3. The Partito Democratico and Its Organisational Innovations: The Consequences of an Open Party

1. Introduction

Mainstream parties in contemporary democracies are affected by several social and political changes that are likely to undermine their legitimacy. What we defined as disintermediation strategies could be seen as parties' responses, on the organisation's side, to the challenges of this new context. The aim of this chapter is to analyse whether the Partito Democratico (PD) employs disintermediation strategies, how it implements and interprets them and which dimension amongst those outlined prevails. The PD is a party that was born in 2007 from the merger of two existing organisations with deep roots in the history of Italian parties; it can be considered a relevant case to examine because it allows us to analyse the organisational innovations pursued by a mainstream party.

In this chapter, the organisational history of the PD will be examined from its foundation in October 2007 to the end of 2020. Five dimensions will be taken into consideration: the selection and role of the leader; the role of party members; the selection of candidates; the determination of policies; and the role and characteristics of the party's intermediate bodies. To analyse the organisational history of the party, it can be divided into five phases. The first is the so-called genetic phase, i.e. the phase preceding the foundation of the party. The other four phases correspond to the mandates of the four party leaders that succeeded each other in the time span 2007–2020[22].

Two types of sources will be compared: on the one hand, party statutes and documents; on the other hand, interviews with privileged witnesses and party members. As highlighted by Katz and Mair (1992), party statutes

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22 Officially, there were seven party leaders in the time span 2007–2020, but three of them (Dario Franceschini, Guglielmo Epifani and Maurizio Martina) were elected by the national assembly (NA) of the party after the party leader's resignation, and their only task was to lead the party to the next congress. For this reason, they won't be taken into consideration. In early 2021, Nicola Zingaretti resigned, and the PD is currently led by Enrico Letta, elected as secretary by the NA in March.

tell only one side of the story, the official one, and then it is useful to compare them with the accounts of party members and party personnel regarding the actual distribution of power within the party. Moreover, we have seen that it is crucial to understand how actors perceive the stimuli that lead to change and the reasons for some strategic choices, as well as to grasp the discursive surroundings and narrative on party organisational change: interviews are the most appropriate tool to fulfil this goal.

2. The Genetic Phase: The 2005 Primaries as the "Founding Myth"

The so-called genetic phase is fundamental in order to understand a party's development, as it can influence its organisation in the years to come (Panebianco 1988). Initial decisions can indeed determine the frame of constraints and opportunities within which the party will act in the future. For this reason, it is relevant to analyse the period that precedes the foundation of the PD. The PD was officially born on October 14th, 2007, from the merger of two existing parties: Democratici di sinistra (DS) and Democrazia è libertà – La Margherita (DL). These two parties are the heirs of the two most important Italian mass parties, the Partito Comunista Italiano (Italian Communist Party, PCI) and the Democrazia Cristiana (Christian Democracy, DC).

The idea of creating a major reformist party capable of uniting the progressive forces of social-democratic and Catholic-democratic inspiration and of transforming the structure of the political system in a bipolar sense, had its roots in the previous years (Salvati 2003) but only became a reality in 2007. The PD is therefore formally a new party, but in reality, it is a merger party (Ventura 2018) deeply rooted in the history of Italian parties. Bordandini, Di Virgilio, and Raniolo (2008) have indeed observed that the most important representatives of the new party come from the two major parties of the First Republic, and that militants, middle-level elite, and national leaders maintain close relations with the identities of the past.

The definition of the rules regarding the constituent process of the new party was related to a committee composed of 45 personalities from both the two parties and the so-called civil society. The committee had the task of deciding how to elect a constituent assembly (CA), which was also in charge of drafting the party statute, and the first secretaries, at both the national and regional levels. Two alternative models were proposed (Vassallo 2006): on the one hand, given that the new party derived directly from two existing parties, the CA could be composed by the delegates of

the founding parties; on the other hand, the CA could be elected by the citizens according to the principle "one head, one vote".

These kinds of choices are not neutral and, as we will see, will have some consequences on the future of the party. The committee decided for the second option: the CA of the new party was elected directly by citizens with a proportional system. The party's first national secretary was also elected directly; each candidate was linked to closed lists for the CA. The selectorate was as broad as possible: all Italian citizens over the age of 16 and also foreign residents who committed to sign a charter of values and pay the minimum contribution of one euro could vote. This was an absolutely relevant novelty in the European political scene: it was the first time that the secretary of a party was elected not only by its members but, potentially, by the whole electoral body[23].

Numerous studies have highlighted a trend towards the adoption of inclusive methods for the election of the party leader (Pilet and Cross 2014), but the innovation initiated by the Partito Democratico is a radical change in the method of his or her selection. In Italy, with the exception of some rare cases, this process has always been managed by party elites (Musella 2015, 231). Indeed, as pointed out by Bordandini, Di Virgilio, and Raniolo (2008, 315), these initial choices highlight a tension between "oligarchical dynamics", namely the selection of the members of the assembly using closed lists, and "plebiscitary dynamics", the direct election of the secretary. In this way, what was essentially the merger of two parties is covered by a halo of popular participation.

In fact, there existed "the real danger that this operation would become only a sort of «cold fusion», that is, that the reorganisation between post-Christian Democrats and post-Communists corresponded to nothing but the unification of the ruling groups of the two founder parties" (Natale and Fasano 2017, 7). As pointed out by a senior executive of the Partito Democratico, the foundation of the PD "could appear a political class agreement and instead we decided to turn it into a popular fact" (Int 16). According to another, "the crisis of politics needed an external and stronger response, and not for parties to close-in on themselves" (Int 2).

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23 For instance, the French Socialist Party inaugurated the use of open primaries in France during the 2012 presidential election (see Lefebvre and Treille 2016). It should be noted, though, that these are primaries in the strict sense, that is, for the selection of candidates for elective offices. Italy is one of the two European countries that use open primaries for the selection of party leaders, the other being the Greek Pasok. For a comparison between Italy and France, see De Luca and Venturino 2015; Giannetti and Lefebvre 2015.

There is also a specific event that contributed to making this choice—to make the new party's constitution coincide with the direct election of the secretary[24] by such a wide-ranging selectorate—almost inevitable: the primaries for the selection of the 2005 prime minister, defined as the "founding myth" of the party and by some scholars (Vassallo and Passarelli 2016) as "the open party laboratory", as this primary election strengthened the building process of the Partito Democratico as an "open party". The primaries held on October 16th, 2005, legitimised Romano Prodi, the candidate of the centre-left coalition, as the prime minister candidate of the coalition who would run in the 2006 general elections[25]. These primaries were a crucial event for several reasons. According to one of their major promoters, the sociologist[26] Arturo Parisi, it was the first time "that the fundamental choices concerning the government are entrusted *directly* to the citizens" (emphasis added).

In fact, it was an open primary: those who had the right to vote at the next elections could vote, after having signed a political document and having paid at least one euro. Four million three hundred people voted, while there were about one million members of centre-left parties (Vassallo and Passarelli 2016). The 2005 primaries had a strong symbolic importance in two respects: on the one hand, they became a symbol of renewed and strong popular participation; on the other hand, it was, in reality, a poorly competitive primary election because, despite the presence

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24 The election of the secretary of the Partito Democratico is commonly called a primary election even if this is not completely correct. The term primary indicates, in fact, the selection of a candidate for public office. The use of this term can be partly justified by the fact that, at least until 2019, the party secretary was automatically the party's prime minister candidate. In the following pages, in line with the common use of the word by PD members, supporters, elected representatives, and commentators, we will call "primary" the direct election of the party secretary.

