are measured through two cumulative indexes of obligations imposed (0 to 4) and privileges distributed (0 to 8) to formal members (Cronbach's alpha: 0.26 and 0.77). The higher the individual score, the more extensive rights and/or more obligations full-members have. We look at the following rights: right to stand as candidate for elected office, to attend the party congress without being a delegate, to vote at the party congress, to call the party congress, to select the party national executive organ, to select parliamentary candidates, to select presidential or prime ministerial (or, generally, chief-executive) candidates, and to select the party leader. We explored the following obligations: to pay an inscription fee; to go through a probation phase, to adhere to party rules/principles; and to be involved regularly in party activities. These indexes provide a

valuable proxy concerning the level of both intraparty democracy, parties' organizational models and the relationship between members and leadership.

**Figure 1.**

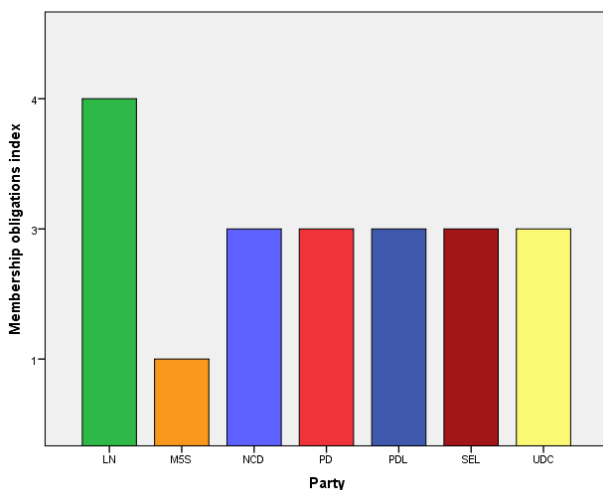
*Membership rights in Italian parties (2015).*



Source: Sandri and von Nostitz (2021)

**Figure 2.**

*Membership obligations in Italian parties (2015).*



Source: Sandri and von Nostitz (2021)

While the PD's sympathizers do not enjoy the same amount of rights and obligations of affiliates, they can participate in most party activities, they are also involved in internal ballots such as those for selecting the party candidates for election of leader, and they can stand as candidates for elected office for the party. This suggests that, while intra-party democracy measures such as open primaries can be beneficial for improving the party image and mobilizing support between elections, this kind of degree of organizational permeability and the growing evidence of recurrent pathologies related to the use of primaries by Italian parties might lead to forms of 'plebiscitary' intra-party democracy (Scarrow et al. 2017).

### 3.2 The PD's primary elections: the rules

What is significantly innovative in the party's organizational structures is the degree of internal democracy and more specifically the leadership selection method (Fasano and Natale 2017; Pasquino and Venturino 2010; 2014; De Luca and Fasano 2018; Rombi and Serricchio 2019). First, the statutes state that the access to all party offices is decided by 'members and electors' (Venturino 2015: 36). By so doing, the PD has gone beyond the solutions adopted by many European parties during the 'democratic revolution' begun in the Sixties. Since then, several parties have made increasing use of internal democracy, giving a say to their members in their internal affairs. By enfranchising both members and electors, the PD has given a say in crucial internal matters to both – very different – grassroots groups and encouraged adopting a larger than usual leadership selectorate. Moreover, the label 'electors' in the party statutes identifies a set of people that is larger than the number of citizens eligible to vote in parliamentary elections, as it includes citizens aged 16 years and older, as well as regularized immigrants. These 'electors' must register as party 'supporters' on primary election day, with the party keeping a more or less updated supporters' inventory (Sandri and Seddone 2015). In practice, through these provisions the PD has institutionalised the use of open, American-style primary elections.

Open primaries have been routinely used by the PD to select both candidates for elections and officials for party roles. Referring to the latter, the national party leader – known as *Segretario Nazionale* – is appointed for a four-year term renewable only once. For this selection, an original mixed method is envisaged involving three different selectorates<sup>2</sup>. First, aspirants endorsed by 10 per cent of the outgoing National Assembly, or alternatively by at least 1,500 enrolled members, are voted by the whole membership. The three most supported aspirants are admitted to the following open primaries, given that they have gained 5 per cent of the members' votes<sup>3</sup>. Second, all electors are enfranchised to vote in the open primaries, which are not used to directly select the leader. Rather, primary voters cast a ballot to elect the National Assembly, a permanent party board that here has the role of an electoral college. To allow voters to express their preferences, aspirant leaders promote closed and gender-balanced list of candidates, competing through a PR electoral system. The third and final selector is the National Assembly, which can play a different role according to the results of the primaries'. Had an aspirant gained a majority of delegates, then s/he is simply acknowledged as the new party leader, while if the most voted aspirant gained less than 50 per cent of

delegates then a runoff takes place between the top two aspirants. In this circumstance, the role of the National Assembly as party leader selector would be far from ceremonial, but this case has never occurred.

