

The election of Matteo Renzi as the leader of the PD might herald a ‘New Labour’ style revolution in Italy’s centre-left

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Matteo Renzi was elected as the new general secretary of the centre-left Democratic Party (PD) in Italy.

[Arianna Giovannini](#) and [James L. Newell](#) assess the implications of the election for the PD and the wider political landscape in the country. They note that Renzi has generally been portrayed as a similar figure to Tony Blair in the UK due to his youth and ‘reformer’ image. They argue however that Renzi’s most immediate challenge will be to win control over the Italian premiership from current prime Minister Enrico Letta.



On 8 December, the election of Matteo Renzi as general secretary of the centre-left Democratic Party (*Partito Democratico*, PD), Italy’s strongest political formation, was more a coronation of a leader whose succession had been certain, than a genuine victory. Everyone, including observers on this side of the Channel, expected it. Consequently, while until a few months ago very little attention was devoted to the election or to the candidates, all of a sudden the British media turned their spotlights on the presumed winner. Indeed, already on 7 December, the BBC and the Guardian published political profiles of Renzi, defining him, *de facto*, as the new leader of the centre left and without even mentioning his rivals.

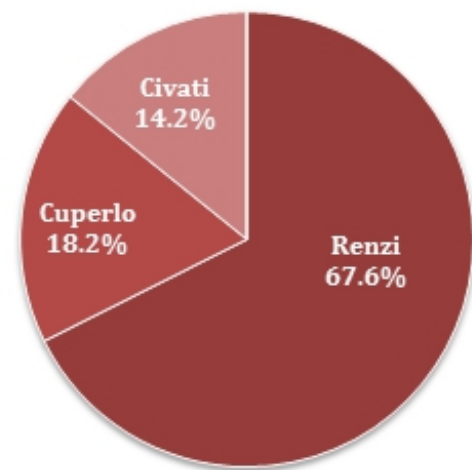


In fact, Renzi won the contest – which was open not just open to party members but also to ordinary voters, making Italy a unique case in Europe – with 67.6 per cent of the vote, against 18.2 per cent and 14.2 per cent for his two rivals, Gianni Cuperlo and Giuseppe Civati, respectively. Chart 1 shows the result of the vote.

Chart 1: Result of the PD leadership contest (December 2013)

Source: Commissione Elettorale del Partito Democratico

Though Renzi had an absolute majority in every region, it was noticeable that his best results were all obtained in the four so-called red-belt regions of Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany, Umbria and Marche. His lowest percentages all came from the South and islands. This can be interpreted as a reflection of his status as the “change candidate”. More than any other candidate, Renzi stood for a dismantling of the traditional factions and the power of party notables, and it is in the South that these have their greatest influence.

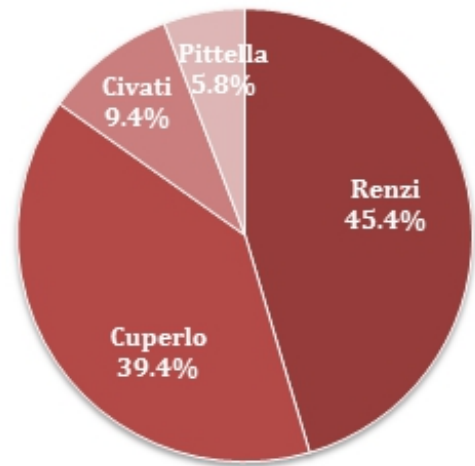


Their power could be seen in the run-up to the elections where, to be admitted as a candidate, the aspiring general secretary had to win the votes of at least 15 per cent of PD party members and the same proportion in at least five regions, or be among the top three candidates and have at least five per cent of party votes. In these internal party ‘pre-elections’, Renzi had achieved 45.4 per cent, compared to Cuperlo’s 39.4 per cent and Civati’s 9.4 per cent. Chart 2 shows these results.

Chart 2: Result of the internal party ‘pre-elections’ in the PD leadership contest (November 2013)

Source: Commissione Elettorale del Partito Democratico

Who, then, is Matteo Renzi, and what does his election mean for Italian politics generally? Renzi is probably best known, in Italy and abroad, as the young charismatic mayor of Florence who earned himself the nickname, *il rottamatore* (or “the scrapper”) thanks to his insistence that the PD needed to undergo fundamental renewal based on a generational turnover among its leaders and principal spokespeople. In November 2012, he took 39.1 per cent of the vote in primary-elections to decide who would be the centre left’s candidate for the premiership in the [general election](#) of February 2013.



Although he failed to defeat the then PD general secretary, Pierluigi Bersani, he had clearly staked his claim to the succession. When Bersani managed to lose the general election – or, rather, failed to win, by getting only a wafer-thin majority – it became evident that the centre left needed a new leader, one with the necessary charisma to enable the PD to rise from its ashes. So when, in April, Bersani resigned over the issue of the formation of the post-election government, Renzi was ready to take up the challenge.

