

Recent trends in Italy showcase the ‘presidentialised’ future of democratic politics in Europe

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair were both accused of taking British politics into a ‘presidential’ direction, with highly visible and ‘strong’ leaders seen as the defining political force. But this trend is not unique to the UK, with Italy also moving in this direction under first Silvio Berlusconi, and secondly the incumbent Prime Minister Matteo Renzi. The trends that have shaped this change are not unique to either of these countries as **Fortunato Musella** argues, with developments in Italy likely to repeat across the continent and influence the shape of European politics to come.*



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Some cross-national trends are changing political parties in all Western democracies. Many of these changes are at the full benefit of those at the top of their parties, who are now more able to gain more popular legitimation and exercise more powers than they were in the past. Indeed, if party leadership selections used to be an oligarchic intra-elite selection procedure, now an increasing number of parties allow members to participate directly in the selection of, say, the party Chairman. Moreover, the process of [presidentialisation](#) of democratic government brings about a shift of power and responsibilities from the collective to the [monocratic](#). Due to short and long term factors, such as the ‘*mediatization*’ of political life, as well as to charismatic appeal of single presidents, party leaders are assuming the role of the protagonist in the democratic world. So studying party leaders is becoming a way not only to analyse one of the most relevant actors in representative regimes, but also an opportunity to observe the ways in which democracy itself is departing from its traditional form.

A forthcoming special issue of the [Italian Political Science Review](#) (edited by myself and Paul Webb) aims to investigate the rise of “personal leaders” in Western democracies, including the UK, Germany, Italy and some Central-Eastern European countries. My article, arrived at through analysing a dataset including approximately five hundred party presidents in thirteen democracies, focuses on the personalisation of party leadership by comparing Italy with other Western countries. The analysis confirms that ‘party leaders have become more powerful and autonomous actors in recent years, by developing a direct and personal relationship with citizens’. In particular, Italy

seems a step more advanced than most democracies in three different key respects when it comes to the rise of individual party leadership; leader selection; party organization; and governmental activities.

With regards to the new procedures for the selection of party chairs, Italy reinforces the tendencies toward the enlargement of the franchise that registers in other countries. In the populist [Lega Nord](#) party, for instance, after Roberto Maroni announced that he was stepping down from the party leadership, a competition occurred between the party founder Umberto Bossi and the emerging leader Matteo Salvini, who was able to obtain a landslide victory with 82% of the vote in the “primary” and more than 8,000 ballots. The *Democratic Party* has also innovated with new methods of selecting leadership posts since 2007, when the party directly elected its the party secretary – the first case of this happening anywhere in Europe. Walter Veltroni was nominated as leader through the consensus of the party base, in a consultation open to all electors, and he obtained a plebiscitary victory. In 2009 Bersani occupied the highest party office through the vote of party supporters, although he won in a more competitive contest. Finally, in 2013 Renzi became the youngest ever leftist party leader and the current prime minister only thanks to the votes of his sympathizers.

If we want to see an alternative model of leadership to Renzi’s, we need only look elsewhere in Italy. In the *Forza Italia* party, and in the parties that have imitated its organizational structure in the last years, the leader is simply anointed by citizens or specific collegial bodies, with no effective competition for leader selection. The same is for the new-born *Movimento 5 Stelle*, whose leader Grillo acts as a natural leader, with no necessity to be elected through a membership ballot.

Centralisation of power in party organization is particularly marked in Italy in comparison with other democracies. If we consider, for example, the power of selecting candidates for national legislature, a clear shift can be identified towards widening participation within the selectorate. For instance it is relevant to note the novelty of the [primary organized by the Italian Democratic Party](#) for candidate to lead them into the 2013 national elections (called “parlamentarie”), with very high levels of participation and competitiveness. Yet empirical support has been found to show that, despite increasing the inclusiveness of candidate selections, party leaders still retain many instruments to indicate candidates, or to exercise a veto on unwanted nominees. Moreover in new Italian parties founded by their party leader, the president acts as a [plenipotentiary](#) figure by deciding candidacies and directly imposing his associates.

Finally, while party leaders also obtain central positions in key democratic institutions, such as parliament or government, Italy is following the pattern of Western democracies in terms of correspondence of party leaders and prime ministers too. Thanks to the bipolarization of the party system brought about by the majoritarian electoral system reforms after [Tangentopoli](#), coalitions started to nominate a candidate for premiership before elections. Later on, Renzi has become the first to become premier as a representative of his party.

This result has seemed to complete a process of reinforcement of the Italian head of government which has rendered the country a leader in the process of presidentialisation of parliamentary regimes. Italian executives have strongly increased their normative powers in the last years: in particular, Renzi has reached the incredible record of the quantity of decrees approved through a parliamentary confidence vote, a circumstance which has occurred more than three times a month during the first part of his mandate.

Italy is not to be considered a special country in the field of party leadership, as a lots of its trends have been shared by other advanced democracies. It is not wrong, however, to use it as a laboratory of party change, which shows to Europe its future towards personalisation.

Even after Berlusconi, leaders and their ‘personal parties’ will continue to change the very nature democratic



politics.

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