25 After some limited local experiences in the late nineties, primaries have been organised with some continuity in Italy starting from 2004. These primaries have three characteristics: they are asymmetrical (they are held only by centre-left parties), they are coalition primaries, and, above all, they are open primaries (Venturino 2009). In addition, we can note that the success of the 2005 primaries has had the secondary effect of increasing the use of primaries in Italy (Venturino 2015).

26 It is interesting to note that university professors (in particular political science and political sociology scholars) seem to have a relevance in the choices regarding the organisation of the new party. As I said, Arturo Parisi is a sociologist (as well as a politician). In the same way, Salvatore Vassallo (author of the paper on the organisational form of the party quoted above) is a political science professor.

of seven candidates, Prodi obtained about 74 per cent of the votes. The goal of the election was, in fact, more about giving popular legitimacy and strength to a "natural candidate" rather than actually entrusting the choice to citizens. This event also had some consequences on accelerating the founding process of the new party and on the configuration of its organisational model. As recalled by an interviewee strongly involved in the foundation process of the new party:

> There are various reasons why the 2005 primaries were held. Some have to do with the idea of the open party that took shape then, which has different roots. The idea of forming a party with strong leadership, a party not fragmented into factions, had a particularly high risk since it was formed by the aggregation of two previously structured organisations and therefore meant creating a party that was able to present itself with a clear line, etc. […] There was precisely the need for the centre-left to replace the absence of a natural, strong leader, who has control of the organisation, with an additional investiture. But the other reason was also that […] we had a conviction that the willingness to participate in political life, in the life of the parties, was paradoxically much more widespread than the willingness to register, to become a member (Int. 4).

We can therefore establish some points regarding the genetic phase of the Partito Democratico, the marks that affected its evolution in the years to follow. On the one hand, the birth of the new party was essentially the merger of two existing parties, and therefore an elite operation. On the other, in a context in which anti-party sentiments were strongly rooted, the birth of the party was ratified with the direct election of the secretary open to all citizens, following the great success of the primaries of 2005, which are considered the "founding myth" of the Partito Democratico.

Both the 2005 and the 2007 primaries were not competitive, since their goal was to give what is called an "additional investiture" to an already selected leader, and to give citizens the idea that they were directly participating in the life of the party. It was therefore an operation with a strong symbolic rather than a practical value: opening the decision-making processes to the citizens, showing that the new party was not the result of a political agreement, but was open to citizens. Moreover, the direct election of the secretary aimed to create a strong leadership, legitimised directly by a popular vote. And through this tool of direct citizen participation, the goal was to encourage participation outside the traditional party structures.

3. Open Party, Light Party, Liquid Party

With the primaries of October 14th, 2007, the Partito Democratico was officially born. The birth of the party was ratified by a primary election through which citizens (including 16-year-olds and foreigners with a regular residence permit) elected the members of the CA and the party secretary, at both the national and the regional level. In 2007 there were five candidates for the national secretariat, and Walter Veltroni (the former party leader of the DS and mayor of Rome) seemed to be the favourite, also because the majorities of the two co-founding parties supported him. Participation was lower than in 2005, but it was still high: three and a half million voters. Veltroni's victory, as in the case of Prodi, appeared then more like a legitimation of the natural candidate rather than the result of a real competition: in fact, Veltroni obtained 75,8 per cent of the votes (Pasquino 2009). The CA elected in 2007 was made up of roughly 2,800 delegates, and about 73 per cent of them came from the two founding parties, so there didn't seem to have been a substantial change in the organisational structure or ruling coalition, with the foundation of the new party. The CA had the task, through a special commission, of writing the statute, which was published at the beginning of 2008.

The model of the Partito Democratico has been defined by its promoters as the "open party" (Vassallo 2006). In fact, we can state that the fundamental feature of the organisational model, which makes it original compared to other political parties, is the opening of internal decision-making processes (selection of leaders, candidates for public offices and policies) to a very broad and inclusive public: not only the members, but those who recognise themselves as "voters" of the party. As we can read in the speech with which Veltroni presented his candidacy to the public, the so-called *Lingotto speech*, the "openness" that characterises the new party is pitted against "closed politics". A second fundamental characteristic of the party is its will to be a party that aims to have strong leadership.

> The Partito Democratico, an open party that proposes, because it wants and needs it, to fascinate the millions of Italians who […] find politics closed, and when they try to get closer to it, it is easier for them to come across the request to join a faction or a power group, rather than an idea or a project […]. In the Partito Democratico everyone will and must be, right from the start, at the same level as the others. This is why we wanted the principle "one head, one vote" […]. One method, direct election, was chosen, certainly knowing what the consequences are for having it as an internal life model. I had, and I

> still harbour many doubts, but so it is. Strong leadership must exercise all its prerogatives, none excluded, and must know how to do so by listening and sharing (Walter Veltroni, *Lingotto speech*).

The greatest organisational innovation of the Partito Democratico lies in article 1.2, dedicated to the principles of internal democracy, which states that "the Partito Democratico is a federal party *consisting of voters and members*" (emphasis added). The Partito Democratico, in fact, "entrusts the fundamental decisions concerning the political direction, the election of the most important internal offices, the selection of candidacies for the main institutional positions to its voters" (article 1.3). Therefore, there are two "subjects of the internal democratic life: members and voters" (article 2.1).

The voters (article 2.3) are those who "declare themselves willing to recognise themselves in the proposals of the party, to support it in elections and agree to be registered in the public register of voters". The voters have the right to (article 2.4) participate in the definition of the political direction of the party through the direct election of secretaries and assemblies at the national and regional levels, participate in primary elections for the selection of party candidates to the main institutional offices, propose their candidates should hold institutional positions, take part in thematic forums, vote in the referenda open to the voters, and take part (without voting rights) in the assemblies of the local sections (*circoli*).

In addition, members (article 2.5) can participate in the direct election of secretaries and assemblies at the levels lower than the regional one, be consulted on the selection of candidates, vote in referenda reserved for members, participate in the formation of the party's political proposals, apply for the party's governing bodies and endorse candidacy proposals. In short, "members can apply for the party's governing bodies, endorse candidacies, and they are the only ones to vote for local and provincial governing bodies; the voters can take part, in addition to the primaries in the proper sense, in those for the election of the national and regional secretaries" (Int. 4). As noted by some commentators on the statute (Floridia 2009; 2019), the boundaries between the rights of the two subjects, voters and members, are very blurred. Indeed, there seems to be a supremacy of the former over the latter—who are also, significantly, listed first in the statute. As stated by an interviewee who is part of the national organisation office of the party:

> The Partito Democratico gives shares of its sovereignty to the voters: through the involvement of voters we elect our national secretary,

and then we choose our prime minister candidate; through voters we choose our mayors or candidates for monocratic offices; it is clear that voters have a very significant role, which is different from the "normal" tradition in which members are those who hold the power to choose, to make this type of choices. This has also led, and it is a discussion that exists within the party, to the consideration of members playing a marginal role, because… Why do I have to register if I am able to exercise my powers, the most important ones, even by being a simple voter? (Int. 17).

Such a configuration of membership, so different from the role traditionally granted to party members, has different motivations. The first involves "the crisis of parties as channels of political participation" (Vassallo 2006).