The activation of an inclusive selectorate of thousands or millions of potential voters requires a greater effort by the involved party. Unquestionably, this is the case with the open primaries, which need months to be planned, organized, and finally held. Thus, primaries cannot be used in emergency, and political parties based on an inclusive method of selection usually empower an alternative and smaller selectorate to quickly pick a new leader when under pressure, which is often a party council. This is the case of the PD's statutes, which give the National Assembly an important power. Firstly, a majority of the delegates may deselect the serving leader before of the end of his/her four-year term, and in such a case a new selection is immediately called to elect a new Assembly and a new leader. Secondly, and of greater relevance here, if the serving leader gives up the Assembly, they are able to elect a new leader to conclude the current term; if the leader resigns after a disagreement with a party council, then a two-thirds majority is requested.

It should be noted that in 2019 the National Assembly changed some relevant rules concerning the party leader selection process. The new set of rules will be applied for the next leader selection scheduled in 2023<sup>4</sup>. However, the general framework for leader selection is maintained even after the current reform.

### 3.3 The PD's primary elections: the races

The leaders of the PD may be then selected through open primaries, which constitutes the usual process, or alternatively by a party council under exceptional circumstances. Table 1 details the Democratic leaders who have served since the party's launch in 2007 and their actual selectors<sup>5</sup>. In the period between 2007-2021, due to the two mandates of Matteo Renzi, nine leaders alternated for ten terms. Notably, no leader has so far completed his four-year term. As discernible in the last column, this exceptional leadership instability is due to the electoral failures upsetting many European mainstream parties in the last decade. Moreover, the PD's leadership instability may also be explained by the challenges of managing a heavily factionalized party with few organizational incentives to keep the intraparty conflict under control (Florida 2019). For instance, Walter Veltroni resigned after a defeat at the regional election in Sardinia, which however came in a row of negative results, including the 2008 parliamentary election. Pier Luigi Bersani also gave up after the disappointing result in the 2013 general election

(Seddone and Venturino 2015). Matteo Renzi – then also Prime Minister – first resigned in 2017 when a referendum rejected the constitutional reform he was strongly committed to, and then in 2018 after another unsuccessful parliamentary election<sup>6</sup>. Similarly, in 2020 Nicola Zingaretti resigned in March 2021 due to intra-party factional conflicts and pressures.

Table 2 reports some descriptives on the leader selections organised by the PD so far. Beside the first race gained by Walter Veltroni in 2007, disputed under atypical rules, the role of party members has been negligible in some cases. In fact, in 2009 and 2017 only three candidates were fielded from the first stage, therefore no screening took place, even though in principle it could occur that a candidate fails to reach the 5 per cent threshold, and therefore only two are then enabled to run the second round. Instead, in 2013 and 2017 respectively one and three aspirants have been barred by the members' vote. The last column of Table 2 shows that the front-runner has always won a majority of votes in the open primaries. This evidence seems to support the claim by Kenig (2008) that inclusive selectorates are correlated with a low level of competitiveness. However, there are remarkable differences between the very large percentage gained by Veltroni in 2007 and the lesser margin won by Bersani in 2009. Moreover, in three out of the four comparable cases the percentage of the elected leader is larger in the open than in the closed primaries stage. The 2009 selection won by Pier Luigi Bersani is once more the exception, as the candidate has been voted by the party members more than by electors at large.

## 4. RESULTS

We aim to clarify whether party members and sympathizers have aligned in their respective voting patterns in intra-party elections or, conversely, their diverse commitment in the party organization also implied dissimilar voting strategies. We address this question by means of aggregate data referring to turnout and competitiveness. Data are organized at regional level and account for the four leadership selections held since 2009 to 2019. Our analyses investigate the degree of congruence in participatory and voting behaviour between party members and sympathizers. First, we are interested in assessing whether the two groups have participated in internal ballots in a similar way over the years. Accordingly, we compared the levels of turnout in the four leadership selections distinguishing between closed and open primaries. The aim is to understand whether participatory responses in closed and open primaries have followed similar patterns. Concerning the variation in voting behaviour, we relied on measures of competitiveness as a proxy of the concentration of consensus around a single candidate.

**Table 1.**  
*The leaders of the PD, 2007-2021*

Party leader	Term	Method of selection	Term conclusion
Walter Veltroni	27 October 2007 to 21 February 2009	Open primaries	Electoral defeat
Dario Franceschini	21 February 2009 to 7 November 2009	National Assembly	New selection
Pier Luigi Bersani	7 November 2009 to 20 April 2013	Open primaries	Electoral defeat
Guglielmo Epifani	11 May 2013 to 15 December 2013	National Assembly	New selection
Matteo Renzi	15 December 2013 to 19 February 2017	Open primaries	Electoral defeat
Matteo Orfini <sup>a</sup>	19 February 2017 to 7 May 2017	Elite agreement	New selection
Matteo Renzi	7 May 2017 to 12 March 2018	Open primaries	Electoral defeat
Maurizio Martina <sup>b</sup>	12 March 2018 to 17 November 2018	National Assembly	New selection
Nicola Zingaretti	17 March 2019 to 4 March 2021	Open primaries	Internal pressures
Enrico Letta <sup>c</sup>	Since 14 March 2021	National Assembly	Still serving

a: acting party leader; b: acting party leader until 7 July 2018; c: still serving.

