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THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY: A JOURNEY TO BECOMING THE PARTY OF THE NATION

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A special akwnolegment to Prof. Lucetta Scarraffia,
for her invaluable insights on the Italian political trends and her
excellent bibliographic reccomendations.

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Few words from the Editors

The Next Left Country Case Studies is a relatively new publication series in the FEPS and Karl Renner Institute Next Left Research Programme, which is soon entering its 16th year of existence. This extraordinary collection is designed to provide readers with answers to reoccurring questions such as: *how are the other (sister) parties doing? What are the best examples that could be shared from their respective practices? Is their current situation resulting from a long-term process or just an electoral blip?* These and many other queries are covered in the volumes that are intentionally kept short and remain focused on social democratic parties and the specificities of the respective national contexts in which they operate. Although they are crafted with a mission to zoom in, they also provide incredibly valuable material that can enable comparative studies – being an innovative assemblage that feeds in an obvious void not only within the world of think tanks but also when it comes to contemporary academic writings.

The volume at hand is a most gripping history of the center-left in Italy, where after an infinite number of rather dramatic turning points, Partito Democratico (PD) emerged. To be able to diligently depict all the sudden plot twists, to capture their rationale and to resonate all the emotions accompanying the turning of the pages without overwhelming the readership takes a very skillful author. And Eleonora Poli is certainly the one, masterfully accomplishing the task of identifying all the factors that made progressive forces in Italy evolve and reach the point where

they find themselves now – becoming a party that is inclined to grow again and is led by such a charismatic and so unanticipated leader as Elly Schlein.

Evidently, Partito Democratico and its predecessors have been active within a specific national context and, hence after, in a particular political system. Poli refers to their uniqueness while examining the First, Second and Third Republics in a search for the factors that contributed to the party's evolution. Against this background, she investigates the center-left through a prism of its aspiration to be the *party of the nation*. This is, as she argues, the angle that allows us to understand why a party with a communist background could transform itself to a democratic left and, after this, also merge with center and even catholic political actors . And it is key to fully comprehend the PD developmental trajectory, which time after time has seen a tension between the need to develop a modern, long-term, cohesive ideological agenda and, in parallel, establish itself immediately by winning subsequent elections.

Furthermore, what makes the volume outstanding is that the exclusive focus on Italy and PD does not prevent the author from articulating important hypotheses that should be considered and may well be adequate when discussing the situation of other sister parties. To offer an example, Poli – herself a political economist – dives into the question of why the center left has been struggling amid accelerated globalization and growing inequalities. She takes upon the myth that providing the adequate answer to the previous and current crisis would by default fall into the strong competence of the progressive forces and busts it by pointing to parties' tendencies to flirt with neoliberalism at the beginning of the century and to arrive even to somewhat accepting the dogma of austerity in the aftermath of the financial crisis. Poli's criticism about the episodes characterized by abandoning the strive for social justice and prosperity for all and replacing it with a narrative focused

on individual rights is a well-thought-through anatomy of what went wrong, why the trust was lost and why it was possible for the right-wing extremists to step out of the shadows in such a constellation. But, as Poli points out, while the low points can occur – the real question is how much a party learns from them and in how far it is able to re-establish itself. And to that end, the study of Poli – shows also in an instructive manner how PD drew conclusions attempting to bounce back and how now it stands a fair chance to become again a modern party of which agenda is however yet again marked by such issues as fight against poverty and climate change, as also strive to modernize and reform the labour market and welfare system.

Consequently, Eleonora Poli, who currently works on the edge of politics and academia, being a well-established name in the world of think tanks, looks also at the prospects and the potential of the PD of the future. Her analyses show that despite the *grand experiment* that the founding of the party and the introduction of the open primaries definitely have been, the organization in itself remains still rather conventional and does not *per se* reflect the ambition to transform into a party of citizens. It remains a hierarchical structure, evolving closely in sync with the type of leadership that the party has at the given moment. These may make the party vulnerable to all the predicaments that the vast literature pertaining to the crisis of the traditional parties enlists. And what is interesting here is that it would seem that PD has grown vastly aware of that fact, as also conscious that it cannot rely on the old patterns of moblising the supporters and voters. That is especially that the turnout in the national elections continues dropping. PD of today is aware that it will need to find ways to build larger coalitions for change across diverse demographic groups, and that it will be a long political battle. In its course, PD – like other sister parties – will need to prove that it is able to respond to the aspirations and fears of the voters

with a values-driven, ambitious agenda, which still remains in sync with the responsible approach to politics and pragmatic stand on persisting limitations of governance.

To that end, this book by Eleonora Poli should become an indisputable *must-read* - not only because it encapsulates a well-structured rudimentary knowledge about one of the key parties in Europe amid its 30 years of evolution, but also because it serves as a great encouragement. In that sense, the final sentence of the book is a fantastic cliffhanger, stipulating that though there is no shortage of challenges – PD, like many other sister parties, is still in a position to make the right choices. And we dare hope that the political advice that is irresistibly embedded across these excellently written pages will help in identifying and facing them, crossing over to a new era marked by much-needed social democratic revival. *Attraversare e andare avanti*!

Brussels / Vienna, 1st October 2024

Executive summary

The outcome of the snap 2022 Italian national elections witnessed the triumph of extreme right-wing parties. The years that followed were anticipated to serve as a pivotal moment for the Democratic Party (*Partito Democratico*, PD) to rebuild trust among Italian citizens, especially in view of the European parliamentary elections, held in June 2024. So far, this path of regaining faith among voters does not seem to have been fully achieved, yet the trend is undoubtedly positive. At the European parliamentary elections, PD was not able to overcome Brothers of Italy (*Fratelli d'Italia*, 28.8% of the vote), yet with 24.1% of the vote and 21 seats, PD did perform well and much better than the majority of European left-wing parties. Considering multiple challenges that have been affecting PD, along with many other European left-wing parties, this analysis aims to scrutinise PD's evolution since its establishment in 2007 to identify the party's primary strengths and weaknesses and provide some recommendations on how to rejuvenate its political support. In particular, as a catalyst for the main trends and challenges faced by Italian social democrats, the analysis is focused exclusively on PD to provide a clear picture of the evolution of progressive politics in Italy.

Developed from a historical necessity and the revitalised ambition of the former Communist Party and exponents of the Christian Democrats, PD has persistently aspired to position itself as the party of the nation, bound, however, to the left-wing political spectrum. Since the beginning, PD has been challenged by the need to build an inclusive

political platform, while distancing itself from the legacy of the former Communist Party. Despite a thinner and more ambiguous ideological background and a partial loss of its social foothold, PD aimed to build a socially inclusive political organisation and maintain contact with the broader public. In this respect, it developed a modern political structure by introducing an innovative primary election system to allow all citizens, not just party members or supporters, to democratically select its leader, the party secretary.

Moreover, PD has not abandoned the concept of equality in and of itself. It has evolved, as many sister parties did, to encompass civil rights more than class struggles. In other words, to become successful, be a modern political organisation and loosen its legacies from a political and economic tradition that had become untenable, PD adopted a more liberal standing on social and economic matters.[1] In line with the neoliberal ideas circulating in the 90s, PD, similar to the majority of parties within the Italian political scene, openly promoted the liberalisation and privatisation of public companies as a panacea for improving economic growth and welfare. At the same time, guarantees within national labour regulations started to be eroded. In particular, this process was epitomised by the abolition of Article 18 of the Statue of Workers' Rights by former PD Prime Minister Matteo Renzi through the introduction of the Jobs Act in 2015.[2] Yet, such an infatuation with economic liberalisation policies seems to be over now. In fact, PD, under the leadership of its new secretary, Elly Schlein, appears to be more focused on socio-economic issues. For instance, the Jobs Act, valued negatively by 32% of Italians,[3] has been declared as unrightful by the current PD secretary, who has decided to sign the petition launched by the CGIL Union for a referendum in 2025 to abolish it.[4]

Yet, while in the last years the perception among Italians was that, on labour policies, PD has been somehow decreasing workers'

protection, on civil rights, the party attempted to be more progressive. This however was not without internal battles within the party. For instance, when it comes to LGBTQI+ rights, PD is divided into two factions, whereby the more progressive and liberal one has often faced a more moderate section of the party, holding traditional and Catholic values, with a more lukewarm attitude to civil rights and equality issues. Such internal divisions have undermined not just the party's strengths to push forward progressive reforms for social groups and minorities, but also its ability to define a neat political identity, resulting in PD often appearing to lag behind other political entities when formulating robust policy proposals. In particular, while it has ardently championed civil rights and minorities' rights, in the Italian parliament, it has not been able to pass any law to fully equalise the rights of LGBTQ+ couples to those of traditional ones. Moreover, when it comes to social and economic matters, while PD has been battling for the introduction of a minimum salary for years, it has only recently, under the leadership of Schlein, been able to articulate a clear position on the matter. Before Schlein, indeed, the issue of salaries and compensation in Italy, even for reasons of political convenience, has long been delegated, even by PD, to trade unions through national contracts. Yet, the number of contracts left outside national contract agreements has resulted in an increasing number of workers with limited rights and powers.

