

# The PD's leadership election might signal the first step in the re-legitimation of the Italian political system

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*The centre-left Partito Democratico (PD) suffered a disappointing result in this year's Italian elections. After the resignation of party secretary Pier Luigi Bersani, a new leader is due to be elected in December.*

***Arianna Giovannini** and **James L. Newell** assess the significance of the leadership contest, which the Mayor of Florence, Matteo Renzi, is favourite to win. They argue that leadership contests of this nature have far more potential to engage citizens in Italy than they do in countries such as the UK.*



Seen from here in Britain, the elections to decide the next leader of Italy's Partito Democratico (PD), due to be held on 8 December, suggest that the party is attempting to undergo a process of profound, but also very difficult change.

Certainly, it has to be said that the British media have not so far given much space to the debate surrounding elections of this type. The reason is simple. On the one hand, newspapers and other media outlets on this side of the Channel often discuss Italian politics in negative terms. They focus on elections without winners and with too many winners; on Berlusconi and his court cases; on scandals and political corruption.



The election of the next leader of the PD represents a contrast to all of this – an attempt to restructure the PD and the Italian political system more broadly. Probably, therefore, the results will be discussed once they are known but, reflecting a degree of British cynicism, little space is currently being given to the mechanisms and power games that have been taking shape during the organisational phase preceding the elections.

On the other hand, primaries and “secretaries” (to use the neologism coined by Marco Valbruzzi) are interpreted differently in the United Kingdom. Here, this type of election is used mainly by the Labour Party (the Conservatives have introduced them only recently), but with procedures and aims that are very different when compared with Italy. In particular, they are (especially) closed. In fact, only Labour Party members and members of the affiliated trade unions can vote, and the party conference has significant weight in the selection process.

For this reason, primaries and “secretaries” are for the most part seen as procedures internal to the party – whose purpose is to give “appropriate weight” to the various political and trade-union stakeholders, and which are only partially open to ordinary members. In Italy, by contrast, they have a completely different significance, having been conceived principally as instruments which have become almost *necessary* in order to (re)legitimise the principles, structures and values of the country's weak system of representative democracy.



Matteo Renzi, Credit: Maryb60 (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

The PD thus uses them as a device for reinforcing its links with the electorate *as a whole*, and to (attempt to) increase the level of citizens' trust in politics. The British media therefore say little about Italy's primary and "secretary" elections, but also about their own, perhaps because, in accordance with traditional guiding principles, they tend to look at other cases from the perspective of their own, without grasping the significant differences of meaning and procedure.

From an academic point of view, however, debate surrounding the elections has given rise to certain reflections worthy of attention. Seen from Britain, the most striking aspects of the elections are two-fold, one negative, the other positive. The negative aspect concerns what the competition tells us about the depth of the divisions within a party that is attempting, almost desperately, to re-engage with its voters and supporters.

As the PD was a party that came into existence as the simple merger of two bureaucratic apparatuses rather than through any real process of organisational or ideological innovation, the dominant coalitions within each of the two parent parties agreed tacitly to share positions of power within what, as a consequence, has always been a highly factionalised entity.

In the aftermath of the [February general election](#), internal divisions were exacerbated by the failure to forge any kind of governing alliance with the Five-star Movement; by the failure to act compactly in the election of a new President, and by the consequent formation of the government of *larghe intese* which Bersani and his supporters had very much opposed, convinced as they were that Berlusconi's conflict of interests made him and his party inherently illegitimate as contenders for public office. Recently, internal conflict has even led to exchanges of accusations among the leadership candidates concerning artificial inflation of the party enrolments that will help them through the pre-election phase of the leadership contest and provide the ground troops for their campaigns.

More positively, by embracing elections for leadership selection open to the participation of citizens as well as members – thus making it a unique case in Europe – the PD has made a downward concession of power, one that is interpretable from a cross-national perspective as part of a family of changes designed to address the "crisis of party". It is significant, then, that the last leadership contest, held in October 2009, was a clear success: genuinely competitive, it was able, despite scandals and recent national and European election defeats, to secure the participation of over 3 million voters.

This time, however, the fact that the contest is being held in December and looks like being a foregone conclusion must throw at least a question mark over the likely turnout. In other words it is legitimate to ask whether, in this situation, Italian citizens who are PD members or supporters will be mobilised in large numbers – showing a desire to (re)legitimise the PD and the institutions of representative democracy – or whether they will take refuge behind anti-political sentiments or simple apathy.

One must also wonder about the impact of the likely outcome: frontrunner Matteo Renzi wants a dismantling of the party factions, but also a party that devolves power to local-level leaders. While a less centralised party might make it easier to attract votes from outside the party's traditional catchment areas, the two aspirations together arguably point in different directions in terms of party cohesion. And while the Florentine mayor mobilises the support of those hoping he will revolutionise the party's fortunes by an attack on its traditional oligarchies, the latter have already begun to jump on the Renzi bandwagon. Party renewal therefore seems now to be less of a priority than some months ago for a politician who knows that he will need to have all wings of the party united in their support of him if he is to retain the charisma he needs to satisfy his ambition to become Italy's next prime minister.

In short, it is difficult when viewed from Britain to disentangle the various knots underlying the debate surrounding the election of the next PD leader. On the one hand, the prospects do not seem especially rosy, a number of issues and problems remaining unresolved. On the other hand, if the PD is able *genuinely* to overhaul itself, starting with its top leadership groups, and to open itself to influence from below, then these elections for the party secretary could represent an important turning point, and not only for the centre-left. They could signal the first step towards the re-legitimation of the Italian political system in the eyes of its citizens – and, perhaps, also in the eyes of the publics that

observe Italian politics from abroad.

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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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