From this point of view it is interesting to note that the image of the new party secretary conveyed by Italian, British and European media has tended to revolve around a comparison with two controversial political personalities: Tony Blair and Silvio Berlusconi.

On the one hand, Renzi has been compared, rather appropriately, with Tony Blair of the 1994 New Labour revolution. Renzi is young, as Blair was at the time, with the appearance of a well-mannered schoolboy. He is ambitious, charismatic, a very good communicator and is liked by the media. Similar to Blair, Renzi has a precise objective: to change not only the image of the centre left, which has been incapable of winning for years, but also its ideology, inaugurating a “third way” designed to appeal to both sides of the left-right divide and to distance his party from the trade unions.

On the other hand, the Florentine mayor has also been compared to his – perhaps now former – principal competitor, Silvio Berlusconi. This is due to his charismatic speaking, but also to his way of communicating, which comes across as straightforward and seductive. Crucially, such style appeals to ordinary people out on the hustings and has a big impact on television. Besides, Renzi and Berlusconi share the same battle cry: the reduction of taxes.

The next generation of Italian politicians?

Another feature political commentators have focused on is Renzi’s age. At 38, he is viewed as an almost bizarre exception in a country where politics is largely ‘grey and old’. So, between his gifts of charisma, his communication skills and his post-ideological ‘catch-all’ approach to politics, Renzi has been defined by many as the ‘necessary change’, the redeemer of all the ills of Italian politics, and a sort of ‘last hope’ not only for the PD and the centre left but for the country as a whole. In this sense, the election of Renzi as leader of the PD is likely to have a significant impact not only within the ranks of his party, but on the wider political landscape in Italy.

This was reflected in the turnout of the 8 December election, where 2,814,881 Italian residents and Italians living abroad came out to vote. In order to participate, voters had to be EU citizens with the right of residence in Italy. They also had to be willing to donate two euros and to make a declaration of support for the party and its programme. The turnout allayed fears that the time of year and the apparent certainty of the outcome would depress participation.

It seemed to support the view of Ezio Mauro, editor of the leading daily, *la Repubblica*, that, in the face of widespread anti-political sentiments, the election combined the demand for change with a surprising and comforting manifestation of faith in democracy and democratic processes. In fact, voter turnout was comparable with the 3,102,709 who had participated in the last such election, held in the warmer month of October in 2009, and the 2,802,382 who had participated in the second round of the centre-left primary of 2012, which had been open to a larger constituency of electors and whose outcome had been much less certain.

Second, it seems likely that the victory of Renzi will send shockwaves throughout the political system, bringing changes of political personnel, government and policy. He has given a voice to the demands for political renewal and has linked it to the idea of generational change. His election has coincided with the emergence of younger party leaders, such as the 43 year-old Angelino Alfano, on the centre right, and the 40 year-old Matteo Salvini, elected general secretary of the Northern League. In this respect, he has raised expectations for a significant turnover of the political class, with the likely result of a further marginalisation of the 77 year-old Berlusconi.

Third, the election of Renzi as the new leader of the PD means that the lifespan of the incumbent government – a centre-left/centre-right coalition under fellow PD spokesperson, the 47 year-old Enrico Letta – has probably been shortened. On the one hand, with minority support among PD members, Renzi, whose opinion-poll ratings currently far exceed those of all other party leaders, will almost certainly want to avoid jeopardising his popularity outside the party by being seen as responsible for an early government collapse. However, his credibility as an agent of change necessarily implies distancing himself from a government which by its very nature is driven by a constant search for compromise.

Furthermore, with the centre right in disarray, it is widely expected that Renzi will use this as an opportunity to push forward with his Blair-style policy revolution. Through policy measures such as tax cuts and restrictions on public-sector salaries, this may enable him to achieve what his British predecessor did, that is to extend his party's appeal beyond its traditional basis.

All that being said, Renzi's biggest challenge still lies ahead of him and revolves around his relationship with Enrico Letta. For the moment, the mayor of Florence has been elected general secretary of the PD, but he will not be the fully-fledged leader of the centre left as a whole until he achieves his ambition of becoming Prime Minister.

Ostensibly, Letta claims to support Renzi, but at the same time it is unrealistic to think that the incumbent premier will be willing simply to cede place to the new secretary without batting an eyelid. Seeing off Gianni Cuperlo and Giuseppe Civati has been relatively easy for Renzi, but the quiet, subtle and capable Enrico Letta belongs in another league. The real fight has yet to begin and it is the one that will see the Florentine mayor vying with Letta for the premiership.

A shorter version of this article was originally published in Italian by [the SISP \(Italian Political Science Association\) Standing Group Candidate & Leader Selection](#).

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