**Table 2.**  
*The primary elections of the PD, descriptive analyses*

Year	Winner	Closed primaries		Open primaries	
		Number of candidates	Winner votes	Number of candidates	Winner votes
2007	Walter Veltroni	–	–	5	75.8
2009	Pier Luigi Bersani	3	55.1	3	53.2
2013	Matteo Renzi	4	45.3	3	67.6
2017	Matteo Renzi	3	66.7	3	69.2
2019	Nicola Zingaretti	6	47.4	3	66.0

Source: CLS-Candidate and Leader Selection

It should be noted that the results of the first stage of the leader's selection race, which is reserved only to party members, are often deeply influenced by the ability of the various leaders of the different party factions to guide and "control" the vote of the enrolled party members (the so-called "*correnti organizzate*"). This control is more difficult to exert on the large numbers of voters of the open primary. Thus, the different results between closed and open primaries, with the latter more prone to producing a "plebiscitary" output, can also be related to the degree by which party élites reach an agreement on a candidate or, otherwise, decide to opt for a more "open conflict" (Vercesi and Salvati 2018). In addition, when analysing the relationship between closed and open primaries, it should be considered that results from party members' choices could affect the sympathizers. In fact, the vote in closed primaries could serve as a voting cue for those who are uncertain on which candidate to choose in the open ballot.

In order to verify the possible congruence between registered members and supporters not enrolled in party organization, we assessed to what extent these different selectorates converged on the same candidate, and whether these candidates obtained a similar degree of consensus in open or closed

primaries. Then, we calculated the closeness in both closed and open primaries for each region, obtaining a measure of competitiveness. The difference in percentage points of the votes obtained by the two most voted candidates allowed us to understand the degree of the leadership race's closeness and thus also the kind of convergence of the different electorates around a candidate. Indeed, high levels of closeness will correspond to scarcely competitive contests, where voters tend to aggregate around the same candidate; conversely, lower levels of closeness would suggest that voters are divided. A different degree of closeness in closed and open primaries would imply a difference between party members' and sympathizers' preferences.

#### 4.1 Members and sympathizers: cross-time participatory patterns

By adopting a longitudinal perspective, Figure 3 details the size of the PD's party membership and open primaries' participation. In the space of approximately twelve years, the PD has reduced its number of affiliates by half. In 2007, with nearly one million members, the PD was one of the largest organizations in Western Europe. This figure accounted for the two founding parties' registered members – Democratici

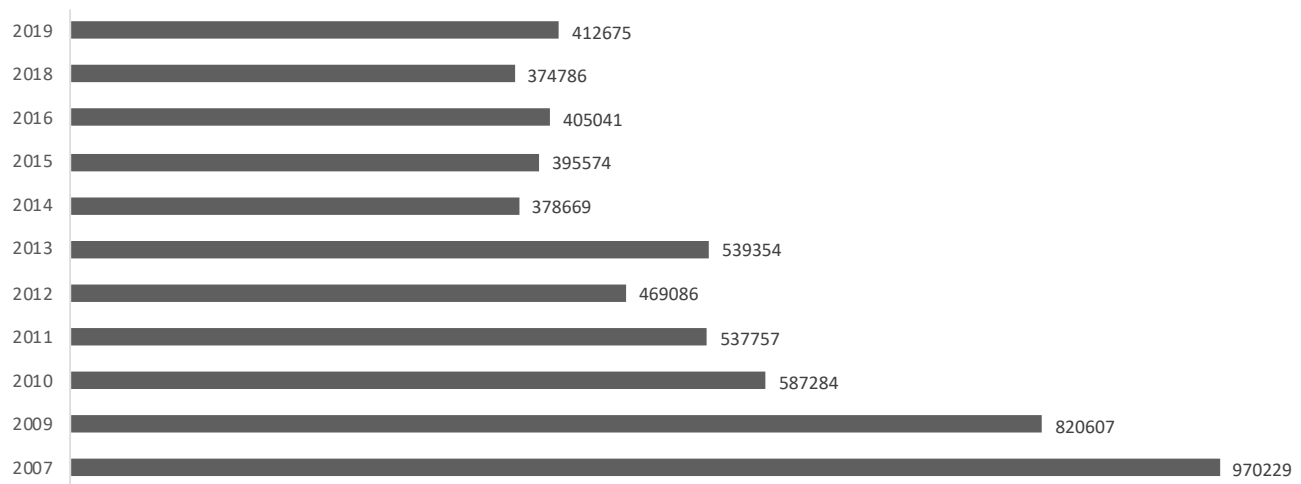
di Sinistra (DS) and La Margherita. However, at the end of the first recruitment campaign promoted by the new-born party, the number of affiliates has diminished by about 15%. Furthermore, since then, figures present a progressive (and not that slow) drop. To be precise, between 2013 and 2014, the party suffers from a severe decline in the number of enrolments, with a loss of about 30% of members. After 2014, data seem to stabilize but still point to a dramatic failure in recruiting new affiliates.