The moment in which the party is born and its fundamental documents are written, it is given this definition of membership. There was an awareness that parties' traditional organisational structure was no longer holding firm because people do not enrol anymore, because people do not see the neighbourhood as the place in which politics happen anymore. Because membership in a party can also be membership related only to some issues, not necessarily an entire ideology that explains the whole world. There is also a certain rejection of mediation in favour of more immediate models of direct participation. Do not forget that the Second Republic was born from referenda, from the referendum movements (Int. 3).

It is not a question of replacing today's members with the "people of the primaries", but the primaries teach us that political participation can be considered attractive by a wide and heterogeneous group of people if it does not imply too demanding (all-encompassing) a form of "belonging" and if it has, in the perception of the participant, an immediate, recognisable, relevant effectiveness […]. Therefore, if the Partito Democratico really wants to be open it must provide a form of individual membership that is easy, simple, immediate, and user-friendly, to paraphrase computer jargon. With an adhesion that obviously does not exclude (and indeed is perhaps a prelude to) more intense and stable militancy, it is clear that there will be different intensities of participation and exercising the rights connected to membership […]. Membership must imply a right to participate directly in the main choices regarding the party's political direction and in the selection of its governing bodies (Vassallo 2006).

A second motivation for such a membership configuration is to make allegedly "non-manipulated members" enter the competition, in order to allow the creation of strong and contestable leadership.

> It was necessary to introduce non-manipulated members into the competition because this was one of the ways to question the consolidated establishments that were consolidated thanks to intermediation, that is, thanks to the fact that, previously, members were largely manipulated by a group of party officials (Int. 4).

What does this strong and contestable leadership look like? According to article 3.1 of the statute, "the national secretary represents the party, expresses its political direction on the basis of the platform approved at the time of his election and is proposed by the party as the candidate for the office of prime minister". The secretary can stay on a maximum of two mandates of four years, unless if at the end of the second mandate he holds the office of prime minister for the first term. The secretary is elected in a three-step process (article 9, see also Venturino 2015). In the first phase, candidacies are submitted to members in an OMOV (one member one vote) procedure. The first three candidates are admitted to the second phase if they have obtained at least 5 per cent of the votes and at least 15 per cent in five regions. The second phase is the open primaries: voters are called to vote for the leaders and the connected lists for the national assembly (NA). In the third phase, the assembly elects the secretary if he has obtained at least 50 per cent of the votes. Otherwise, a run-off occurs within the NA, between the two candidates who have received the most votes.

The fundamental innovation of the Partito Democratico therefore lies in the fact that the leader draws his support from the outside, and no longer from a more or less restricted group of people, that is, party members. Moreover, the internal bodies (the national assembly and the national directorate) are composed in proportion to the vote for the secretary, thus configuring a balance of internal power that derives from the vote, not by the members, but by the voters. In sum, primaries foster the autonomy of the party leadership *vis-à-vis* the organisation (Sandri, Seddone, and Sozzi 2020). As stated by a senior executive of the party:

> [The primaries] have changed everything; before you had to have the support of a narrow group of people, your members; now you must speak to a wider public. You don't win a congress if you convince the members, you win it if you convince the voters and then you need to have tools and methods to speak with wider public opinion and this

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changes the structure, the dynamics of the internal life of the party (Int. 16).

External legitimation is linked to another fundamental characteristic of the party model of the Partito Democratico: the equivalence of the party leader and the prime minister. In article 18.8 it is indeed stated that "if the Partito Democratico adheres to coalition primaries for the office of prime minister, the only candidature that is admitted among the members of the Partito Democratico is that of the national secretary".

As regards the selection of candidates for public office, the Partito Democratico institutionalises open primaries for the selection of candidates as a method. According to the statute, candidates for the office of mayor, president of the province, and president of the region will be chosen through the use of coalition primaries. If coalition primaries are not held, there will be party primaries. Even in this case, both members and voters can participate, thus conferring great decision-making power, considered a classic function of the parties, to all citizens. With regard to the candidacies of elected representatives to the assemblies, the statute states that the selection takes place at every level using the primary method or, also in relation to the electoral system, other forms of "broad democratic consultation" (article 19.1). However, in its first national electoral test, the general elections of 2008, the Partito Democratico did not use primaries for the selection of its candidates to the parliament: they were chosen by the party's governing bodies.

> In 2008, the candidates for parliament were chosen through a selection made first among candidacies emerging from the local sections, then the provincial and regional offices created a first list, then the regional secretary was sent to take part in a national table of candidacies and at this national table we tried to find some points of equilibrium between the national requests, the requests of the factions, the requests of the territories, and at the end those who started in the first positions could find themselves outside the list, and vice versa... Let's say a sort of slaughterhouse... (Int. 2).

Even as far as "the elaboration of the programme" is concerned, the statute of the Partito Democratico confers many rights to its members and voters. In particular, there are three tools listed in the statute: the thematic forums (article 23), the annual programmatic conference (article 26), and the internal referendums (article 27). The thematic forums' aim is to involve citizens (members and voters) in the drafting of programmatic proposals, while referendums are intended to allow their participation in the forma-

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tion of party decisions. According to the statute, the national secretary, the national leadership with the favourable vote of the absolute majority of its members, 30 per cent of the members of the NA, and 5 per cent of the members of the Partito Democratico can apply for a referendum. According to the statute, referendums can be deliberative or consultative, reserved for members or voters. Despite their innovation ("it represents politics that choose to delegate a decision to members", Int. 2), these tools have never been used.

> The internal referenda [have never been used] because in reality despite all the rhetoric, this idea does not make sense in a party. And this is due to the fact that internal referenda, if systematically used (and they are very complicated because… Find me more than four arguments that can be reduced to a yes/no in terms of policy…), they can only have two systematic applications: a plebiscite by the party leader or an internal opposition campaign that aims to put the party leader in difficulty on issues for which he may be in the minority at that particular moment (Int. 4).

As regards the party's intermediate bodies, there are three internal organs that make up the party: the national assembly (NA), the national directorate (ND), and the national secretariat (NS). The NA (article 4.1) is made up of 1,000 delegates and is responsible for the direction of the national party policies, the organisation, and the functioning of the national executive bodies. It lasts for four years and can impeach the party leader. The ND (article 8.1) has the task of implementing the decisions of the NA and is a political body. It meets every two months and is made up of 120 members elected by the NA with a proportional vote, and therefore reflects the balances defined by the voters' vote. The NS has executive functions (article 7.1) and is appointed directly by the party leader. Moreover, the local sections (*circoli*) (article 14) are the basic organisational units, and they can be of three types: territorial, environmental, and, as we will see in the next chapter, online.

What are the fundamental features of the organisational model of the Partito Democratico, from the analysis of its statute and the first secretariat? The most important feature and the greatest novelty is the direct participation not only of its members but of the citizen-electors in the fundamental decisions of the party (hence the label of open party). These fundamental decisions do not only potentially concern the selection of candidates for public office and the selection of policies, but above all the election of the secretary, who is also the candidate for prime minister, and

the governing bodies of the party. There is a direct and external legitimation of the leadership, which is therefore potentially more contestable.

We can therefore see that in the party model of the Partito Democratico there are the two dimensions of disintermediation: the opening of decision-making processes even beyond members and the strengthening and greater autonomy of the party leadership. A consequence of this great, even though mainly symbolic, opening of the decision-making processes is the loosening of the party's organisational boundaries. The status of being a member does not give significant additional powers compared to those of a voter, except for the possibility of endorsing candidacies, voting for the governing bodies at the lower level, and becoming a member of the party's governing bodies.

