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Leader selection in Italian parties. Intraparty democracy in weak organisations, 1946–2020*

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Abstract. This study is an analysis of the methods Italian parties used to select their leaders from 1946 to 2020. Using an extended database originally based on the Comparative Study of Party Leaders (Cospal) project and collected through a content analysis of the statutes, the study deals with three topics. First, the individual requirements for candidacy are examined; second, the different types of selectorates are reported; third, a cursory test of the conformity between statutes' provisions and actual leader selections is proposed. The analyses show that both candidacy requirements and selectorates have become more inclusive through time; that the diffusion of inclusive – and cumbersome – selectorates has been followed by the adoption of alternative faster methods of selection based on some type of party council to be used under pressure; and that there is a large overlapping between formal and actual selectorates. A result of this work is a quantification so far unavailable of intraparty democracy in Italy on a long period.

Keywords: Italy, Parties, Party leaders, Leader selection.

WHY PARTY LEADERS?

Personalisation has been defined as a process of change through which '… individual political actors have become more prominent at the expense of parties and collective identities' (Karvonen 2010, 4). Although conceptually controversial, the trend towards personalisation has attracted the attention of scholars and is considered remarkable for its impact on numerous contemporary democracies. Rahat and Sheafer (2007) have contributed proposing a distinction among three types of personalisation. Institutional personalisation denotes the rise in power wielded by prime ministers within the governments they lead, a process also described as an example of 'presidentialisation' (Poguntke and Webb 2005). The media comprise the second arena in which personalisation has expanded dramatically in

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recent times; this type entails the overwhelming visibility of politicians within media coverage, with parties and institutions relegated to the background (Van Aelst, Sheafer and Stanyer 2012). Both politicians and voters may represent behavioural personalisation: politicians may disconnect from their parties, engendering 'candidate-centred politics' (Wattenberg 1991) during electoral periods; similarly, the choices made by voters could be driven by their assessments of leaders and candidates rather than the party attachment (Mughan and Aaldering 2018).

Political personalisation thus pertains to several strands of research, and as usual it has generated mixed evidence and many controversies. Yet, party leaders have been deemed pivotal actors, regardless of the point of view. First, popular leaders were considered relevant for their direct influence on electoral results (Aarts, Blais and Schmitt 2011; Bittner 2011; Costa Lobo and Curtice 2015; contra King 2002). Scholars have subsequently indicated the existence of indirect effects evoked by the electorate's perceptions of party leaders. For example, Garzia (2012) has demonstrated that the origin of party identification was once connected with family socialisation and social class; however, it is currently deemed the specific consequence of a positive appraisal of a leader. Ferreira da Silva, Garzia and De Angelis (2021) have instead detected a 'personalisation of voter turnout' because the propensity towards electoral participation is demonstrated to some extent to result from the approval ratings of party leaders.

Such leader effects are not confined to the domain of electoral activities. Webb and Poguntke (2005) focused on party organisations and identified a shift of power towards the party leader as a significant aspect of the presidential syndrome affecting democratic polities. Presidential or personal parties have become a recurrent presence in all party systems (Passarelli 2015; Kefford and McDonnell 2018); they may also assume the extreme form of the 'entrepreneurial' party (Hloušek, Kopečec and Vodová 2020), a hierarchical and centralised political organisation that is directed by its leader using business logic.

In this article, I adopt an organisational perspective to examine the changes in Italian political parties from World War II to recent times. The organisation of Italian parties has been extensively researched in the past[2]. The available analyses have included several topics, such as membership, finance, and cadres. Such a wide-ranging study would exceed the scope of this work, therefore I attend here to a single aspect of party organisation: how Italian parties have selected their leaders. Marsh (1993, 229) emphasised the relevance of leader selection via a path-breaking analysis presented in a special issue of the *European Journal of Political Research*. First, the methods used for their selection reveal a party's organisational style given the abovementioned importance of leaders. Moreover, leader selection is a crucial aspect to assess the extent of intraparty democracy along with the selection of candidates for public offices and internal referenda about crucial decisions on policies and coalition-building.

To pursue my goals, I have first examined the party statutes to collect data about candidacy requirements and the inclusiveness of selectorates. These data may be used in different ways. I have avoided employing advanced statistical techniques in the present context and have instead proposed tabular and graphical analyses. Also, I did not search for covariates that can presumably predict the changing selectorates of the Italian parties. Rather, I have presented my data disaggregated by decades to describe trends. In comparison to other researchers that have recently approached Italian parties from a similar perspective (Sandri, Seddone and Venturino 2014; Valbruzzi 2020), I make use of comparable techniques of analysis applied to a dataset unparalleled for duration and number of parties.