Figure 4 reports data on national turnout in closed primaries. The number of registered members participating in the first phase of the leadership selection has steadily decreased since 2009. In

particular, the number dropped by more than half. Furthermore, the participation rate<sup>7</sup> confirms that the loss of mobilization capacity in closed primaries is not just a mechanical effect of the general crisis in recruiting (and maintaining) affiliates. Besides the drop in the absolute number of registered members, figures suggest a growing disaffection among militants: while in 2009 about 57% of the party members cast their ballot in closed primaries, after ten years this quota falls to about 42%.

Figure 5 focuses on open primaries and confirms a similar pattern. In 2007 the unexpected success in the open primaries – with about 3.5 million participants – has been interpreted as a support for

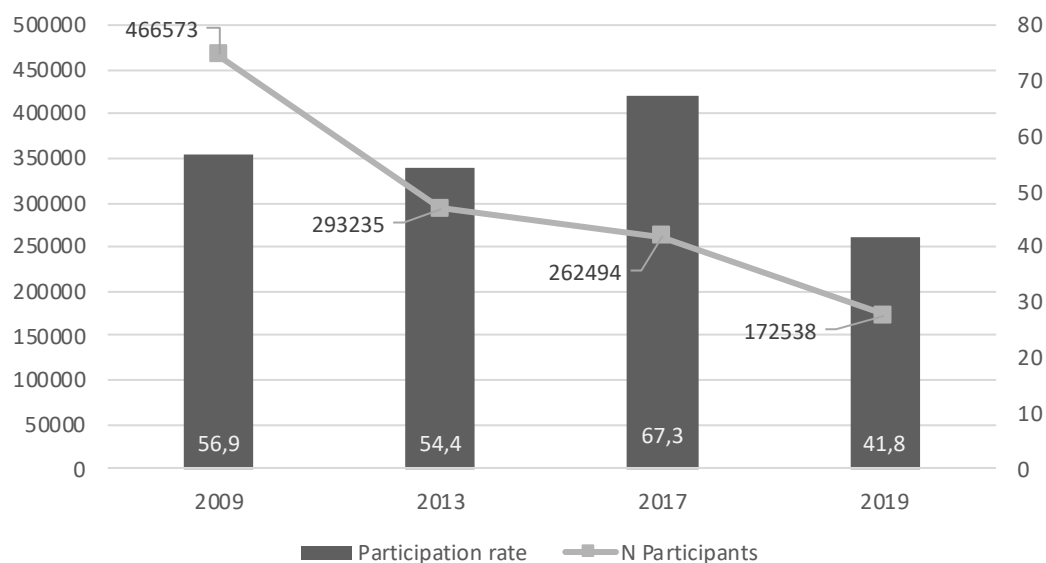
**Figure 3.**  
*The membership of the PD, 2007-2019*



Note: data on 2008 and 2017 are missing and have been estimated, respectively, as the average between 2007-2009 and 2016-2018.

Source: Our adaptation from Sandri et al. 2015.

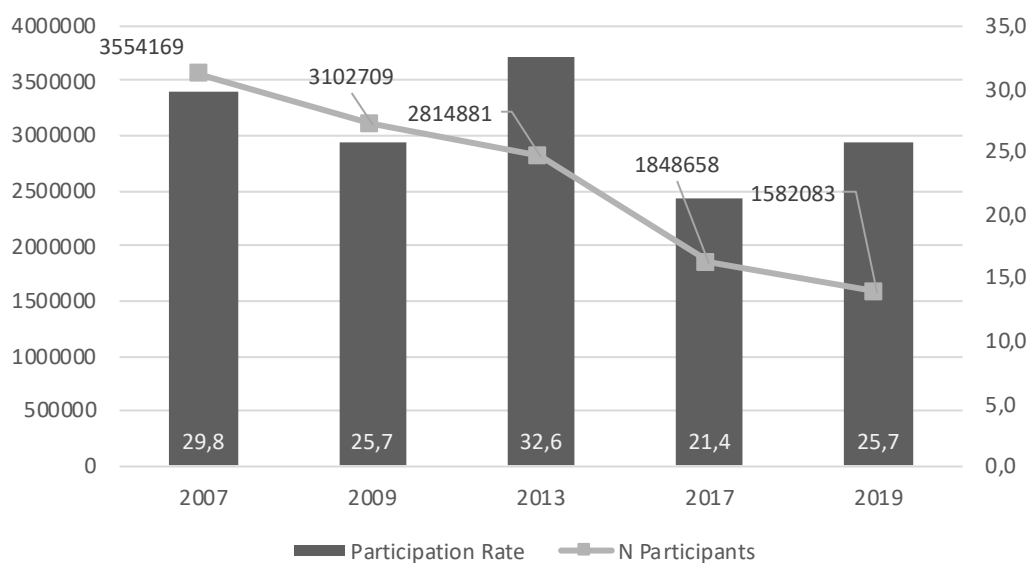
**Figure 4.**  
*Turnout in closed primaries organised by the PD, 2009-2019*