The Partito Democratico thus seems to have responded to the crisis in parties by opening itself up to its voters. However, the voters enjoy individualised participation, which is expressed basically at the time of the elections and does not have mechanisms of accountability, thus potentially leading to greater autonomy of the leadership. In fact, there is a sort of personal mandate for the party leader, an unmediated relationship between leaders and citizens, to the detriment of members and middle-level elites. This pre-eminence of the leader over the organisation is strengthened by the fact that the intermediate organs are established starting from the voters' votes (NA and ND) or nominated directly by the elected leader (NS). To sum up, on the one hand, there is a will to strengthen the party's leadership through the direct and unmediated participation of voters:

> [we had] the need to reduce the weight of the intermediaries, that is, their weight and influence on the internal party structure of the network of officials who are perhaps not so useful in a phase like the one we are living in, but certainly useful for the maintenance of positions within the party establishment (Int. 4).

On the other hand, we note that, in the PD, there are intermediate bodies and precise procedures of internal democracy, which limit both the leader's and the voters' power. What is interesting is the tension between persistence and change: despite the organisational innovations, the intermediate bodies are still mainly composed of personnel who come from the old parties. Moreover, against a rhetoric of openness and the direct participation of citizens, the process of leadership selection results in the legitimisation of a natural candidate. The most innovative procedures, for instance those for the selection of policies, are not actually implemented.

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4. The (Apparently) Solid Party

Walter Veltroni resigned in February 2009, fewer than two years after his election as secretary, following the party's electoral defeat at the 2008 general elections and at the regional Sardinian elections of 2009. There was therefore no time to consolidate either his leadership or the party's organisational model. Dario Franceschini was then elected by the national assembly as *ad interim* secretary and new elections for the leadership of the party were called: the first held in accordance with the rules contained in the statute. As we have seen, the candidates and their political-programmatic platform are first voted for by members using an OMOV method.

   The first three candidates and the lists connected to them are then voted for by the voters. The candidates in this case were Pierluigi Bersani, Dario Franceschini and Ignazio Marino. Three million one hundred supporters participated. Bersani won with a much smaller majority than Veltroni (53.2 per cent), and the members' and the voters' votes were almost identical. We can therefore say that these primaries were more competitive than those in 2007. The platform with which Bersani, a long-term politician who comes from the tradition of the PCI, presented his candidacy is called *Identity, Territory and Organization*. Against what was called the "liquid" or "light" party, Bersani's promise was to give greater solidity to the PD project, even from an organisational point of view.

> The question we asked ourselves in recent months is not whether we are an "old" party or a "new" party, but are we really a party: a free association of citizens with a recognisable identity, internal organisation, social roots, places of discussion and participation, as well as accepted and shared rules? Not having clarified these fundamental points has weakened the initial path of the Partito Democratico. In the aftermath of the primaries, we have disappointed both those who were linked to more traditional forms of militancy, and those who expected new forms of political participation and social involvement. We have lost an immense asset, cultivating a senseless juxtaposition between voters and members, whilst the voters are asking us for a more organised presence in the territories and in society […]. A party is organised in local sections (*circoli*) present in every municipality or district, in work and study places, in communities abroad, but it can really open up to voters only if it is rooted and recognised in the country […]. The Partito Democratico is *a party of members and voters* who pursue gender equality in political responsibilities. *Sovereignty belongs to the members*, who share it with the voters on the occasions regulated by the statute.

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Fundamental rights such as the participation in decisions at various levels (including referenda) and the election of governing bodies are acknowledged to the members. The Partito Democratico involves voters, through the primaries, to select candidates for elective offices with particular reference to the elections in which there is no preference vote. It takes part in coalition primaries with a representative chosen by the members and governing bodies. The primaries for the election of the national secretary require new rules inspired by two criteria: they must not be turned into a plebiscite and cannot be distorted by other political forces (Platform *Identity, Territory and Organization*, 2009).

At this stage, despite the emphasis on the organisational dimension, there were no significant statutory changes. What the Bersani secretariat tried to do, and this aspect can be clearly seen in the text on the platform, is to "provide meaning" to the participation of members, thus trying to shift the decision-making power from voters to members. In the absence of statutory changes that redefine the rights of the members, this seems a difficult task to achieve. However, the attempt seems to have been successful, since members seem to have the *perception* that they count more within the party. This perception derives from different elements.

In the first place, there truly is a greater consideration for the local sections and members, who are encouraged to take part in numerous campaigns that come from the national level. And this seems to work, although this participation is, according to the party executives interviewed, an end in itself, with the sole purpose of involving members (participation, eloquently reported as "dig a hole, fill the hole"). Secondly, there is an ideological proximity between the militants who, in the majority of cases, come from the PCI-DS tradition, and the new secretary and governing bodies. Finally, members were enthusiastic about the genuine expectation of winning the 2013 general elections. Although, as we have seen, there are no procedures and channels, apart from the primaries, through which one could directly influence political and party decisions, the interviewees perceived, had the idea, they were being heard.

There has never been a direct channel through which the discussions that you made in the local section came directly to the national level, but there were times when the base was consulted and the party tried to follow this path, to convey the idea—and it was often true—that if you participate in a local section, somehow your participation counts. You are not one of many, but together with the other members of

the section you can influence the decisions of the party. Of course, you can't influence decisions on national policies, but with a path through many levels… You bring a discussion into the *circolo*, which is brought to the provincial level, then possibly at the regional level and so on […]. So, it was never the individual member that counted, but you conveyed the idea that there was a path with several steps… The pyramid had the right shape, you start from the base and then you slowly climb until you reach a synthesis that is expressed by a national representative (Int. 7).

There were no statutory changes regarding the election and the role of the secretary in this phase. A substantial novelty, however, can be found in the coalition primaries for the selection of the candidate prime minister (called at the end of 2012 for the 2013 general elections) in which, according to the statute, only Bersani could take part. During these consultations the challenge by a young member of the party, Matteo Renzi, took shape. Matteo Renzi was the mayor of Florence, elected through primaries, and he had been carrying out a strong critique, mainly on a generational basis, of the party's establishment for several years. Renzi's critique of the party was that it was not able to keep its promises of renewal, given the persistence of the ruling coalitions of the two founding parties. The provocative proposal by Renzi was to "scrap" the old ruling class of the party, in favour of a renewed political class, without ties with the political traditions of the past (on the 2012 primary elections, see Corbetta and Vignati 2013).

After a great internal debate, article 18.8 of the statute, the one that states that only the party leader can take part in coalition primaries for the role of prime minister, was suspended, and Renzi was therefore allowed to take part in the consultations. Five candidates took part in these primary elections, two of which (Bersani and Renzi) came from the Partito Democratico. This was a two-round consultation with a run-off. In the first round Renzi got 35.5 per cent, while in the second round, as expected, Bersani won and thus became the prime minister candidate of the coalition. Another novelty was the method for selecting candidates for the parliament. Given that the electoral system established closed lists, the general anti-political climate and the fact that the M5S had already organised online primaries for the selection of its candidates, it seemed clear to the leaders of the Partito Democratico that it was no longer possible to decide on the candidates in "smoke-filled rooms", as before.