In this respect, the current trends within the party suggest a potential return to some elements of traditional social democracy. In particular, there is a stronger positioning on social-economic rights as well as on civil rights, with leaders like Elly Schlein building the party's European electoral campaign on the need to promote a European social welfare system. In light of the positive results of the European parliamentary elections, it remains clear that the role of PD is also

crucial for offsetting the rise of extreme right-wing forces in Italy. Yet, to effectively counterbalance the right wing, PD must articulate a set of policy ideas to re-establish a clear identity and resonate with 40-50% of the Italian electorate disengaged from politics.[5]

1 Introduction

Since the end of fascism and the turn towards democracy, the Italian political system has been characterised by three distinctive phases, commonly referred to as "Republics". Each of these Republics originated from a radical change within the political landscape and a consequent shift in political ideologies, party structures and models of representation. The creation of the Italian Democratic Party (*Partito Democratico*, PD) in 2007 was the result of one of the above-mentioned internal shifts between the First and Second Republics, but it also occurred in a time of a global historical transformation in the aftermath of the collapse of the Iron Curtain and the development of a neoliberal global order.

The PD, brought to life through an agreement between the Left Democrats (*Democratici di Sinistra*, DS, former Communist Party) and *La Margherita* (the Daisy, mostly former Christian Democrats),[6] was profoundly influenced by external and internal factors. Although it had a very definable centre-left identity, as its membership to the Party of European Socialists (PES) demonstrates,[7] the party refused to be classified within the existing traditional Italian political categorisation and aimed to position itself as a major national force with a pluralistic approach. It was striving to address a spectrum of social challenges, and hence, had an ambition to redefine and shift the balance within the Italian political party system. It was modelled

as a liberal force to transcend outdated ideologies and construct a new political culture in line with the needs of the time to make Italy a modern country.

In other words, PD aimed to innovate Italian institutions through a "post-ideological" approach to answer the evolving needs of society. As highlighted in its 2008 manifesto, PD aimed to become a

> *democratic and reformist party not only in its ideal and programmatic inspiration but also as actively committed to promoting the evolution and reform of the political-institutional system towards a competitive democracy, centred on the sovereignty of the citizen-voter, the arbiter of the choice of government.*[8]

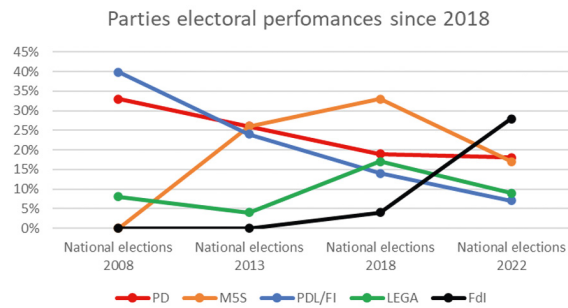
Moreover, differently from its predecessors, especially the Communist Party, PD was not elected as a mass party.[9] The PD wanted to be the party of the nation, leveraging on traditional left-wing membership, while also creating space for new and often non-traditional supporters to join.[10]

Yet, like other political parties in Italy, from the left to the right, the modern PD has certainly assumed some connotations of a personalist party, whereby the party secretary, directly selected by citizens, tends to lead and shape the organisation and the activities of the party itself.[11] This can be easily noticed by simply having a glimpse at PD under Matteo Renzi's leadership: he tried to push the party towards an unprecedented liberal standing.

Consequently, as underlined in the next sections, the recent election of Elly Schlein as the new party secretary in 2023 has been adding a fresh dimension to PD's narrative, signalling a potential shift in strategy and a renewed focus on progressive values. Schlein was elected by Italians to become the leader of PD against her competitor, the president of Emilia Romagna region, Stefano Bonaccini, thanks to her focus on social policies.

Within this frame, while addressing the party's leadership and nature, this case study attempts to analyse why and how – after the first decade of substantial electoral competitiveness and success in developing a cohesive centre-left political force, followed by decreasing trends and a terrible loss against the far right during the last national elections – PD seems to be recovering and performed well at the recent European parliamentary elections. Indeed, after getting 33% in 2008, without however winning the elections, PD was able to run the Italian government in 2013, with a slim majority. At the time, the newly appointed Secretary and Prime Minister Matteo Renzi attempted a profound transformation of the party, cutting out the old memories of the past. The result, however, was that Renzi got 40.8% at the European parliamentary elections in 2014,[12] but lost the leadership of the government after negative results in a constitutional referendum in 2016, when 59.6% of Italians voted against the constitutional reforms he proposed. As Figure 1 highlights, since 2008, PD seems to have lost the capacity to win national elections but not to govern the country.

Figure 1. Electoral performances of Italian parties since 2018.



Source: Personal elaboration of data from Politico.eu.

From 2019 to 2022, PD was part of the two Italian governments that allowed the country to face and exit one of the worst social, economic and health crises of the last 50 years: the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, during the last national elections, which took place on 25 September 2022, the party was not rewarded by most Italian citizens, getting only 18% of the vote. The majority of Italian experts talked about the worst electoral result for PD, especially since its competitors represented the most conservative right-wing political spectrum. Yet, the negative electoral results should not be seen as something unexpected. It was part of a well-established trend. One of the factors that worked against PD was that it governed the country for almost three years, without properly winning the 2018 national election, where it came second and not first in terms of electoral support. Secondly, as economic pressure related to the COVID-19 pandemic started to rise, Italian citizens generally punished all parties that entered the Draghi-led technical government, favouring Brothers of Italy, which was the unique political group in opposition.

To date, PD remains the second-largest party in the Italian political system in terms of electoral support. Moreover, the results of the European parliamentary elections, with PD getting 24.4% of the vote and becoming the first social democratic party in terms of seats at the European Parliament, might represent the turning point needed to revitalise the party's political standing on the national platform.[13] As the current time underscores a strategic juncture for PD, the case study aims to trace the party's evolution within the Italian political and historical contexts, examining its rise, falls and current trends, as well as its ideological transformations, electoral successes and setbacks. The analysis encompasses PD's responses to economic crises, changes in leadership and the growing influence of populist movements, particularly the Five Star Movement (*Movimento 5 Stelle*, M5S) and

the right-wing Brothers of Italy. Finally, the case study focuses on the current party's attempts to redefine its identity, especially in the wake of the Schlein era, but also on the evolution of its nature and engagement with pressing social issues. Indeed, as Italy stands at the crossroads of political and economic uncertainties, the future of PD hangs in the balance.

2
PD's identity within the Italian political system

Since the overthrow of fascism, the Italian political system has undergone different changes. They are clustered into three phases, defined in the Italian political lexicon as "Republics". These periods represented the moments after dramatic shifts within the Italian political system, catalysing a complete restyling of parties and models of political representation. As explained in the following sections, it was between such dramatic changes, precisely on 14 October 2007, when the Italian PD was created. Yet, because its development happened in a moment of radical transformation of political ideologies, its nature cannot be easily defined only by the above categories. At the time, the so-called Washington consensus was the hegemonic ideology around the globe and neoliberalism seemed to be the unique economic dogma that could effectively regulate market trends. Within this background, the nature of PD was very liberal and less concentrated on the traditional themes characterising classical left-wing parties, namely, workers and class struggle.

At the time, it was commonly believed that the combination of globalisation, the free market and individual freedoms, guaranteed by democratic institutions, was a good starting point to boost economic growth and spread general welfare improvements. In this respect, in

line with a more individualistic conceptualisation of society, at the basis of the neoliberal economic model institutionalised in the USA in the 80s and then spread globally, PD focused more on individual citizens' rights than class rights. In its 2008 manifesto, there was no mention of the class struggle. The word equality was used only once, while globalisation was fully accepted as a positive phenomenon, which could bring more prosperity. In a nutshell, rising from the ashes of an old and often stale rhetoric of the former left-wing and communist parties, PD did not aim to be simply a new party; it had to be a different party.