Note: figures for 2017 are an estimate.



**Figure 5.**  
*Turnout in open primaries promoted by the PD, 2007-2019*



this inclusive tool, at that time a true novelty in the Italian political environment (Sandri and Seddone 2015). Nonetheless, the initial enthusiasm faded away quite rapidly. While in 2009 we can see minor signals of a decrease in turnout, the declining pattern became extremely evident in 2013 – when for the first time the total number of selectors fell below three million – and is confirmed in 2017 with a further loss of about 1 million voters. The decrease in participation continued in 2019, with only 1.5 million participants. Looking at the participation rate<sup>8</sup>, the picture changes a bit. While the primary event is losing some attractiveness among members, sympathizers – despite some fluctuations – still maintain a certain interest in participating in leadership selection. In 2007, slightly fewer than 30% of the party electorate participated in open primaries. After only two years the turnout dropped, but more than a quarter of the PD voters took part in the 2009 open primary election. Participation rates peak in 2013 when almost one-third of the electors were involved, but a few years later, in 2017, participation rates decrease to 21.4%. A positive signal comes in 2019, when the participation increases back to 2009 levels.

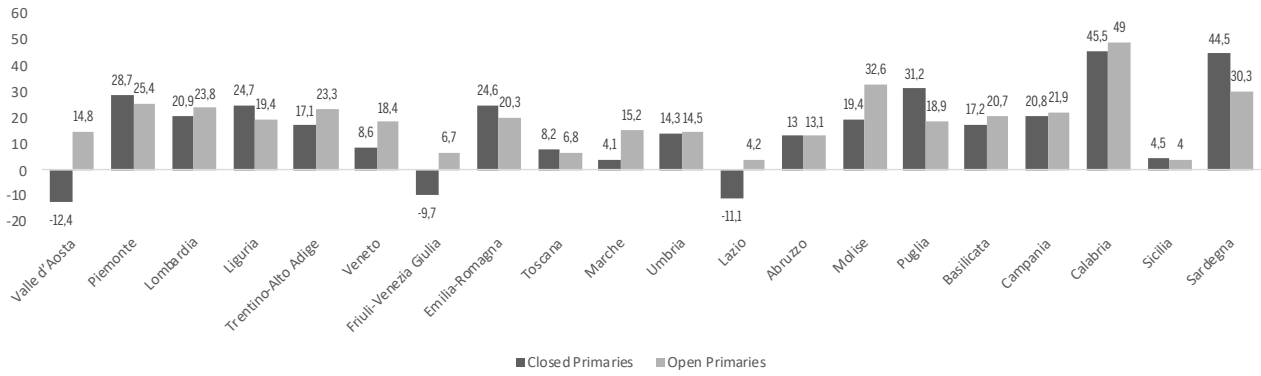
In general, the data suggests a declining mobilization response among both registered members and sympathizers. Figures, indeed, show that the number of participants in both the primaries' stages are constantly decreasing, and the same applies to the rate of participation. In closed primaries, the quota of registered affiliates participating in the first step of the leadership selection is below half of enrolled members. It should, furthermore, be noticed that this ratio is calculated on a smaller base – given the crisis in membership recruiting. Likewise, the participation rate in open primaries has to be interpreted in the light of a massive loss of voters in general elections.