We made the choice that seemed natural to us, considering the electoral system present in that phase, with the closed lists. Bersani didn't

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> want to […] seem to be the man who wants to decide on everything and make lists in his image and likeness, but we wanted to leave the choice up to the territory, except for some candidates, chosen by the centre (Int. 2).

These are the so-called *Parlamentarie*, which are used to select and order 90 per cent of the candidates for parliament. 10 per cent of the candidates are nominated by the ND, while the candidates in the first positions are proposed to the ND by the secretary, after having heard the regional secretaries. So, 782 candidates out of 918 are selected by citizens (or rather, by those who had taken part in the primaries for the selection of the prime minister). In reality, we can state that the *Parlamentarie*, although representing an opening to the outside of the party, were highly controlled from above. Firstly, in addition to the number of "reserved" places, it is necessary for candidates, except the incumbent MPs, to collect signatures among the members. Secondly, it is the provincial office that defines a first draft of the list of names. Finally, the regional offices have to assign a precise number of places on the list to the various provinces, and the ND has the task of approving the final lists.

To sum up, in this phase, against a party model defined as open, Bersani's attempt was to strengthen the organisation, and above all the centrality of members with respect to voters, reinforcing the party's boundaries and internal organisation. It is necessary, however, to be careful not to get trapped in the contrast between the so-called "light party" and the "solid party". These seem to be more *narratives* of the party than really different organisational configurations. Moreover, in the previous phase, we noticed how party organisation had not disappeared; on the contrary, there was a persistence of personnel belonging to the two previous parties. Overall, the party model remained substantially unchanged.

We can also note that there was an attempt to restore the centrality of the party members. However, given that the statute did not change, the members' impression of counting derived more from an ideological affinity with the leadership than from a real possibility of influencing political and party decisions. Moreover, we can note that during the Bersani secretariat a further opening took place, both inside and outside the party, with the primaries for the candidate prime minister and with the *Parlamentarie*, where we see that a number of the candidates for parliament were chosen by citizens. This seems to contrast with the rhetoric of the solid party, even though in both cases we note that the procedures and the "rules of the game" were controlled from above.

5. Renzi: The Normalisation of the Challenge from Outside

After the defeat of the PD in the 2013 general elections (ITANES 2013) and the failure to elect the president of the republic (Seddone and Venturino 2015), Bersani resigned and the NA elected Guglielmo Epifani as secretary, until the new congress, called for December 2013. Notwithstanding the efforts to create strong leadership, six years after its foundation the Partito Democratico elected its third secretary, which was a sign of instability and poor institutionalisation of the new political entity.

There are two trends that need to be highlighted to understand the context of Renzi's rise to the leadership of the party. The first is the sharpening of the crisis of representation in Italy: the 2013 elections (which were defined by scholars as an "electoral earthquake", Chiaramonte and De Sio 2014) were characterised by a decrease in voter turnout and very high electoral volatility, due to the great success of the M5S. The M5S, a new anti-establishment party at its first electoral test, got 25.5 per cent of the votes and broke the bipolar dynamics that had been established during the so-called Second Republic. A second trend that we can observe, which underpins the transformations of politics in general and of the PD in particular, is the growth in the use and relevance of digital media and social networks (Ceccobelli 2017). It is in this context that Matteo Renzi found room to consolidate his challenge to the party's establishment.

At the 2013 primaries, participation decreased to two million and eight hundred thousand; regarding the results, an interesting datum was the difference between the outcomes of the two voting phases: the one reserved to members and the one open to voters. We see (Table 3.1) that Renzi also won among members, but with very different percentages, and his victory among voters came especially at the expense of Gianni Cuperlo, an exponent of the left of the party. It is worth synthetising the results of the 2009 primaries and those of 2013 in a table. And it is important to remember that the balance within the governing bodies of the party is determined by the votes of the voters, and not of the members: Renzi's success was constructed not within but outside the party.

Table 3.1. Results of the 2009 and 2013 PD primaries: first and second phases

Year	2009			2013		
Candidates	Bersani	Franceschini	Marino	Renzi	Cuperlo	Civati
Members	53.2	37.4	8.4	44.6	38.6	11.7
Voters	53.8	34.5	11.7	65.8	20.5	13.7

Thanks to the constraints and opportunities provided by the party model, Renzi's candidacy sought external support rather than internal support. The party therefore seems to have adapted "to a tendency that was implicit in some original choices" (Int. 4). Renzi seems to have understood and exploited the potential of the so-called open party in order to conquer the party leadership through direct and external support, provided by a broader base than by the party members alone.

> When Renzi took part in the primaries against Bersani in 2012 he had the support of three deputies... Three, it's no joke. Of all the parliamentary groups of the Partito Democratico only three MPs supported Renzi. So, it was a minority position that found extraordinary support outside the Partito Democratico (Int. 3).

> Renzi was perceived as a foreign body to the party by a part of the political and ruling class. It was, for the first time, a leadership that was imposed, not identified with and shared within the party, but which imposed itself from the outside (Int. 17).

Even in this case we see that there were no relevant statutory changes: the role of the leader on paper did not change, what changed was the style, the way the leadership was played out. Leadership, in fact, "varies according to personalities, depending on the idea that one has of the organisation of the party, and of politics itself" (Int. 2). As regards the role of the leader, Renzi, although positioning himself as a continuator of the Veltroni line, the line of the "light party" with a "majority vocation", represented, according to the interviewees and scholars, a break "in the method, in the communication; a political and even symbolic break" (Int. 17), carrying out unprecedented communication and agenda-setting modes (Natale and Fasano 2017). Other scholars stated that "his rhetoric, his direct approach to the party and supporters, together with a (conscious and capable) use of new media, suggest an approach centred on the leader that has no precedents in the history of the Partito Democratico" (Seddone and Venturino 2015, 487).

What were the characteristics of Renzi's leadership? First, and we also see this from the primaries' data, its approach consisted in seeking support outside the party and outside the boundaries of the traditional members of the party. In addition, there are two features of Renzi's leadership that emerge from the interviews collected and the analysis of the literature (Bordignon 2014; Seddone and Venturino 2015; Bobba and Seddone 2016): direct communication with followers, also through the skilful use of social networks, and strong and personalised leadership, both outside

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and within the party. With regard to communication, digital tools allow fast, direct and potentially bidirectional communication between a leader and their followers. As stated by a journalist working for the party's website (Int. 1), "the main feature of Renzi's communication is direct communication without intermediation". Therefore, an unmediated relationship between leadership and citizens is established through direct communication and identification with the leader, although this is a predominantly top-down relationship. As stated by a member of the national organisation office of the first Renzi secretariat:

> The transformation of the party in recent years has been quite marked [in the sense of] a much more direct relationship between leadership and our militancy and our voters [that currently] is still very much based on the top-down dimension, so it is the leadership that communicates with the base (Int. 17).

Even on the internal side, i.e. the dialectic within the party, the interviewees refer to a more direct and decisive style, also because of the large majority in the party's governing bodies. This is seen as a problem by an executive that was in charge of the national organisation in the Bersani secretariat:

> Once members held a power that derived from the fact that their representatives, within the party, proportionally had the power that they [the members] gave them: so, if a secretary got 60 per cent of the votes, there was a 40 per cent that still had power in the representative bodies of the party... If, amongst the members, one secretary gets 40 per cent but later gets 20 per cent among the voters, where is this power transmitted? It is transmitted to the leadership that, without having obtained those votes from the members, will govern the party with a strength that cannot be counterbalanced, because the members will be represented by a 20 per cent in the governing bodies, despite the choice made by 40 per cent […]. The difference that is created between the voters' and the members' data does not turn into power for a broader body, i.e. the voters, but it goes directly to the leadership. And so, there is an improper accumulation of power, compared to the normal situations of a party in the past (Int. 2).