Indeed, according to the manifesto, since Italian society "no longer recognize[d] itself in rigid ideologies of belonging […]", it "need[ed] a new political framework. In the Democratic Party, great traditions converge[d] […] to constitute this reference" not just to "piece together the remnants of past stories but to develop a shared vision of the world, building on this basis the project of a new Italy".[14] In a nutshell, because the old parties and old ideologies were considered to be inadequate to represent contemporary social issues, PD had to converge new social interests and needs in a new and "post-ideological" political culture, beyond rigid ideologies, to develop a shared vision of the world on which to build a new project for Italy. Since the sovereignty of citizens had to be at the centre, PD adopted the so-called "majoritarian vocation". It positioned itself not as a left-wing party, but as the party of the country – a major national force – that did not aim to represent a partial segment of society. It intended to become a pluralistic party, adopting a broader vision to provide adequate responses to current and future social challenges.[15]

This is why PD's detractors based their main critiques on the fact that the party was not created to continue fighting for the left-wing traditional ideals of equity and social-economic goals. Indeed, since its creation and the need for Italy to recover from the global financial crisis

of 2008, PD has progressively adopted some liberal economic ideas. Such a trend was epitomised by Matteo Renzi's government (2014-2016), with the privatisation of companies such as Enel or Eni and the reforms introduced in the job market, which reduced workers' security, allowing employers to fire employees for economic reasons or simply because of organisational issues. Yet, as never before, recently, PD has undergone a through transformative process to face the mounting social, economic, security and political crises of the last years. Ultimately, the end of the so-called global liberal order, exacerbated by the war in Ukraine and in the Middle East, the rise of regional "non-Western" powers such as China, as well as climate change and the energy and food crises, have indeed exacerbated social and economic inequalities, with the middle-income classes being caught between a diminishing enclave of the hyper-rich and an expanding segment of a working class struggling to make ends meet on their own salaries. These are all factors that have led to the party rethinking its foundational principles and reshaping the ideals that traditionally underpinned left-wing ideologies. This process seems evident in PD's new manifesto, where the term sustainable development, combatting various forms of inequality, such as poverty, discrimination and social marginalisation, re-emerged as a focal point in the party-political agenda. This resurgence was accompanied by a renewed emphasis on the necessity to defend and strengthen democracy.

The party, in this context, appears to have initiated a journey of change embodied in the election of Elly Schlein as secretary of PD in early 2023. However, the nature and inherent contradictions of this transformation are intricately linked to the historical context in which the party has unfolded (Table 1). The subsequent subsections delve into a comprehensive explanation of PD's evolution across the different "Italian Republics".

Table 1. PD's secretaries.

PD secretary	Years	Background information
Walter Veltroni	2007-2009	The first national political secretary of PD and Mayor of Rome. Veltroni won the primaries against Rosy Bindi, Enrico Letta, Mario Adinolfi, Pier Giorgio Gawronski and Jacopo G. Schettini, with 76% of the vote. He resigned in February 2009, after defeats in the April 2008 general election and the 2009 regional election in Sardinia
Dario Franceschini	2009	Former Undersecretary of State to the Presidency of the Council of Ministers in the D'Alema and Amato governments and the first president of the Ulivo group in the Chamber of Deputies from 2006 to 2008, Franceschini was elected secretary of PD in 2009, running against Arturo Parisi. He was secretary of PD during the 2009 European elections and led the negotiations with Martin Schulz that led to the birth of the group of European Socialists and Democrats. Franceschini then ran in the 25 October 2009 primaries but was defeated by Pier Luigi Bersani. From 22 February 2014 to 1 June 2018, he was Minister of Cultural Heritage and Activities and Tourism first in the Renzi government and then in the Gentiloni government
Pier Luigi Bersani	2009-2013	Elected in the 25 October 2009 primaries, running against Dario Franceschini and Ignazio Marino, Bersani was the former president of the Emilia-Romagna Region (1993-1996) and former Minister of Industry, Transport and Economic Development. In the aftermath of the 2013 national elections, being unable to form a new government, he resigned as secretary of PD. In 2017, disagreeing with Renzi on the political line of PD, he left the party to found "*Articolo 1 – Movimento Democratico e Progressista*" with Roberto Speranza, Massimo D'Alema and Enrico Rossi

Guglielmo Epifani	2013	Appointed as regent secretary of PD by the party assembly, Epifani was the former secretary general of the Italian Trade Union CGIL. He remained in office until 15 December 2013, when he was replaced by Matteo Renzi, winner of the 8 December 2013 primaries. Like Bersani, Epifani also left PD in 2017 due to disagreements with Renzi and joined *Articolo 1 – Movimento Democratico e Progressista*
Matteo Renzi	2013-2017	Former mayor of Florence, Matteo Renzi became the secretary of PD, running against Gianni Cuperlo and Giuseppe Civati, and winning with 67.5% of the vote. As PD secretary, he then presented a document proposing the replacement of the government led by Enrico Letta: the text was voted for by an overwhelming majority of the PD leadership and, after the premier's resignation, in February 2014, Renzi was given the task of forming a new executive by Napolitano. Yet, on 4 December 2016, the failure of the constitutional referendum resulted in his resignation as prime minister (formalised on 7 December) and then as secretary of PD (19 February 2017)
Matteo Orfini	2017	Orfini was PD's secretary for three months between Renzi's first and second terms in office
Matteo Renzi	2017-2018	In 2017, Renzi ran again in the party primaries against Minister Andrea Orlando and Puglia President Michele Emiliano, winning 69.2% of the vote. His resignation came again less than a year later, following the PD debacle in the 4 March 2018 general election
Maurizio Martina	2018	Martina was regent PD secretary after Renzi's resignation. During his term, Martina distinguished himself for his openness towards the M5S during the post-vote transitional phase. On 7 July 2018, the PD National Assembly elected him party secretary, a role he held until his resignation, made official on 17 November of the same year. Five days later, on 22 November, he announced his candidacy in the 3 March 2019 primaries

Nicola Zingaretti	2019-2021	Former president of the Lazio Region, Nicola Zingaretti obtained 66% of the votes at the 2019 primaries, defeating Maurizio Martina and Roberto Giachetti. On 30 March 2019, he presented the new logo chosen to run in the European elections: the classic PD symbol together with the words "We are Europeans" on a blue background and "Socialists and Democrats" (Pse) on a red background. After two years, in which PD supported first the Conte-bis government and then the Draghi executive, Zingaretti decided to leave the leadership of the party
Enrico Letta	2021-2023	Becoming PD secretary, Letta claimed the party did not need a new secretary but rather a new identity: "progressives in values, reformists in method and radical in behaviour". Yet, following the disastrous result of the 2022 general election, Letta announced a Party Congress and called for the election of a new secretary
Elly Schlein	2023-ongoing	Elly Schlein won the primary elections against Stefano Bonaccini, Gianni Cuperlo and Paola De Micheli. She is the first woman to run the party

Sources: PD website, SkyTg24, own elaboration.

3
Transformation of Italian party political systems

Democracies across Europe are characterised by a system of representation that should connect parties, institutions and social interests. The models upon which each democracy is built change.[16] There are indeed consensual models, whereby social interests are contraposed and representation is disaggregated, and there are competitive models with a bipolar system of parties, which alternate in leading the government, as is the case in the UK or the USA. Looking at the Italian political system and its evolution, one could argue that, in the aftermath of the Second World War, Italy has experienced both consensual and competitive models.

Between 1948 and 1993, Italian democracy was based on a consensual system before adopting a competitive model after 1993, with the beginning of the Second Republic.[17] Such a change was influenced by internal and external factors. Internally, the system was broken by a set of scandals that involved the main political figures. Externally, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dominance of the American economic and political model also resulted in a modification of parties' ideologies. The PD was not immune to such a process. Indeed, it resulted from it.

3.1 First Republic

The so-called "First Republic" started in around 1946, with the end of the war and rejection of fascism, and was concluded in the 1990s with the beginning of Berlusconi's political era. This phase was characterised by an imperfect two-party system, whereby power was controlled by the Christian Democracy (*Democrazia Cristiana*) together with other smaller political entities and the second-largest party, the Italian Communist Party (*Partito Comunista Italiano*, PCI).[18]

According to Fabbrini, during the First Republic, Italy was a consensual democracy, as governments were formed by large coalition without alternation in power.[19] Indeed, the ideological polarisation between the Christian Democrats and the communist bloc was so vivid that it could only be managed by mediation and through an inclusive approach of compromises. Moreover, PCI could not possibly govern the country alone. Indeed, because of the Cold War, to think about a government led exclusively by PCI was possible but practically unrealistic, considering the informal influence exerted by the USA over the country at the time and the economic aid, such as the Marshall Plan, that Italy benefited from in the aftermath of the Second World War.[20] In the 90s, the consensual model was then abandoned because changes in the international system, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, contributed to diminishing the influence of PCI as a party representing an alternative social and economic model. Yet, economic development also played a part in minimising the role that PCI and its fight for the class struggle could bring to the political debate.[21] Indeed, those years resulted in the so-called Italian economic miracle, with an unprecedented rise in GDP, economic growth and social welfare.[22] Italy managed to progressively modernise its institutions and economic model, becoming a fully industrialised country.