#### 4.2 Comparing competitiveness in closed and open primaries

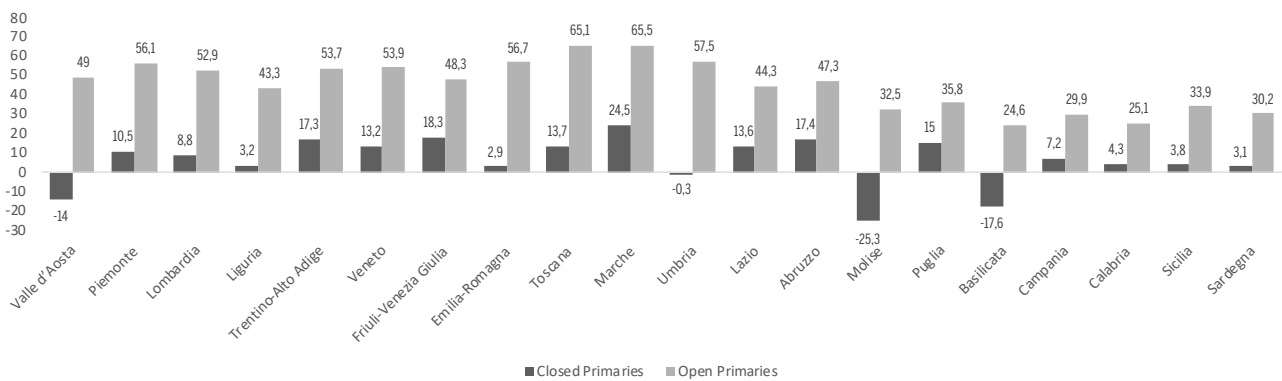
The level of competitiveness is usually used as an estimate of the divisiveness brought by a leadership selection within the party organization. Competitive races are said to harm intra-party cohesion. When the voting shares of the two most voted candidate are close, a large number of the loser's supporters may develop a sentiment of disgruntlement, leading them to voice their disappointment or even to exit the party by supporting other parties (e.g., Venturino and Seddone 2020; Wichowsky and Niebler 2010; Kenney and Rice 1987; Southwell 1986; Hacker 1965). However, here we look at competitiveness from a different perspective. In the context of the multi-stage procedure involving different selectorates portrayed above, competitiveness allows the exploration of the congruence between members and sympathizers. When these two selectorates are aligned, and their voting patterns supporting the leader are congruent, the party cohesion will be strengthened. As closed primaries are the first step of the leadership selection procedure, open primaries determine the result to be acknowledged by the party national assembly. This implies that, in case of divergence between the two main selectorates, the open primary outcome prevails while party members lose their voice. Likewise, different competitive patterns suggest that registered members and sympathizers are not aligned in their view on party leadership with implications at the organizational level. In closed primaries ending with a small margin between candidates and plebiscitary outcomes in open primaries, there is the risk of organizational divisions and internal conflicts among affiliates.

As mentioned above, within the range of the many indexes provided in literature for measuring the

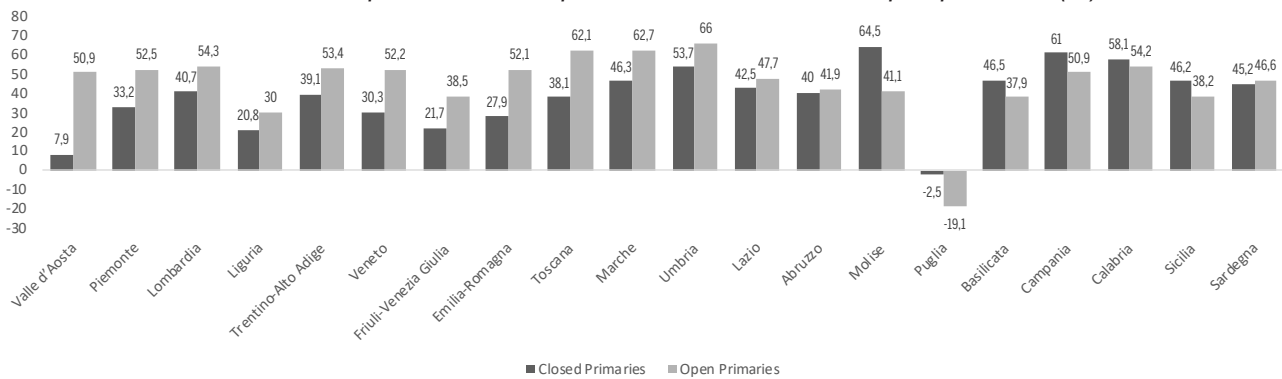
**Figure 6.**  
2009 leadership selection, competitiveness in closed and open primaries (%)