This has had consequences on the internal life of the party, in the direction of greater centralisation of decision-making processes.

> The minority does not exist today in the Partito Democratico because there are no places to exercise that margin of possibility that the

congress has entrusted to those who did not vote for Renzi, because the DN is a voting place; Renzi does not even reply at the end of the debates, Renzi makes the introduction and then there are the discussions—five minutes each—often Renzi doesn't even reply, and we vote... Obviously the majority is taken for granted (Int. 3).

A few months after his election as party leader, in February 2014, strengthened by the popular legitimisation of the primaries and having a large majority in the DN, Renzi proposed that the national directorate of the party withdrew its support for the government led by Enrico Letta (who was also a member of the PD) and became prime minister of the multi-party government formed after the 2013 elections. For the first time, therefore, the roles of the party leader and the prime minister converged, as stated in the statute. This had consequences on the relationship between voters and members, and on the perception of the political effectiveness of the members.

The change that has taken place in the party in recent years has greatly transformed the role that each of us had in mind as party members […]. Now you feel you don't count at all. Because you have a national level in which the proposals, especially in the first phase of the government, arrive very fast, because there is a need for communication... Let's say that Renzi is very good, from this point of view […]. This speed does not allow you to hold a discussion in the *circoli*: if you have the prime minister announcing that in five days' time a law proposal will arrive in parliament, you feel a bit discouraged to organise a meeting in the *circolo* where you talk about that law […]. In an ideal world, from the *circolo* point of view, you should have a national secretary who opens a broad discussion on that topic, who lets the *circoli* have their internal discussions on that specific topic, who makes a synthesis at the provincial level and at the higher levels, up to the DN, where you take note or otherwise gather opinions (Int. 7).

But perhaps members' discontent during Renzi's secretariat is to be found more in the lack of political affinity between the leadership and members, rather than in the lack of political effectiveness of the members. As pointed out by a senior executive, in reality the militants "did not count at all even before" (Int 16). In fact, if on the one hand the perception of not being able to change the party line was heightened during Renzi's secretariat, on the other it emerged that the real problem was that the majority of members did not recognise themselves in Renzi's proposal. It seems, however, that Renzi's election as secretary sharpened members' discontent, as

they did not feel involved in political and party decisions, and were used as a "labour force" during electoral consultations. If, on the one hand, there is the perception of the breaking of the so-called "transmission belt" between members and party; on the other hand, it seems that the party was more open, through digital media, to external solicitations. These are individualised and unmediated stimuli, such as the collection of inputs via the party website and of comments on social networks.

> The horizontal and reticular dimension of social networks is exactly an answer to this [the problem of the relationship between members and party] because it shortens the distances... If today Renzi takes pieces of e-mails that he receives or questions to the *Matteo risponde*[27] and transforms them into pieces of his political discourse as a secretary or suggestions for governmental activity, in this sense, I believe that the organisational and not just the communicative power [of social networks] is strong (Int. 18).

> It has been thought that it is enough to write what one thinks on the internet and nothing else, but the discussion and then the creation of a common opinion has a different power compared to when everyone writes their opinion under a post... That is *Matteo risponde*, a way of gathering opinions that is neither right nor wrong, in my opinion, but it does not reflect the decision-making process that a party must have. Because a decision, an idea, is formulated with time, with discussions, with experience, and it cannot be just a Q&A (Int. 11).

The European elections, held in May 2014, certified the very high approval ratings among citizens towards the new prime minister Matteo Renzi: on this occasion, the PD obtained its highest result ever, 40.8 per cent of the votes. Abstention was, however, high. The policy style of the Renzi government has been defined as "founded on leadership" (La Spina 2016, 31), and the pillars of its government (February 2014–December 2016) were institutional, public administration, and labour reforms (Salvati 2016). The issue of institutional reforms was certainly the most relevant. The Renzi government was the promoter of a constitutional reform project whose main objective "was to restructure parliament through a series of changes that would do away with symmetrical bicameralism (a term used to describe a system with two chambers which have the same powers and the

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27 *Matteo risponde* is a live video chat on Facebook where Renzi answers the questions made by users.

same functions). In combination with the new electoral law, the so-called *Italicum*, the reforms would have had a significant impact on Italian institutional arrangements and on the mechanics of the whole political system, producing a clear shift towards a *majoritarian democracy*" (Ceccarini and Bordignon 2017, 281).

In December 2016, a constitutional referendum was called to approve the reform. The strong personalisation that characterised Renzi's leadership in this case proved to be a double-edged sword: the referendum became a vote "on Renzi" and his government and 59.1 per cent of citizens voted against the reform (Pritoni, Valbruzzi and Vignati 2017). Following this defeat, Renzi resigned as prime minister and secretary of the party, but in April 2017 he ran again for the role of secretary of the PD, winning the primaries (Sandri and Seddone 2018).

The primaries of April 30th, 2017, saw three competitors for the phase open to votes from members and supporters: Matteo Renzi, Andrea Orlando (minister of justice in the Renzi government) and Michele Emiliano (president of the Apulia region). Also because of the fact that members from the leftist faction of the party, including Bersani, left the PD to form a new party (Articolo 1 – MDP), in this primary we witness a sharp decline in participation, which stopped at one million eight hundred thousand. In this case, in contrast to the 2013 primaries, the votes of members and the votes of supporters almost coincided (see Table 3.2), meaning that many members dissatisfied with Renzi left the party, but also that in his first term as party leader Renzi managed to strengthen his leadership not only outside, but also within the PD. According to Sandri and Seddone (2018), in this phase the leader is the "organisational glue" of a party that faces a loss of members and participation, and in which the old ruling class has been marginalised.

As usual, these are non-competitive primaries. Renzi's victory, with almost 70 per cent of the votes, confirmed that the "external body" had been absorbed, and that the party—after the split by the leftist faction—was united around its leader and almost identified with him. In the face of such figures, we can say that the 2017 primaries served as a sort of re-legitimation of Renzi's leadership within the party, after the defeat of the constitutional referendum.

Table 3.2. Results of the 2013 and 2017 PD primaries: first and second phases

Year	2013			2017		
Candidates	Renzi	Cuperlo	Civati	Renzi	Orlando	Emiliano
Members	44.6	38.6	11.7	66.7	25.2	8
Voters	65.8	20.5	13.7	69.2	20	10.9

What were the characteristics of the Partito Democratico during Renzi's two terms as party secretary? Against the absence of statutory changes, what interviewees and scholars perceive is a marked change in the party towards a more direct and personalised style of leadership in the relationship with citizens and a more centralised style within the party and in the government. The real novelty lies, however, in the fact that, for the first time, in 2013 the secretary's support came more from outside than from within the party. This led to even greater attention on voters with respect to members. In this context, the spread of digital media was perceived as an opportunity to establish a direct relationship with supporters. However, the process of listening is only apparently bidirectional, since the choice of which stimuli to accept or reject always comes from the centre. In the same way, the listening to the members was apparently bidrectional during Bersani's secretariat.