Nevertheless, the First Republic undermined individual responsibilities, with its lack of effective political competition in a system dominated by political parties rather than being governed by one of them.[23] The culture of constant mediation resulted in public services and major companies, banks and trade unions being affiliated with parties. This contributed to boosting social and economic stability over a fragmented society, but it eliminated any form of meritocracy, which was needed to build an efficient political and economic model, and favoured the diffusion of corruption.[24] In this respect, the First Republic ended in the 90s because of a series of corruption scandals known as "*Tangentopoli*",[25] in which the main political figures of the time were involved.[26] To face the internal downfall of the old institutional system, on one hand, and, on the other, to overcome the external influence related to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin wall, at the end of the 80s, PCI decided to aggregate the left-wing parties to reframe its political identity and boost its electoral competitiveness by attempting to build a more western European social policy identity. This was also based on the idea developed in the 70s by Enrico Berlinguer, one of the most influential politicians of the First Republic and a member of PCI, of a Euro-communism, whereby the realisation of socialism in countries where capitalism was advanced could be reached by using democratic institutions and through a process of progressive economic reforms.[27] To build a new political path, there was a need to abandon the Gramscian communist identity and develop a new political movement.[28] Such a process, which started in 1989, was concluded in 1991, in the aftermath of the 20th Congress of PCI. The congress resulted in the end of PCI and in the consequent development of the Democrats of the Left (*Partito Democratico della Sinistra*, PDS) led by Achille Occhetto, one of the most influential political figures of the time and former secretary of PCI. Composed of former militants of PCI and

more progressive political actors, PDS started to move its attention from PCI's traditional political focus on the working-class struggle to the rights of civil society in general.

In a time of profound institutional crisis, PDS aimed to reform the national political landscape and transform the electoral system into a majoritarian one, the so-called *Mattarellum*. This was achieved in June 1991 for the Chamber of Deputies and in 1993 for the Senate, through two ad hoc referenda. The election in 1994, the first held under a majoritarian system, signalled the end of the First Republic. Indeed, thanks to the Mattarellum mechanism, which rewarded coalitions of parties led by individual candidates, three distinct coalitions formed in a very short time. On the left side of the political spectrum, the coalition of progressives led by Achille Ochetto and composed of PDS, the Communist Refoundation, the Greens and the Italian Socialist Party (*Partito Socialista Italiano*, PSI) led by Bettino Craxi, former Italian prime minister, got 20.3% of the seats. At the centre, the Pact for Italy, formed by former members of the Christian Democrats, got around 15% of the seats, while on the right side of the political spectrum, Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* in coalition with Umberto Bossi's Northern League and Gianfranco Fini's MSI-National Alliance got 25% of the seats, leading a new Italian government and putting an end to the old political system.[29]

3.2 Second Republic

The crisis of legitimacy of the traditional party system caused by *Tangentopoli* and the rise of Berlusconi as a new political figure represented the beginning of a new political era for Italy, the so-called "Second Republic".[30] This phase was instead characterised by a bipolar system composed of *Forza Italia* on the right-wing side and a set of fragmented left-leaning political forces (Table 2).[31] The latter

comprised the PDS and several centre-left parties, such as the Italian People's Party, the Federation of the Greens and other minor forces. After the 1996 elections, Ulivo constituted the main parliamentary base of the Prodi governments (1996-98), D'Alema (1998-2000), Amato (2000-01) and Prodi (2006-2008).[32] Yet, following defeat in the 2001 elections, the main parties of the Ulivo coalition federated and in 2007 merged into a new political party: the PD.

Funded by a group of well-known political militants, such as Walter Veltroni, Enrico Letta, Pierpaolo Fassino, Romani Prodi, Massimo D'Alema and Pier Luigi Bersani, among many others, PD aimed to find a common ground between the different voices of the Italian left, connecting the more radical left-wing thinkers to the Catholic endeavour, as well as to more progressive forces. Considering global trends, the collapse of the Soviet Union and changes within Italian society, Veltroni, the first secretary of the party, knew that to be successful, PD had to distance itself from the Italian communist tradition. Moreover, any direct reference to prestigious Italian communist thinkers and political figures, such as Gramsci or Togliatti, to name a few, would have risked exposing the party to the harsh accusation by Berlusconi that PD was built on the remains of an inefficient and defeated state-centric political system.[33] To be a coherent political alternative to the centre-right coalition led by Berlusconi, which based every electoral campaign on the need to fight communism, PD needed to become a comprehensive political force to catch the attention of all Italian citizens, even those that in the past would not have voted for the left. As clearly stated in Veltroni's famous "Lingotto Speech" in 2007, PD had to be a new political form, free from any ideological limitation, to revitalise the interest of Italians in the political debate and address those who believed in innovation, talent, merit and equal opportunities in particular.[34] Hence, in the speech, he

claimed the party would have supported the private sectors, which needed to be competitive to be successful in the global market, as well as a process of liberalisation of the Italian market to make Italy successful both politically and economically.[35]

Table 2. Italian governments from 1994 to 2012 (Second Republic).

Government	Prime Minister
XVI Government (29 April 2008-23 December 2012)	Mario Monti (technical government, December 2011 to April 2013)
	Berlusconi (Forza Italia in coalition with Lega and MpA, 8 May 2008 to 16 November 2011)
XV Government (28 April 2006-6 February 2008)	Prodi (Ulivo coalition)
XIV Government (30 May 2001-27 April 2006)	Berlusconi (Forza Italia)
XIII Government (9 May 1996-9 March 2001)	Prodi, D'Alema, Amato (Ulivo coalition)
XII Government (15 April 1994-16 February 1996)	Independent government led by Lamberto Dini (17/01/1995-17/05/1996)
	Berlusconi (10/05/1994-17/01/1995)

Source: Governo.it.

Certainly, the party's attempt to broaden consensus to the middle class resulted in the abandoning of some of the classic redistributive themes of social democracy, in favour of a more liberal approach. At that time, such a strategy seemed in line with the new social and economic needs. The global economy was growing, and the world seemed united in believing that neo-liberal capitalism was the best form of market economy. Yet, such an ideological shift prepared the ground for voters to punish the party. In 2008, Walter Veltroni, PD's first leader, led a good political campaign for the national election. Yet, despite the party performing well (33% of the vote and 11 million

voters), it was unable to defeat Berlusconi's coalition (47.32% and 15.5 million voters).[36]

Although criticism about the too-liberal nature of the party started to develop, the party kept its "third way" vision. This became more evident in the aftermath of 2008, when Italy had to face multiple economic crises, and PD seemed to align with the austerity economic approach that prevailed across the EU.

The lack of a real alternative political proposal was also one of the causes of PD's inability to beat Berlusconi on the political ground. Although there are several reasons to justify the ability of Berlusconi to remain in power for so many years, such as his control of the main private TV channels in Italy or his party's populistic rhetoric, the reality is that Berlusconi was not defeated in national elections. Berlusconi's government started to face growing instability in 2011 due to political scandals, as well as increasing economic and financial volatility. In November 2011, Silvio Berlusconi announced his resignation as prime minister due to mounting pressure from financial markets and European institutions, who were seeking to stabilise Italy's economy. This political crisis led to a power vacuum and the need to form a new government. At the time, Italian President of the Republic, Giorgio Napolitano, appointed Professor Mario Monti, an economist and former European Commissioner, to lead a technocratic national unity government. This technocratic government aimed to address the economic crisis, implement structural reforms and restore international confidence in Italy. Certainly, during this crisis period, PD played a significant role. The leader of PD, Pier Luigi Bersani, and the party in general, supported the formation of the Monti government and collaborated with it on key reforms, which included public spending cuts across different strategic sectors and, most importantly, a reform of the pension system, which increased the pensionable age. In particular, through the decree "Save

Italy", the government approved measures for the reduction of public spending by €13 billion and to introduce new taxes up to €17 billion, which should have allowed the state to save a total of €26 billion between 2012 and 2014.[37]

These reforms resulted in high social pressures and discontent, which contributed to the success of a new political party, M5S. The rise of M5S determined the end of the Second Republic, opening the way for a tripolar system. Indeed, while PD won the election in 2013, at the time, it lost around 4 million votes compared to 2008, and it had to govern the country with a slim majority.[38] The aftermath of the elections ushered in a political landscape marked by confusion, where no distinct winners or losers emerged. The tumultuous outcome of the election can be attributed, in part, to a new electoral law known as the "*Porcellum*". Enacted in December 2005 and championed by former Lega Minister Roberto Calderoli, this law sought to establish an almost purely proportional representation system, coupled with a significant majority bonus, without the option of indicating preferences. The *Porcellum* was declared unconstitutional in 2014, leading to considerable fragmentation of the vote, posing significant challenges, particularly within the intricate framework of Italian politics, in forming cohesive majorities. Despite this, with 41% of the vote, PD managed to secure victory in the election, propelled by an effective campaign led by its secretary, Pier Luigi Bersani.[39]

Nevertheless, following Bersani's decision to step down, the responsibility of forming a government fell to Enrico Letta, the vice secretary of PD, who forged a coalition with centre-right parties. Enrico Letta is not only a well-known public figure and well-prepared political actor, holding several positions as minister in different Italian governments, but he was also well known for his capacity to mediate among internal forces within the party. Despite Letta's political abilities,

his tenure as prime minister was short-lived, spanning from April 2013 to February 2014. Matteo Renzi assumed the position as the new secretary of the party in 2013, subsequently taking charge of the government and replacing Letta. However, both the coalition with centre-right parties and the internal power dynamics within PD incurred substantial losses in support for the party. This downturn paved the way for M5S to progressively gain more traction within the Italian political landscape.