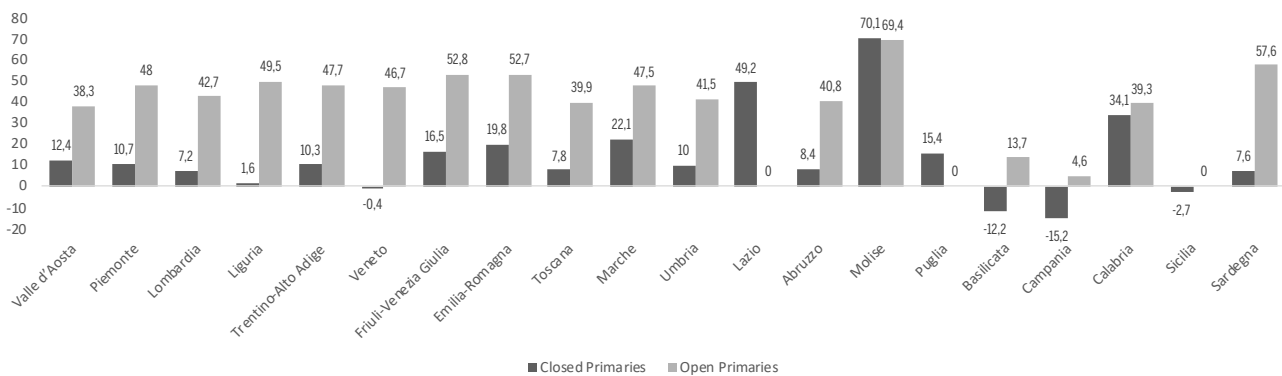
**Figure 7.**  
2013 leadership selection, competitiveness in closed and open primaries (%)



**Figure 8.**  
2017 leadership selection, competitiveness in closed and open primaries (%)



**Figure 9.**  
2019 leadership selection, competitiveness in closed and open primaries (%)



competitiveness, we opted for the closeness<sup>9</sup>, calculated in each region as the difference between the vote share obtained by the national winner and the regional runner-up. Figures 6 to 9 present the degree of closeness in closed and open primaries held, respectively, in 2009, 2013, 2017, and 2019<sup>10</sup>. Starting with Figure 6, it is easy to see that in 2009, with few exceptions, the margins between the winning candidate and the runner-up are quite similar in both closed and open primaries. In 2009, both party members and sympathizers aligned in supporting the same candidate – Pier Luigi Bersani – at the party's head.

This pattern is totally reversed when looking at closeness referring to the 2013 leadership selection (see Figure 7). The plebiscitary consensus obtained by the winning candidate from the inclusive selectorate does not correspond to closed primaries' competitive scenario. Indeed, the closeness in open primaries ranges between 24.6 percentage points (Basilicata) and 65.5 percentage points (Marche). Instead, party members' backing is by far less cohesive and supportive of the winning candidate. Even if Matteo Renzi is confirmed as the winner in all regions (with the only exceptions of Valle d'Aosta, Molise, and Basilicata), the comparison between closed and open primaries reveals that the two selectorates did not align on a common pattern. Interestingly, in 2017 – when Renzi ran for a second time as the incumbent party leader – the picture is (again) changed (see Figure 8). The two selectorates converged, displaying quite similar patterns of competition – Puglia being the only exception in this case<sup>11</sup>. Moreover, the closeness level is similar in all regions, with large margins between the winner and the runner-up. The landslide success obtained by the incumbent hints at the realignment between party members and sympathizers and suggests that the leader could rely on a large legitimacy from both inside and outside the party.

Nonetheless, this was quite a precarious conjuncture. As mentioned above, Renzi's second term at the head of the party ended with his resignation. In 2019 a new leadership race was organized. Nicola Zingaretti was appointed as the head of the party. Figure 9 shows a more nuanced picture, where affiliates and sympathizers present quite different voting patterns. The levels of competitiveness in closed and open primaries suggests that the two selectorates did not converge. The large margins between the winner and the runner-up confirm robust support for the winning candidate among sympathizers. With regards to closed primaries, party members, instead, diverge as demonstrated by the lower scores of the closeness indicator in most regions. The plebiscitary drive characterizing the inclusive selectorate is not congruent with the voting patterns among affiliates.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The aim of this paper was to explore the influence of affiliates and sympathizers on inclusive leadership selections. The literature has often stressed how the promotion of intra-party democracy measures by parties was aimed at activating new participatory channels while reviving internal activism. In a logic of multispeed membership, where different degrees of intensity of affiliation are possible, intra-party democracy procedures also make it possible to exercise unprecedented prerogatives. Open primaries, in particular, provide both members and sympathizers with similar powers, even in the face of unequal commitment. The risk is that this very asymmetry in the role of members and sympathizers will trigger mechanisms of dissatisfaction destined to weaken – rather than strengthen – the relationship between the party and its militants. Moreover, open selectorates may entail plebiscitary mechanisms while weakening party organization. First, the voice of the membership would be diluted in a broader selectorate composed of sympathizers. Second, inclusive selection mechanisms, such as open primaries, would imply a direct legitimation of the leadership, weakening the so-called middle-level elites and, in the end, disengaging the leaders from their own organization.

Relying on the case of the Italian PD, we analysed the participatory and competitive in four leader selections (since 2009 to 2019). These cases are intriguing because they rely on a hybrid method of election allowing to directly compare the behaviours of different party supporters, namely members and sympathizers.