To sum up, we can state that the preconditions for the success of a form of leadership such as Renzi's were already present in the statute of the Partito Democratico. Against the backdrop of a deep crisis of representation, helped by the spread of social media, the strongly personalised leadership of Renzi succeeded in creating a direct relationship with the electorate, more than his predecessors. However, in the absence of statutory changes, the party model remained formally unchanged: the only noticeable changes were in the interpretation of the leader's role, within the constraints and opportunities given by the statute.

The unmediated relationship between leaders and citizens has, in fact, been present in the Partito Democratico's party model since its genetic phase, as has the supremacy of voters over members. It seems that Renzi's leadership exploited and strengthened these dynamics. On the one hand, one can observe strong and more personalised leadership; on the other, the spread of social networks allowed the creation of a direct relationship of a mainly communicative nature with citizens. The spread of digital media seems to have amplified the disintermediation strategies already present in the party, which are facilitated by the general social and political trends that affected Western societies and were strengthened in Italy by the outbreak of the crisis of representation, especially from 2013 onwards.

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It is necessary, however, to point out that, despite a major emphasis on the figure of the leader, the Partito Democratico in this phase cannot be considered a personal party but rather a personalised one (Bobba and Seddone 2016). Renzi, in fact, acted within well-defined rules and procedures, through the majority he obtained, according to the statute, in the internal governing bodies. By statute there are procedures for the removal of the secretary, and his office has a defined duration that precludes any form of permanent leadership.

6. Zingaretti: The Party Strikes Back?

At the 2018 general elections, the PD obtained its worst result (18,8 per cent) and Renzi resigned as party secretary. Maurizio Martina was then appointed as *ad interim* secretary, in order for the party to elect a new leader, with open primaries. The primaries, the fifth in the short history of the party, were called for March 3rd, 2019. The rules were unchanged; six candidates were proposed, and after the members' voted three were admitted to the phase open to supporters. The three candidates were: Maurizio Martina, Roberto Giachetti and Nicola Zingaretti, president of the Lazio region. The primary election happened after the worst electoral result of the party, and in a phase in which the PD was in opposition. For these reasons, perhaps also because primaries were no longer a novelty in Italian politics, and due to the relatively low profile of the candidates, it did not attract much attention from the media or in public debate.

After a defeat such as the 2018 one, one would have expected a fierce internal battle, with different positions on the future of the party's organisation and on its programmatic profile. Instead, the competition was characterised by the absence of polarising issues and strong programmatic distinctions (Valbruzzi 2019), also because, as in most past primaries, the likely victorious candidate soon became apparent: Zingaretti. As regards participation, it decreased, both regarding members and voters (one million five thousand), testifying to the inability of the PD to broaden its decreasing constituency of supporters. As regards results, in the end Zingaretti was the winner with 66 per cent of the votes. Even in this case, as in 2013, despite the very different profiles of the contenders, we see that the support for Zingaretti came more from supporters than from members of the party (Table 3.3).

Table 3.3 Results of the 2017 and 2019 PD primaries: first and second phases

Year	2017			2019		
Candidates	Renzi	Orlando	Emiliano	Zingaretti	Martina	Giachetti
Members	66.7	25.2	8.	474	36.1	11.1
Voters	69.2	20	10.9	66	22	12

What were Zingaretti's ideas about the party? Even if the patterns of the support for the new secretary were similar to those for Renzi in 2014, we can say that after the long experience, and the failure, of the personalised leadership of Renzi, the aim of the new secretary was to break with his style and to give more importance to the collective nature of the party. In his platform for the congress, called *Prima le persone* (People First), Zingaretti denounced the "leaderships who have too often manifested selfishness and myopia", and claimed he would "replace the pride of the ego with the strength of the us". It is exactly the style of Renzi, considered adverse to mediation, that he challenged.

> In our field, the adversaries' myths were imposed […[for instance] that intermediate bodies are always useless and harmful, when instead they should be innovated and reformed as a fundamental element of a participatory and strong democracy […]. It is necessary The Partito Democratico leave behind the season of "disintermediation", establishing "consultation agreements" with economic, social, civic forces and with associations, foundations and think tanks with a political orientation close to that of the party (Platform *Prima le persone*, 2019).

With regard to membership, Zingaretti acknowledged the crisis of the party and affirmed that "sovereignty must move towards the base of the pyramid; we must make members, supporters, voters really protagonists". However, it is interesting to note that he made no difference between the three subjects. The new secretary stated that "the role of members and activists has been gradually reduced", and called for organisational reform, leaving behind "the useless and banal opposition between solid and light party". In his motion, Zingaretti called for the end of the identification between the role of national party secretary and that of candidate prime minister, to organise members' consultations on the political and programmatic strategies of the party, also through a new online platform, and to finally implement the statutory provision that provides for the organisation of an annual programmatic conference.

The statute was indeed reformed in November 2019. According to rhetoric that dates back to the foundation of the party, Zingaretti stressed

that, with the new statute, the PD would be "a more open party, which opens up to the participation of the people, a more direct one, and one that will make those who are part of it the protagonists". In reality, there were only a few relevant changes to the organisational structure of the party. The structure remained that of an open party that, giving relevant decision-making power to party supporters through the direct election of the secretary, supposedly strengthens the leadership and weakens the party's intermediate structure.

The most relevant change was that the party secretary is no longer automatically the candidate prime minister. For the rest, the PD is still a party "consisting of voters and members" (article 1.4) that entrusts to voters the fundamental decisions concerning the party (article 1.5), including the election of the party secretary. As regards members' rights, the only difference to the first version of the statute is that only members can elect regional secretaries, a decision that before was entrusted to supporters (article 4.5). Therefore, the boundaries between the rights of the two subjects are still very blurred. Despite the ten-year debates on this issue, there has been no change in this peculiar aspect of the party.

In terms of the configuration of the leadership and the leader's rights, the most important difference is that the party leader is no longer appointed automatically as the party's candidate party for the office of prime minister. According to articles 5.2 and 5.3, *when he deems it appropriate for the interests of the country and the party*, the secretary proposes to the ND a different candidate for the office of president of the council of ministers. When the PD joins a coalition and primaries are used to identify the candidate prime minister, the NA establishes the procedures for presenting and selecting any other candidate, in addition to the secretary, who will be admitted to the competition. So, we can see that the party leader still holds a relevant decision-making power on this issue.

How is the secretary elected? The procedure is still articulated in three phases, albeit partially differently from the past. Article 12 is dedicated to the *Choice of political direction through congress and direct election of the secretary and the national assembly*. The congress (a word that was missing in the first statute) is divided into two phases. In the first phase, which ends with the holding of the national assembly, programmatic platforms are discussed. The second phase consists in the vote of the members on the candidates for secretary. Finally, open primaries between the two candidates who have obtained the most votes among members are organised. The candidacies for national secretary are presented together with a list of the candidates for the national assembly; the candidate who obtains

the support of the most delegates in the assembly is elected. Furthermore, the secretary has the right to propose to the assembly the holding of an extraordinary congress on a single issue.

Therefore, the fundamental innovation of the Partito Democratico, that is that the leader draws his support from the outside, and no longer from a more or less restricted group of people, remains unchanged. Moreover, as before, candidates for public office are selected through primaries, as are candidates for the representatives elected to the assemblies, at every level. As far as the elaboration of the programme is concerned, the statute of the Partito Democratico continues to list a vast array of tools through which members and supporters can influence the policies of the party: thematic forums (article 30), the annual programmatic conference (article 33) and internal referendums (article 34). However, as we have seen, these tools haven't been used in the past. In addition, the new statute pays more attention to the issue of digital democracy, of which we will speak in the next chapter.