3.3 Third Republic

In 2013, M5S, running for the first time in national elections, achieved 25.6% of the vote. Subsequently, it imposed itself as the first political force by the number of votes in the Chamber of Deputies. Such a shift was unprecedented in Italian political history. First of all, after years of ideological fights between the left and the right, M5S proudly defined itself as a populist movement and not a political party with a precise ideological collocation. Indeed, the party was an anti-establishment movement, which aimed to fight against the elite within the Italian government and European institutions. Thanks to a harsh populist campaign, which resulted in its leader, Beppe Grillo, organising theatrical shows to spread his populist propaganda and leverage on widespread social discontent, M5S, running by itself for the first time, achieved an unprecedented consensus. [40]

In this respect, the victory of M5S is certainly linked to a general disenchantment towards traditional parties and politics and a reaction to the stringent austerity measures implemented by the technical government of former Prime Minister Mario Monti, perceived by many as an undemocratic imposition. While PD sustained Monti's government as the only way out of a crisis, which could have potentially destroyed

the Italian and eurozone economies, the political reforms implemented by Monti were felt to endanger the economic welfare of those citizens who were already in great economic difficulty.[41]

The M5S defined itself as a movement willing to represent the unrepresented electorate by channelling their malcontent into an anti-elitist populist function through the use of satirical language and giving them media visibility. As the political battlefield moved from the more institutionalised endeavours to the arenas where the M5S leader, Beppe Grillo, conducted political comedy shows and to the internet and social media, PD, as with other traditional parties, was unable to respond to the populist rhetoric of M5S. Political communication started to become more bidimensional and traditional political campaign was transformed into political marketing to mobilise and engage directly with a wider audience.[42]

At the same time, the prime minister and leader of PD, Matteo Renzi, pushed the party towards a more liberal dimension in an attempt to reshape the party's platform and image, according to his own personal values and interests. The attempt to reform and liberalise the job market, through the Jobs Act and the introduction of a flexicurity approach, started to be perceived by the majority of Italians, especially those in the lower and middle classes, as a betrayal from the party that should have protected the welfare of workers. In this respect, what constituted the end of Renzi as prime minister and as meaningful leader of PD was not M5S but the result of increasing discontent among Italians, which was manifested in the constitutional referendum held on 4 December 2016. The loss of the referendum, which was preceded by a personalised campaign carried out by Renzi himself and his closest collaborators, led to the voluntary resignation of Matteo Renzi as President of the Council.[43] Indeed, since the campaign was so personalised, the result of

the referendum was also an expression of citizens' evaluation of Renzi's performances and their disapproval of his policies.[44] While the government led by PD continued until 2018 under former Prime Minister Gentiloni, Renzi's attempt to move the party towards a liberal centre allowed for M5S to gain political support by filling a vacuum and winning the national election in 2018.

With 32.7% of the vote, M5S, led by Giuseppe Conte, decided to form a coalition government with the right-wing Lega (17.4%), led by Matteo Salvini, and not with PD, which got 18.7% of the vote. Yet, PD came to govern the country in 2019, when it formed a political alliance with M5S to establish the Conte-bis government from 2019 to 2021, after the leader of Lega, Matteo Salvini, attempted to call for snap elections in August 2018. The PD-M5S government was a pivotal moment for the Italian political arena, as it determined a major shift of M5S towards less-Eurosceptic positions with regard to the EU but also towards a more institutionalised and progressive political agenda. Indeed, beyond the so-called "*reddito di cittadinanza*", a citizens' income scheme to provide support to unemployed citizens, M5S also started to consider more programmatic social-economic reforms. Indeed, the PD-M5S alliance was based on a "political contract" negotiated by PD Secretary Nicola Zingaretti, who clearly stated that to enter in an alliance with PD, M5S had to abandon the two-ovens approach and choose a more stable and clear political standing. Such a political contract, named *Piano Italia*, aimed to push forward reforms in the educational and social policy sector, also reinforcing the green agenda. For instance, the M5S-PD government, also called the yellow-red coalition, promoted the "*Assegno Unico Universale*", a new universal child benefit scheme to support families, enforced in 2021, and the Climate Decree, which provided economic incentives for purchasing green vehicles. While the success of such a coalition is still

hard to verify, as the incumbency of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in an unprecedented social, economic and health crisis, PD stayed in government with M5S until 2021, when a new technical government led by the former European Central Bank President Mario Draghi took control.

The formation of this government was a response to the political crisis that arose from the need to better program the Italian resilience and recovery plan to get access to the NextGenerationEU funding, developed in response to the pandemic. While the Draghi government enjoyed widespread support from the international community, it was not seen positively by the majority of Italians, who wanted to call for a new national election. In this respect, many perceived that the PD's involvement in a technical government, which was not voted for by citizens, in a moment of increasing social malaise, might have further weakened the party, which, since Renzi's government, was progressively accused of having replaced workers and unions with business and finance,[45] supporting the technocrats who imposed austerity. In other words, PD was blamed for having lost contact with those classes, who were asking for protection and a redistribution of

Table 3. Italian party performances in national elections.

Political party	National elections 2008	National elections 2013	National elections 2018	National elections 2022
PD	33%	26%	19%	18%
M5S	0	26%	33%	17%
PDL/FI	39.9%	24%	14%	7%
LEGA	8%	4%	17%	9%
FdI	0	0	4%	28%

Source: Politico.

wealth, and for having transformed into a political bloc of the inner cities voted for by a wealthy and cosmopolitan minority. According to Politico Polls of Polls data, from the national election in 2018 to the elections of 2022, PD registered its lowest level of electoral support since its creation, around 18-19% (Table 3).

3.4 The Schlein era and the future of PD

The electoral loss of PD registered in 2022 seems to be just the latest chapter of an existential crisis experienced by the party in the last six years. Indeed, with an expansion of almost 6 million votes, Giorgia Meloni's party, Brothers of Italy, was the extreme right-wing political force that emerged victorious from the political competition. In less than three years, the nationalist party, whose name was taken from the first line of the Italian national anthem, went from 6.4% at the European elections in 2019 to 26% in 2022, becoming the most dangerous threat to progressive values embodied by the Italian PD. According to the Demopolis Institute, apart from trust in the leader, Giorgia Meloni (68%), what pushed Italians to support Brothers of Italy was its consistency with its own political vision (60%), importance devolved to security issues (53%), and a less-lenient approach to economic and fiscal policies (51%).[46] With social malcontent on the rise, poverty on the rise, and an overall rate of young people not engaged in education, employment or training (NEET) of 19% compared to an EU average of 11.7%,[47] it was evident that the centrist approach adopted by PD was not paying off and the party needed to go through a series of self-assessments. The PD also suffered from some electoral competition from M5S, which, at the time, seemed to be the most successful party for tackling social-economic issues. Led by former Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte,

during the electoral campaign, M5S was increasingly vocal about the risk of the "*reddito di cittadinanza*", the M5S citizens' income scheme, being cancelled if Meloni won. The *reddito di cittadinanza*, passed in 2019 by the government led by M5S in coalition with PD, was a subsidy intended for the segment of the population that fell below the absolute poverty threshold; in other words, those who had less than €780 per month at their disposal. The fear that the scheme would be cancelled, as actually did happen, drove 18% of voters to support M5S, which was insufficient to secure a position in the government, but substantial enough to represent a significant competitor to PD on social issues. Against this backdrop, in the aftermath of the national election, former PD Secretary Enrico Letta decided to step down from his position, to call for a new party manifesto and for the election of a new secretary.

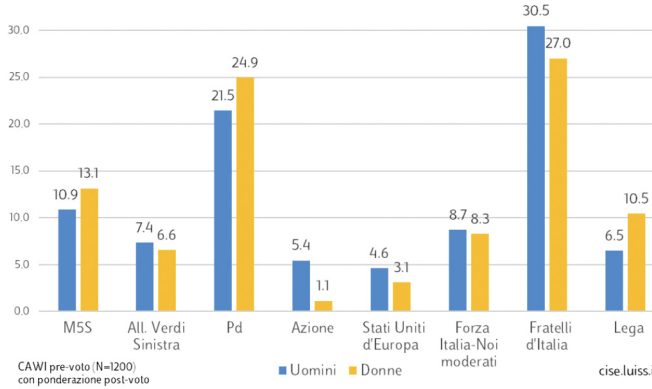
Certainly, the March 2023 election of Elly Schlein as the new party secretary, running in opposition to Stefano Bonaccini, the governor of Emilia Romagna, could represent a positive shock to PD. Schlein, who got 53.8% of the vote, is a relatively new figure within an established party, especially if compared to her counterpart, who has 30 years of political experience. Yet, when she announced her candidature to lead the party, Schlein was not considered the favoured candidate. She was perceived as too young (despite her experience in the European Parliament), too radical on social protection issues and too critical of the party status quo.