We expected that sympathizers and party members to be characterized by diverse patterns of engagement within the party, in terms both of internal ballots' turnout and voting choices. More precisely, we expected that closed and open primaries led to diverse competitive patterns, where closed primaries resulted in smaller margins between candidates, while open primaries brought about more plebiscitary outcomes. By examining the choices they opted for through aggregate data – respectively in closed and open primaries – we have ascertained that, actually, these complementary selectorates have only partially converged along the same lines. To the extent that turnout is at stake, we witnessed a steady downward trend affecting both types of primaries, matching a similar tendency concerning the number of formally enrolled Democratic members. The comparative investigation of the levels of competitiveness has, instead, provided a mixed evidence. Although a clear trend is difficult to find, votes cast by party members in closed primaries often results in contests that are more competitive, while open primaries involving sympathizers not formally enrolled are more likely to

generate plebiscitary results with very large margins advantaging the elected leader. This latter finding implies that party leaders may rely on larger support outside the party (among sympathizers) rather than inside the party (among party members).

These results provide empirical support for some of the most debated topics in the field of intra-party democracy. Following the introduction of primaries – and by extension of other inclusive methods of election – leaders can rely on a large investiture coming from less involved party supporters. Hence, a strong leadership may bypass controls by middle-level party elites and designated party bodies, eventually damaging internal pluralism and the rights of internal minorities (Ignazi 2020). Seemingly, other less inclusive methods – such as closed primaries – entail more competitive elections and reserve a stronger role for formally affiliated members within the party structures. As often happens, watchful politicians have to pay attention to possible trade-offs and to the unintended consequences of their choices.

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## NOTAS

- [1] PD, the League – NL, the Five Stars Movement, the extreme left – SEL, the small centrist party UDC – and the two center right parties New Centre Right - NCD and People of Freedom – PDL (now named Forza Italia).
- [2] The rules for the selection of PD leaders reported here are from the 2015 statute, and have been used until 2019.
- [3] All aspirants gaining 15 per cent of the members' votes are also admitted. As discussed below, this case never happened.
- [4] The party leader selection is regulated by article 12 of the statute approved in November 2019.
- [5] However, the primary election held in 2007 and won by Walter Veltroni was organized before the adoption of the first party statute. Provisional rules were used on that occasion, and never again afterward. The 2007 primaries are thus not comparable with the others. In all primaries but 2007, party members screened initial aspirants, and in all cases the winning candidate gained a majority of delegates. Consequently, the runoff between the two top candidates – envisaged when the most voted contender gains only a plurality of delegates – was never held, and the role of the National Assembly as a third selector intervening after members and electors was nullified.
- [6] As all PD leaders have resigned before the end of their four-year mandate as the consequence of an electoral defeat, the alternative method of selection based on the National Assembly has frequently been activated. Although the statutes empower the Assembly to select a new leader to complete the remaining part of the term, in practice all leaders selected under pressure have maintained their position only for the short time needed to organize the open primaries. Moreover, in two cases the National Assembly selected an acting – rather than a full – leader. These were the cases of Matteo Orfini, then the party president, and Maurizio Martina, then the national deputy-secretary, successively voted as a full leader. It should be added that the 2019 statute regulated this practice by commanding that, when necessary, the party president be designed as acting leader.
- [7] The participation rate in closed primaries has been calculated as the ratio between the number of participants in closed primaries and the number of affiliates of the party in that year. As data on party membership in 2017 are missing, we have made use of the estimate calculated in Figure 1.
- [8] The participation rate in open primaries has been calculated as the ratio between the number of voters in open primaries and the number of votes obtained by the Partito Democratico in previous elections for the Low Chamber (Camera dei Deputati). Accordingly, as concerns the 2007 open primaries, we have considered the votes gained by the Ulivo coalition, which gathered together both founding parties – Democratici di Sinistra and la Margherita; for the 2009 open primaries, we have considered the PD results in 2008 election; for both 2013 and 2017 open primaries we have considered the 2013 election; finally, for the 2019 open primaries, we have relied on the votes achieved by the PD in 2018 election.
- [9] Assessing the level of competitiveness of an election is not trivial. Among others, Kenig (2008) reviewed the most common indicators used in literature. First, when a challenger succeeds in defeating the incumbent leader, leadership selection is deemed highly competitive. Secondly, the number of candidates can be used, with a higher number of candidates implying greater competition. This measure may be critical when party leadership is at stake, because often

a single contender is running (Pilet and Cross 2014). A third measurement considers both the number of candidates running, as well as their electoral performances. In this respect, Kenig (2008) proposes adopting an adaptation of the Effective Number of Parties index by Laakso and Taagepera (1979) to measure the relative support received by each candidate in a leadership contest.

- [10] As concerns the 2019 leader selection, it should be noted that some data for open primaries are missing as they have not been released. This is the case of Lazio, Apulia, and Sicily.
- [11] The diverse competitive pattern registered in Puglia is due to Michele Emiliano's presence among the candidates. Emiliano was indeed the President of the Puglia Region and could rely on strong and cohesive support in that region.

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