As regards the party's intermediate bodies, there are still three main internal organs that make up the party: the national assembly (NA), the national directorate (ND) and the national secretariat (NS). In the new statute, there is also the national assembly of mayors (article 7), an assembly of PD local administrators. The assembly appoints a delegation of five mayors who, together with their coordinator, are members of the ND. The coordinator is also a member of the NS by right. Like in the first version of the statute, the internal bodies (NA and the ND) are still partially composed in proportion to the vote for the secretary. A novelty is that the two organs are now composed according to territorial representation too. The new NA (article 6) is composed of 600 delegates elected proportionally, plus other representatives of the party in central office and one hundred representatives of the party in public office. Nevertheless, in matters regarding the removal of the leader and the selection of the prime minister, only delegates have the right to vote.

The new ND is made up of one hundred and twenty-four elected members. Half are elected by the NA using the proportional method, and half indicated by the regional levels among local administrators and representatives of the provincial federations and circles. As regards local sections (*circoli*) (article 17), the new statute mentions a new form of online aggregation, *Punto PD*, that can be created by three members belonging to the same place of residence, study or work. We will deal with this novelty in the next chapter. Finally, for what we will see in the chapter on the local electoral campaign in Turin, it is worth mentioning the new article

20 on the *Network of volunteers*. It states that the PD promotes a network of democratic volunteers, a network organised in local communities, who are to be active in the territories through specific actions and mobilisation campaigns.

To sum up, we can say that this organisational reform didn't change the main characteristics of the party. Zingaretti presented his candidacy in opposition to the Renzi experience, but we can see that there are many continuities: the role of the leader strengthened from the outside, and a rhetoric of citizen participation that, in reality, consists only in the participation in primaries. With regard to participation in primaries in particular, Figure 3.1 shows the evolution of the PD's membership figures, compared to the participation numbers in the party's primaries, both in the open phase and in that reserved to members. We see a constant decrease in the three figures, showing that the promise of greater members' and supporters' participation is not paralleled by a growth in participation over time.
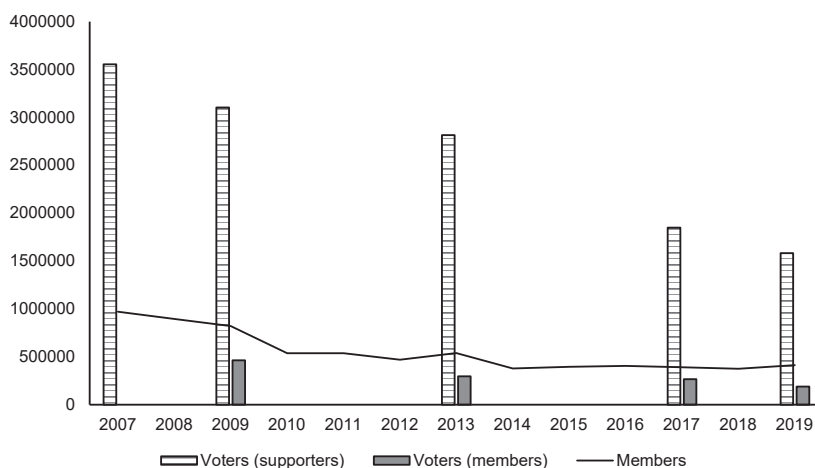

Figure 3.1. PD's membership and voters in primaries (closed and open phases)

7. Conclusions

This examination of the organisational history of the Partito Democratico shows that the promise of an unmediated connection between leader and followers is a fundamental characteristic of the party which has been present since its genetic phase. In fact, there are no significant changes in

the organisation of the party over time, at least according to the analysis of official party documents. Renzi's leadership is often considered a rupture in the party's history, towards the creation of a "leaders' party" (Bordignon 2014), but we saw that in reality, despite being the only one who took full advantage of the opportunity given by the model of the open party, his innovative style was finally absorbed and then superseded. In a context of accelerating technological change and a deep crisis of representation, Renzi exploited the opportunities that were already given by the party model more than previous party leaders, increasing the personalisation of its leadership, creating a direct link with supporters and thus developing, more than his predecessors, disintermediation strategies.

The party model of the Partito Democratico is based on the opening of decision-making processes to voters and on the direct legitimisation, by the voters, of the party leadership, through its direct election. Through this sort of "personal mandate", the leader is supposed to be strengthened both on the outside, towards citizens, and potentially also within the party, since the intermediate bodies are established starting from the voters' vote. The promise of the opening of decision-making processes to voters—and not just to members—is a very important novelty: in the statute we see that the voters have several rights, such as to elect the secretary, to vote in the primaries and to define the party's programme. In practice, we see how the greatest decision-making power has been granted to supporters in the case of the selection of candidates through primaries; in contrast, the tools for the determination of policies (e.g. for the definition of the programme) have never been implemented.

We thus find the two dimensions of disintermediation in the Partito Democratico: on the one hand, the leader, strengthened by the direct and personal mandate given by citizenship, is expected to be stronger, both inside and outside the party. On the other, we see that supporters (and not members) seem to increase their power. The leader is therefore stronger because he or she draws his consent directly from the outside, bypassing party members and the middle-level elite. The primary elections for the election of the secretary are central in this mechanism: indeed, they have been defined by Lorenzo Guerini, then chief of national organisation, as a "democratic interpretation of disintermediation" (Guerini 2014).

Finally, we can question which dimensions of disintermediation prevail. In the Partito Democratico, voters have great decision-making power, greater than that of members. We can talk about a blurring of the organisational boundaries and a bypassing of the members by the voters, who thus are potentially empowered (disintermediation from below). However,

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I have also shown that the voters' power is limited to their participation in primaries, i.e. it is mainly *symbolic* even if relevant, configures individualised participation and lacks accountability mechanisms, to the detriment of the organised party on the ground. On the other hand, we have seen that the PD, although it cannot be defined as a personal party, due to the presence of well-defined rules and procedures, has been built specifically to strengthen the party leadership (disintermediation from above). It is this latter dimension that, in the end, prevails in the party's practices: through voters' participation in primaries, the leader is supposed to be stronger outside and within the party, even because the intermediate bodies are representative of the voters' vote.

We can also question, however, whether new forms of intermediation emerge. In the case of the PD, we can say that, more than the creation of new forms of intermediation, the old party structures have not disappeared: intermediate bodies still play a relevant role. The PD presents an innovative party model, in which open primaries are the backbone. Nevertheless, the party has governing bodies and codified procedures that limit the decisional autonomy of the leader. Even primaries, the most important organisational innovation of the party, appear to be a party affair, and are used consciously by party elites to pursue their goals: to give the impression that the process of the foundation of the party is not only an elite affair, to strengthen and legitimise a natural candidate, to create the image of a party that is open and that offers renewed participation practices, or to conduct an internal challenge against old party elites.

Primaries appear to be, thus, "an elitist instrument behind a plebiscitarian disguise" (Sandri, Seddone and Sozzi 2020). And that is perhaps the reason why, in the end, the Partito Democratico failed to deliver on its promise of durable leadership. Except for Renzi's experience, which was initially seen as an "external body", and ended up being absorbed and normalised, we see that what the PD lacks is precisely strong leadership. The resignation of Zingaretti and the election of Letta as party secretary at the beginning of 2021 testify to this.