Yet, according to eight out of ten Italian citizens, it was her fresh approach to labour, social and environmental issues that allowed her to win the election. Despite her detractors, who still see her as a member of the elite, too far away from the everyday problems of the people, without enough experience to lead in the complicated Italian political life, Schlein is considered an innovative leader by 81% of PD voters. [48] Moreover, she is trusted as a competent leader by, respectively, 61%

and 41% of voters from the left and Green parties and M5S; by 10% of supporters of the centre parties *Azione* and *Italia Viva*; and by an average of 4.5% of those who vote for Brothers of Italy and Lega.[49] Schlein has started talks with M5S to see whether a bigger "yellow-red" coalition against the government could be possible. Yet, so far, apart from regional elections in Sardinia, where Francesca Todde won in March 2024 by leading a centre-left M5S coalition, no formal alliance has been developed; in other regions, such as Abruzzo and Basilicata, such a coalition failed. Yet, Schlein has been successful in achieving a good result in the EU parliamentary elections. Although she was not able to overtake Brothers of Italy, she managed to achieve 21% of the vote and 24% of the seats. In particular, leading a campaign based on the need to boost European institutions and decision-making processes to develop social security systems as well as climate action, Schlein attracted 25% of the vote from Italian women (Figure 2) and 22% of the vote from younger voters (Figure 3). Yet, Brothers of Italy performed better (24% of the vote and 29% of the seats). With a political campaign based on the need to build a Europe of nations and mainly centred on national issues, Meloni was indeed able to lead her party to being the first party in the electoral competition, by attracting the majority of men voters (30.5%), particularly those aged between 45-54 (37%) and 55-64 (34%). [50]

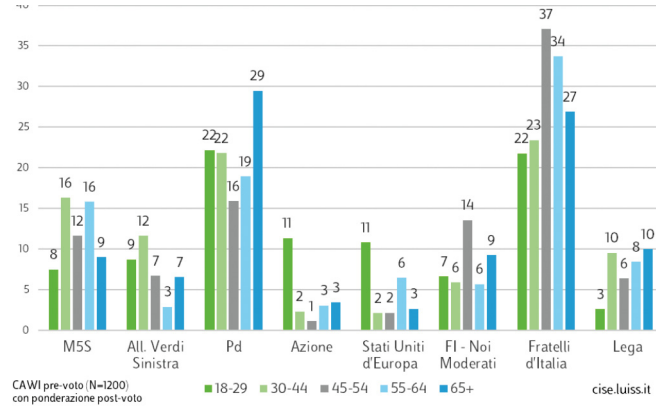
Yet, PD seems to be regaining the confidence and trust of its electorate. Nonetheless, despite the party's open support for a comprehensive program of social and economic development, particularly with substantial funding from the NextGenerationEU, it is unable to push for such reforms, as it is in opposition in parliament. This has likely affected its ability to convince the majority of non-voting Italians to support the party.

Figure 2. Italian voting trends by gender in 2024 EU parliamentary elections.



Source: Luiss University.

Figure 3. Italian voting trends by age in 2024 EU parliamentary elections.



Source: Luiss University.

4

From the right of the working class to the rights of citizens

Amid changes in leadership, PD's focus on social policies and citizens' rights has remained a central tenet over the years, especially since, for the reasons described above, PD abandoned the Communist Party's exclusive focus on class struggle. In line with its broad identity and the need to distance itself from a heavy past, while adapting to current issues, the party has indeed attempted, like the majority of left-wing parties across Europe, to push forward social issues that could unite different citizens from different social classes.

For instance, PD has been placing great emphasis on gender and LGBTQI+ rights. In 2020, the party tried to promote the so-called Zan Decree Law (DDL Zan) on "Measures to prevent and combat discrimination and violence for reasons based on sex, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and disability". The bill obtained its approval in the House on 4 November 2020, but unfortunately its final approval in the Senate was stalled. The bill aimed to tighten penalties for crimes and discrimination against homosexuals, transsexuals, women and disabled people by modifying Article 604 bis of the Penal Code and extending the applicability of the Mancino law against hate crimes (L. 25 June 1993, no. 205) to gender and LGBTQ+ issues. Moreover, the Zan decree aimed to define gender identity and establish a national

day against homophobia, lesbophobia, biphobia and transphobia. The general idea of the Zan decree was that of promoting a more widespread culture of respect and inclusion, as well as to combat prejudice, discrimination and violence motivated by sexual orientation and gender identity. Although for 49% of Italian citizens interviewed by Ipsos, the Zan decree would have been useful, the law remained at a standstill for several months due to obstructionism by Lega.[51] The party maintained that the decree was wrong since the Italian Constitution already sanctioned these crimes and the law risked undermining freedom of expression. Against this backdrop, PD, led by Secretary Letta, tried to present another law, in May 2022, against homophobia. However, the law was never discussed in parliament and with the new government it ceased be on the agenda. In November 2022, Zan presented another proposal, which was similar to the previous decree.[52] Yet, considering the current composition of the parliament, passing the law will be a real challenge.[53] Schlein has been fighting a hard battle against the government to safeguard the rights of both gay parents to have city mayors recognise them as the parents of children conceived by surrogacy, which is illegal in Italy, or assisted fertility, which is only allowed for heterosexual couples. Indeed, the current right-wing government has imposed a veto on city mayors regarding the recognition of children born to same-sex couples. The blocking of birth registration has been possible because, unlike most European countries, Italy has never enacted specific protective legislation for families composed of parents of the same sex. In Italy, a law for civil unions, the so-called Cirinnà Bill, came into effect on 20 May 2016 and was promoted by PD.[54] Yet, civil unions are still a distinct legal institution in the Italian legal system compared traditional marriages and do not hold the same rights, especially when it comes to children. Indeed, children born during the civil union are recognised

as the offspring of the biological parent only.[55] Since the law on civil unions was promoted by PD and civil unions are still not equalised in terms of rights in traditional marriage, PD has often been accused of having pushed for half of the rights for the LGBTQI+ community. Indeed, because of this "incomplete" law, now gay parents struggle to be recognised as such for their children.

To date, while the focus on social and civil rights and the continuous attempt to fight for improved citizens' rights can certainly be considered one of PD's best practices within its political program, PD still needs to tackle a persistent internal struggle within various factions, which do not allow for a fully-fledged push on making progressive civil rights reforms. The PD is indeed characterised by various ideological blocs, ranging from a more radical left-wing perspective, which is strongly committed to promoting societal improvement, to a more moderate or even Catholic left, where progressive ideas, in terms of individual freedom and rights, remain challenging knots to untie. Achieving full internal unity on a common ideological and progressive standing remains a challenge for the party, hindering its ability to position itself as a full champion of civil rights.

Apart from LGBTQI+ rights, such an internal division within PD was also evident on the management of irregular migrants. An example is the almost opposite approach towards irregular migrants detained by Letta's and Renzi's governments. In 2013, former Prime Minister Enrico Letta launched operation *Mare Nostrum* by his government, to use the Italian navy to rescue and save the lives of those migrants who were trying to cross the Mediterranean. This came after an accident that cost the lives of around 360 people on 3 October 2013. The operation, however, was disbanded at the end of 2014, and substituted for the EU's operation Triton until 2018, through the voluntary contribution of EU member states. Such a solidary approach towards migrants

changed during Renzi's and Gentiloni's governments. At the time, Minister of Internal Affairs Minniti applied a stricter policy to counteract irregular migration and promoted a Memorandum of Understanding with Libya to build new Migrants Detention Centres in Libya and train their coast guards to control boat movements in the Mediterranean Sea. In a nutshell, the approach to migration was aimed at securitising Italian borders, without however boosting solidarity. In this respect, it did not appear to differ from centre-right parties' positions on the matter. Yet, such an approach has definitely changed with Elly Schlein. In an interview given on the Italian TV program *La7* in 2023,[56] Schlein claimed that she aimed to lead a party that would not finance Libya to detain irregular migrants in its territory; that would fight to abolish the Italian law "Bossi-Fini", which was developed by Lega in the 2000s to reduce access to Italy to regular working migrants; and that would push for reforms of the Dublin system at the EU level. Indeed, generally, PD has always advocated for a European approach towards the migration crisis, which should not be limited to the securitisation of borders. On the contrary, PD is aiming for EU member states to take responsibility for migration flows, which are affecting primary Mediterranean countries. So far, however, PD has not been successful. According to the Migration Pact, approved by the European Parliament in April 2024 and which PD did not support, the EU member states of first arrival are still responsible for managing applications for asylum or international protection recognition for all irregular migrants. At the same time, PD has not been able to block the Meloni's government's decision to outsource migration management to Albania.[57] Yet, what it is clear is that, since the election of Elly Schlein as the new party secretary, PD has adopted a more progressive agenda on civil rights, migration and even on workers' welfare. In fact, according to Elly Schlein's various declarations, the party's political agenda should encompass an idea of

social progress based on climate change as the new class struggle, the implementation of forms of a basic salary and the advocating for a reduction in working hours.[58] When it comes to climate change, the latter is framed by Schein as one of the major causes of economic disparity. In other words, citizens with low incomes and the middle classes are the ones paying the highest prices for environmental degradation, which is however impacting all segments of society. By adopting a holistic approach, the party aims to champion green initiatives, renewable energy investments and sustainable development to forge a collective response and promote a renovated environmental consciousness and social equity.

