

# Matteo's third way: what lessons could Labour learn from Renzi's success in Italy?

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*Traditional centre-left parties have experienced difficult electoral results and low polling ratings in a number of European countries in recent years, including the Labour Party in the UK, the SPD in Germany, the PS in France and the PSOE in Spain. Yet one significant exception has been the success of Matteo Renzi and his Democratic Party in Italy, who have enjoyed strong polling figures since Renzi became Italian Prime Minister in February 2014. **Francesco Amodio** and **Angelo Martelli** write on Renzi's success and assess whether there are lessons for other centre-left parties in Europe, notably in the UK given the current Labour leadership contest.*



The current leadership of Matteo Renzi in Italy and the relative success of his [Democratic Party](#) (PD) cannot be readily understood without appreciating the context from which they originated. Despite being only three years old at the time, at the beginning of 2010 the PD was still perceived by most of the electorate as the result of a quite unsuccessful attempt to restyle the old Italian centre-left. Most of its leaders had already been active in the decades before. The party lacked a strongly defined identity and communication strategy. Despite the many years and failures of Berlusconi-led governments, the PD was perceived as being subordinate to the centre-right in agenda setting and incapable of standing up as a credible alternative.



Benefitting from his successful experience as mayor of Florence and his limited involvement with national politics in the recent past, Renzi spoke up and proposed himself as the forefront of a new leadership. Among the foundations of his platform was Renzi's mission of *rottamazione*: the "scrapping" of the old leadership. While campaigning against the ruling PD establishment, Renzi was able to shake the traditional political playground by putting forward a new identity for the Italian centre-left.

He embraced a strongly defined agenda of liberal reforms which threatened conservative interests throughout the entire political spectrum and society in a way that transcended the traditional separation between left and right. He also adopted a modern communication strategy whereby the gloomy messages of the traditional leadership were replaced by a fresh and positive message. Meanwhile on the other side of the political spectrum, the Italian centre-right has struggled to find an alternative to fill the void left by Berlusconi's fall.



Matteo Renzi at the June 2015 G7 summit, Credit: Palazzo Chigi (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

## What explains Renzi's success?

The brief history of the Italian *Democrat* is also the history of the introduction of institutional mechanisms of participatory democracy. Starting from its foundation in 2007, the PD introduced primary elections for the

appointment of its leaders and candidates at almost all levels of government. The party has thus been capable of meeting the rising demand for active participation that has later been among the founding pillars of new political actors such as Beppe Grillo's [Five Star Movement](#).

Primary elections improve the accountability of leaders, make it possible to challenge their leadership, and favour a renewal of party heads and elected officials. One example is the primary elections of December 2012, where one million voters had the opportunity to choose the party candidates that would be MPs. This led to an unprecedented change in the demographic composition of elected MPs in the direction of establishing gender balance (thanks to the adoption of gender-based voting rules) and a lower average age.

These institutional mechanisms of participatory democracy have constituted the basis for improving the accountability of leaders and have facilitated a rapid and effective leadership change. Only one year after he was defeated in the primary race to be the PD's candidate for Prime Minister in the [2013 elections](#), the primary elections of December 2013 appointed Renzi as party secretary with 68 per cent of the votes. By then, his one-time rival, Pier Luigi Bersani, had failed in his attempt to form a government with the PD and his successor, Enrico Letta, was struggling to rule in a grand-coalition with the centre-right. The internal turmoil and re-alignment of the old and new establishments after the appointment of Renzi as leader was fatal to Letta's government and ultimately led to the appointment of the former as Prime Minister.

### **Turning “the scrapper” into a political leader**

Roughly one month after Renzi's appointment as head of government, former Prime Minister and historical leader of the Italian centre-left, Massimo D'Alema, asserted in a TV interview that: “Renzi is successful because he beats Berlusconi on the same battleground”. This quote is revealing for several reasons. On the one hand, it highlights the frustrated inadequacy of the old PD leadership to understand the ongoing redefinition of the political battlefield. On the other hand, it also highlights the inability or unwillingness of the old centre-left establishment to actively look for electoral support across the entire spectrum, ultimately turning its traditional struggle into a paradigm of conservatism.

Renzi's success in breaking the stalemate in Italian politics lies in his emphasis on merit over equality: moving beyond the so called ‘vetocracy’, whereby no single actor can acquire enough power to take effective charge, toward an ideology based on real decision-making. Building on the growing unity within the PD, on several occasions Renzi has demonstrated an unscrupulous, Machiavellian-like approach in the pursuit of his goals by adopting a ‘variable geometry’ majority. The most prominent example of this is probably in the initial legitimacy given to Berlusconi as opposition leader – which was crucial in allowing the government to pass his package of labour market reforms known as the Jobs Act. This support was given to Berlusconi only to discard him later on during the [negotiations](#) over the appointment of the President of the Republic.

Despite some tough compromises and unpopular measures, Renzi can still claim to have ticked the boxes and delivered some of the promises he made at the beginning of his mandate, lastly with a reform of the country's electoral law. To date, the political price to pay has been the increasing discomfort of the internal PD opposition and sectors of society which criticise Renzi's decisiveness and the lack of political debate and collegial action it comes with.

Renzi's PD can essentially be seen as a hybrid of, on the one hand, Tony Blair's New Labour, with its reform-driven mentality, a ‘Third Way’ positioning and an efficient party territorial organisation. On the other hand, the PD's working institutions are reminiscent of the Democratic Party in the United States, with the focus on primary elections and the potential for a periodic renewal of the party leadership, allied to an effective communication strategy.

Renzi has managed to build a political platform which has altered the balance of the Italian party system by successfully combining a strong anti-establishment stance with a culture of effective government and decision-making. He understood that for the centre-left to succeed the party had to abandon its traditional rhetoric and

embrace democratic reformism and dynamicity, always having in mind the need to reduce the spread between promises and implementation.

The prerequisite for this message to be credible was Renzi's lack of involvement in national politics over the previous decades. But his success was only possible on account of the PD's internal structure, which allowed for the party platform to be sufficiently flexible and ensured fast and effective leadership change. In this respect the PD has much to teach the UK's Labour Party, as it seeks to negotiate a path back from its defeat in the 2015 general election under a new leader.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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