Regarding social welfare, the goal is to go beyond wealth redistribution and a universal basic income. The idea is to adopt a more pragmatic response to the evolving nature of labour markets and technological advancements by proposing a basic salary, which is the first step to counteract the loss of welfare as well as working poverty. According to Schlein, ensuring that every working citizen has access to a guaranteed minimum income would help create a robust safety net to empower individuals and help them meet their essential needs to actively participate in society. In particular, according to an interview provided by Maria Cecilia Guerra, who is responsible for labour policy for PD, in Italy, there is a clear salary emergency, as it is unique country within the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD),, in which from 1990to 2020 the average annual real salary decreased by 2.9%. In France and in Germany, it increased by 30%. According to Guerra, such a fall impacts around 6.7 million people, one quarter of Italian workers. Against this backdrop, the party is proposing a bill on minimum wages and fair remuneration indexed to prices, in the private and public sectors.[59] Moreover, PD is also promoting the reduction of working hours as an answer to the transformative

impact of technological advancements on the nature of work. Such a forward-looking policy proposal aligns with a global discourse on the need for shorter working weeks to enhance work-life balance, boost productivity and address unemployment concerns. Moreover, beyond the numbers of hours, PD aims also to promote a more flexible working environment, where reduced working hours contribute to increased employee well-being, job creation and overall economic resilience. Against this backdrop, in October 2023, PD presented a legislative proposal to incentivise the stipulation of experimental collective agreements and the reduction of working hours.[60] Employers involved in such experiments would be exempted from paying up to 40% of tax contributions and the manoeuvre could be partially financed by a national "Fund for new skills, reduction of working hours and new forms of work performance".

In conclusion, these initiatives underscore a renovated party's commitment to reshape its identity by tackling labour policies to better respond to the needs of the contemporary workforce. While, in principle, these ideas are relevant and could tackle the main social concerns in Italy, being in opposition will make it extremely difficult for the party to implement any of these reforms. Yet, PD needs to be more vocal in proposing them, to reach the highest possible number of citizens.

5

PD's political organisation within the Italian regions and across citizens

As far as the party organisation is concerned, PD is characterised by direct nomination of its secretary by citizens at large, who can express their preferences during primary elections. Beyond this extraordinary democratic tool, the party has quite a strict hierarchical structure, with various levels of decision-making bodies to promote inclusivity, democratic decision-making and effective representation across different levels of government and society. According to the party statute, the aim is to facilitate representation, while boosting coordination and communication among its members throughout the country.

Specifically, PD has a National Congress, which is the highest decision-making body. The National Congress is composed of delegates from regional branches, local sections and affiliated organisations, who are called to take major policy decisions and are in charge of discussing and voting for amendments to the party's statutes. Beyond the National Congress, there is the National Assembly, which is normally held more frequently than the Congress to discuss and define the party's political strategies and initiatives. Then the National Direction is in charge of implementing the decisions taken by the National Congress and the National Assembly. It includes representatives from different regions,

elected officials and party leaders. The National Direction plays a crucial role in the day-to-day management of the party. The National Secretariat is then the body in charge of coordinating the party's activities, and it is responsible for ensuring that decisions taken are implemented at a higher level.

Finally, the party secretary is the person holding the prominent leadership position within the party. They are responsible for overseeing the day-to-day operations, representing the party and coordinating with other party leaders. The secretary is usually elected during the National Congress.[61] The PD is also characterised by a Guarantee Commission,[62] which is charge of verifying that the party acts in compliance with its statute and regional and local organisations. The PD also has a youth organisation called "*Giovani Democratici*"to engage youngsters in political activities and recruit new members and has developed affiliations with various social and interest groups that share common goals and values with the party.

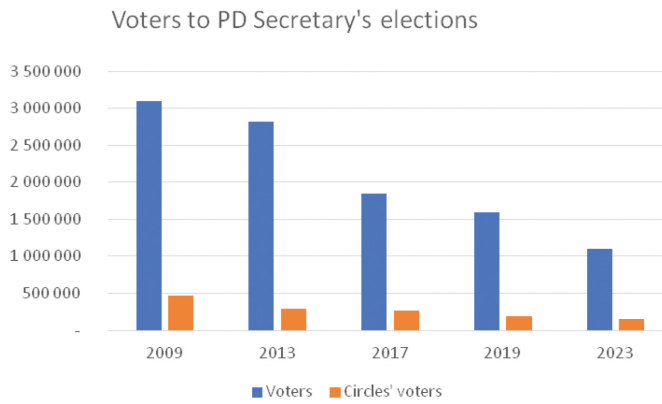
As far as the national party organisation is concerned, at the very beginning, PD did not have a strong territorial presence. Apart from PCI, the other political groups that merged to constitute PD, such as *La Margherita*, did not have many offices across the Italian regions, while DS could rely on some local structures in the north and centre of Italy (Table 4).

This was of no concern for Walter Veltroni, the first leader of PD, who was mainly focused on the need to develop a party able to respond to social issues at large, without concentrating on the actual building of the party itself, especially at the local level.[63] Since then, the party has developed a more territorial presence, through a set of real or virtual offices across all Italian regions. Yet, the efforts did not help in increasing the party's membership. To date, the party can count on around 400,000 members, less than one quarter of the total membership of

the former PCI.[64] As of July 2024, the PD governs only four regions in Italy, namely, Emilia Romagna, Sardinia, Apulia and Campania, while the average party membership ratio is falling. According to *Pagella Politica*, in 2009, the party reached nearly 900,000 members, then declined to about 500,000 in 2012, and has since maintained between 300,000 and 400,000 members in subsequent years.[65] While this decline is generally seen for all traditional parties across the EU, and it is generally related to a diffused disillusionment eroding the foundations of party memberships.[66] The PD, which aims to become the party of the nation, needs to find a way to counteract such a trend.

Yet, citizens' participation, which is central to a party of the nation, is certainly a good practice within the PD, especially when it comes to the election of its secretary. Indeed, according to Article 18 of the PD Statute, candidates wishing to lead the party need to be selected

Figure 4. The number of voters involved in electing PD secretary.



Source: Pagella Politica

Table 4.: PD Offices across Italian Cities and Regions

PIEMONTE	Torino	ALTO ADIGE	Bolzano	UMBRIA	Perugia	CAMPANIA	Avellino
	Alessandria		Trento		Ancona		Benevento
	Asti	VENETO	Belluno	MARCHE	Ascoli Piceno		Caserta
	Biella		Padova		Fermo		Napoli
	Cuneo		Rovigo		Macerata		Salerno
	Novara		Treviso		Pesaro-Urbino	PUGLIA	Bari
	Verbania		Venezia	LAZIO	Frosinone		Brindisi
	Vercelli Valsesia		Verona		Latina		Foggia
VALLE D'AOSTA	Aosta		Vicenza		Rieti		Lecce
LOMBARDIA	Bergamo	FRIULIVE-NEZIA GIULIA	Gorizia		Roma (Città)		Trani
	Brescia		Pordenone		Roma (Provincia)		Taranto
	Como		Trieste		Viterbo	BASILICATA	Matera
	Cremona		Udine	ABRUZZO	L'Aquila		Potenza
	Lecco	LIGURIA	Tigullio (GE)		Chieti	CALABRIA	Catanzaro
	Lodi		Genova		Pescara		Cosenza
	Mantova		Imperia		Teramo		Crotone
	Milano		La Spezia	MOLISE	Campobasso		Reggio Calabria
	Monza e Brianza		Savona		Isernia		Vibo Valentia
	Pavia				Termoli		
	Sondrio						
	Varese						

Source: Based on data available on the PD website.

SICILIA	Agrigento	EMILIA-ROMAGNA	Bologna	TOSCANA	Arezzo
	Caltanisetta		Cesena		Empoli
	Catania		Ferrara		Firenze
	Enna		Forlì		Grosseto
	Messina		Imola		Livorno
	Palermo		Modena		Lucca
	Ragusa		Parma		Massa Carrara
	Siracusa		Piacenza		Piombino (Val di Cornia-Elba)
	Trapani		Ravenna		Pisa
SARDEGNA	Cagliari		Reggio Emilia		Pistoia
	Carbonia-Iglesias		Rimini		Prato
	Ogliastra				Siena
	Medio Campidano				Versilia-Viareggio
	Nuoro				
	Olbia-Tempio Pausania				
	Oristano				
	Sassari				

through primaries. Yet, voters in primary elections are not only party members, but all those who sympathise with the party's objectives and approve its platform. Indeed, according to Article 4 of the "Fundamental subjects of party democratic life", PD "welcomes diverse degrees of involvement, identifying two subjects in internal democratic life: members and voters. Members are individuals who subscribe to the party's values, statutes, and ethical code, while voters support the party's political proposal in elections". This means that any citizens can participate by signing a document and by donating some money at the time of casting their vote. The idea behind this system is the hope to build up a so-called "party of the voters", namely, a political organisation in which members and voters share the same powers, rights and duties.[67] Although this could be interpreted as a risky practice, and it could allow some detractors to have instruments to sabotage the party's decision-making process, so far, it has allowed a vibrant participation in the election of any PD party leader. At the same time, it is a good political marketing move for the party, and it allows PD to become acquainted with the opinions of those who might not vote for the party but are interested in the party's activities.

5.1 The Italian non-voting electorate and the challenges ahead

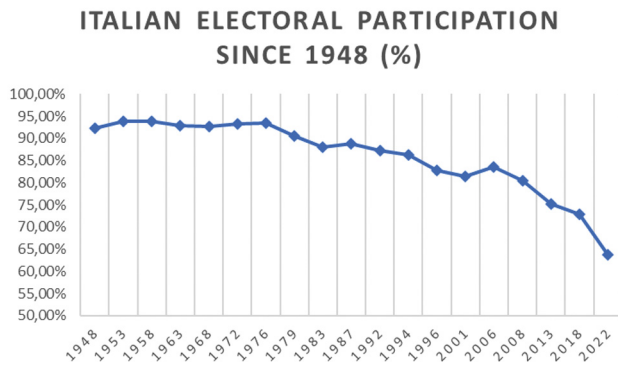
The political crisis facing PD mirrors the challenges experienced by many other progressive parties across Europe. Indeed, as the historian Eric Hobsbawm highlighted in 1977, during his speech about Gramsci at a conference held at the Polytechnic of Central London, "for a variety of reasons […] Italy is a sort of laboratory of political experiences".[68] In this respect, PD, similar to other parties, is

generally suffering from a broader trend of depoliticisation and citizen disenchantment with democratic institutions. Yet, the case of Italy is somehow quite worrisome. When it comes to electoral performances, PD should not only focus on how to beat the political competition with respect to the parties that lead the current Italian government, but it should also think about how to engage those citizens that do not go to vote, who, according to data from the last national election in 2022, represent around the 40% of the electorate (Table 5). The issue of abstentionism and lack of political and civic participation is becoming a huge concern in the Italian public scene. Although the problem attracts media attention mostly during elections, it is essential for PD to tackle this problem for two main reasons. On one hand, as highlighted in its manifesto, PD aims to boost democracy in Italy. Yet, to build a strong and progressive democracy, it is necessary to build an inconclusive system. In this respect, the continuous growth in the number of people abstaining from voting should certainly raise concerns about the legitimacy of the current representative system. On the other hand, considering the last electoral results, it is evident that the right-wing coalition was supported by one in four voters. The most common choice during the last election was "non-voting", meaning that approximately half of Italians did not participate in national elections.[69] These are disengaged citizens, whose disillusion should be central to PD's political program, as they represent the most supported political movement in Italy at the moment: the one of "no vote". Abstention in Italy is not a new phenomenon, but it has been increasingly growing in the last 75 years. Without referring to the lack of political engagements by citizens as a simplistic notion of the "death of political parties", PD should focus on how to tackle this issue and foster citizens' faith in the party's capacity to represent their interests and fight for their needs. Indeed, since its inception,

PD has proved to be one of the most adaptable political forces within the Italian political landscape, striving to interpret the needs and trends of a frequently polarised society. Certainly, the overall party system in Italy has remained largely deconstructed since the beginning of the Second Republic, leading to profound electoral and political discontent. In this context, M5S, by avoiding the term "party", successfully gained traction among citizens, emerging as a third pole within the left-right competition. It disrupted the bipolar competition and challenged existing political alignments. Certainly, the PD majoritarian vocation did not help. Initially, the majoritarian approach was used by the party to secure the highest number of votes, eliminating any ideological baggage that could negatively impact its electoral appeal. Yet, in the long run, it has made the party appear to be a vote-seeking organisation, rather than a political movement with programmatic and innovative ideas. In this respect, it seems that PD is attempting to change such a trend, to reframe itself as a policy-seeking party and address contemporary issues with concrete proposals.[70] For instance, the recent embrace of innovative policy proposals by Elly Schlein, highlighted in previous sections, signifies a departure from traditional paradigms. By addressing climate change as a shared challenge, exploring basic income schemes and advocating for a reduction in working hours, PD aims to position itself as a party responsive to the evolving needs and aspirations of Italian citizens. Yet, to mark a departure from conventional leftist rhetoric and achieve support, in view of the next European parliamentary elections, PD needs to be more vocal and underscore its commitment to forging a progressive path in response to current complex times.

Table 5. Italian electoral participation since 1948.

Italian electoral participation			
Year	%	Year	%
1948	92.23	1992	87.35
1953	93.84	1994	86.31
1958	93.83	1996	82.88
1963	92.89	2001	81.38
1968	92.79	2006	83.62
1972	93.19	2008	80.51
1976	93.39	2013	75.20
1979	90.62	2018	72.94
1983	88.01	2022	63.79
1987	88.83		



Source: Open Polis.

Conclusion

The transformation of the Italian political landscape, marked by the end of the Second Republic and the rise of M5S capitalising on electoral discontent and disrupting the political alignment, presented significant challenges for PD. The abandonment of the class-struggle issues and the alignment with prevailing austerity dogma left the party vulnerable to criticism and electoral setbacks. Alternatively, the idea of being the "party of the nation" had a limited reception among citizens, resulting in the party progressively losing competitiveness and attractiveness. Within this framework, the beginning of the Third Republic has been characterised by intense political competition, with M5S gaining substantial transactions, especially among those low- and middle-income classes that supported social policies such as the "*reddito di Cittadinanza*". To date, PD seems to be recovering from internal divisions and the loss of connection with its traditional base to be able to play a crucial role once again in shaping Italian political institutions and governance.

The election of Elly Schlein as the new party secretary in 2023 has indeed resulted in a period of profound re-evaluation of the party's identity and policies. Not considered to be the favourite candidate by PD members, Schlein has been mainly supported by citizens who seek a fresh approach to labour, social and environmental issues. Certainly, her election indicates a widespread desire for innovation within PD, which should focus more on social policies and citizens' everyday needs.

Schlein was able to register a good electoral result in the European parliamentary elections. Yet, the Italian government is still led by Brothers of Italy, which also came first in the European electoral competition. Schlein now needs to be prepared to fight a long-term political battle at the national level. So far, the right-wing coalition seems stable and Schlein will need to carefully balance progressive values and pragmatic governance to increase the number of PD supporters. The choices the party makes in the upcoming months in terms of policies and coalition building will determine its role in the ever-evolving landscape of Italian politics.

Appendix

Table A1. Main Italian parties.

Main Italian left-wing parties	
Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI): Italian Communist Party	Founded in 1921 and dissolved in 1991. It evolved into the Democratic Party of the Left (DSI)
Partito Socialista Italiano (PSI): Italian Socialist Party	Founded in 1892, it fell into crisis in the 90s with *Tangentopoli* scandals
Democratici di Sinistra (DS): Left Democrats	Launched in 1998, the party merged into the Democratic Party
Partito della Rifondazione Comunista (PRC): Communist Refoundation Party	Created in 1991 out of the dissolution of the PCI
Sinistra Ecologia Libertà (SEL): Left Ecology Freedom	Founded in 2009 by merging into *Sinistra Italiana*
Partito Democratico (PD): Democratic Party	Founded in 2007 from the merger of the DS with *La Margherita*; it is currently the main centre-left party in Italy
Liberi e Uguali (LeU): Free and Equals	Founded in 2017, out of the union of left-wing parties *Sinistra Italiana* and *Articolo Uno*
Main Italian centre parties	
La Margherita (Daisy)	Founded in 2002 from the Italian Popular Party and other left-wing movements.
Italia Viva (IV)	Created in 2019 by former Prime Minister and PD Secretary Matteo Renzi
Azione	Launched in 2019 by Carlo Calenda
Democrazia Cristiana (DC): Christian Democrats	Launched in 1945, it was one of the main Italian political parties until *Tangentopoli*
+Europa (More Europe)	Founded in 2018 by Emma Bonino

Main Italian right-wing parties	
Forza Italia (FI)	Launched by Silvio Berlusconi in 1994
Lega Nord (LN)	Founded by Umberto Bossi in 1989 as a regional secessionist party, it then become a nationalist movement under Matteo Salvini
Fratelli D'Italia (FdI): Brothers of Italy	Founded in 2021 by former members of the National Alliance (former Italian Social Movement, MSI)

Endnotes

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2 Article 18 of the Statute of Workers' Rights of 20 May 1970 was judged to undermine the country's economic growth, as it allowed the legitimate dismissal of employees only under specific circumstances (i.e., insubordination, negligent behaviour, abandonment of the workplace or unjustified absences exceeding four days). In the case of illegitimate dismissal, the dismissal could be judged as ineffective, and workers had the right to be reinstated to their job. With the abolition of Article 18, legitimate dismissal can now occur for economic reasons, such as lack of work, or for internal organisational reasons, resulting in workers potentially being at risk of being fired at any moment.

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Biography

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