The article is organised as follows. In Section 2, I address the methodological questions related to choosing relevant parties and identifying their leaders. Sections 3 and 4 are focused on two types of formal rules for selecting party leaders, namely requisites for being a candidate and inclusiveness of selectorates. In Section 5, I propose a cursory check on the reliability of this formal approach through the correspondence between formal and actual selectorates. In the final section, I emphasise some general characteristics of Italy's version of leader selection and intraparty democracy.

PRELIMINARY (BUT RELEVANT) PROBLEMS

Who is the leader?

To start, it is necessary to identify the leaders of Italian parties. In left-wing parties, they are usually called *segretario* and are called *presidente* by the right-wing parties, although Lega Nord and Sinistra Ecologia e Libertà are exceptions to this rule. These parties' leaders are often assisted by a deputy leader in a clearly ancillary position, and I do not address that position here. I have also excluded acting leaders (*reggenti*) selected under pressure for a short term who are not acknowledged as

[2] A review (in Italian) of this body of literature is offered in Massari and Venturino (2013).

full leaders[3]. Finally, during the Second Republic, the recurrent practice of creating cartels and coalitions has generated electoral leaders who lack a supporting party, Romano Prodi being the most prominent case. I have also disregarded these examples of no-party leaders.

An additional dilemma arises from the coexistence between the organisational leaders and what we might call the frontmen. The latter are the party officials more known to the public opinion who despite their standing are not formal leaders; a recent example is Matteo Renzi, who holds only the roles provided for his parliamentary qualification, while the formal (dual) leadership of Italia Viva is exercised by the presidents, Teresa Bellanova and Ettore Rosato. In these cases, I have privileged the formal aspects and focused on the bureaucratic leaders.

Italia Viva under Bellanova and Rosato is an example of shared leadership, which has been applied, usually by new-left parties, in two ways. Rejecting the sheer principle of leadership, during their first years some parties did not create central offices but rather use large assemblies composed of dozens of activists. Parties that operate in this way cannot identify clear leaders, and thus I disregard them. Other parties merged and adopted dual leadership so that both founding parties are represented or, as in the case of Italia Viva and Verdi, to gender balance party governance. Parties in these cases have recognisable leaders, and thus I include them here.

What is a party?

In her comparative study of 17 advanced democracies, Bolleyer (2013, 1) excludes Italy because of 'the disintegration of its party system in the 1990s, which prevents a clear-cut application of a distinction between organizationally old and organizationally new parties'. Indeed, Italy's parties and party system are extremely challenging, and to manage the chaos I have made two critical choices. First, I consider only those parties that have gained at least a seat in the Lower House (*Camera dei Deputati*), and if a party is present in parliament even for a single term I consider the party's whole history. Second, although several parties feature an apparent organisational continuity through hectic rearrangements, I use name changes as the main principle to distinguish different parties. Applying these criteria, I selected the 48 parties reported in Table A.1 in the Appendix.

Data collection and arrangement[4]

The most relevant comparative research on party leaders is the Comparative Study of Party Leaders project (Pilet and Cross 2014; Cross and Pilet 2015). The chapters of these edited books are based on large datasets assembled by analysing several types of sources. I have built on that experience, utilising the same variables with a few amendments and applying them to different cases. To accomplish this task, I first performed a content analysis – a recurrent source for data collection in this field of research (Von dem Berge et al. 2013) – on about 120 statutes used by the 48 Italian parties I selected. These data refer to formal selectorates and have been used here to compile sections 3 and 4 (*The rules for candidacy* and *The changing selectorates of the Italian parties*). Second, I collected information on the actual leadership choices of the Italian parties under investigation. Party statutes were not suitable in such cases; rather, varied reports published simultaneously with the relevant leadership selections proved useful data sources. Data on the actual leader selections were used to write paragraph 5 (*How reliable are party statutes?*).

Another major difference between the original Cospal project and the present work concerns data arrangement. The original methodology involved data collection only for the years in which a party initiated a leadership selection. In this study, I collected data for all years, regardless of the scheduling of leadership selection. Additionally, the data for this study were organised and analysed in the form of party-years: in opposition to the Cospal original methodology, each party was separately enumerated in the database for each year of activity. For example, Sinistra Ecologia e Libertà (Sel) was founded in 2010 and remained active until 2016, for a total of seven years, so Sel accounts for seven party-years in the database. Overall, this duplication of information on the 48 parties for which I collected data based on their years of activity increased the available number of cases to 796[5].

[3] I make two exceptions to this rule: Vito Crimi was chosen as acting leader of Movimento 5 Stelle (M5s) in January 2020, Claudio Grassi of Sinistra Italiana in June 2019, and both still held their respective positions in December 2020, the data time limit. Under my general rule, both parties would have been without leaders in some years: M5s in 2020 and Sinistra Italiana in 2019 and 2020. To avoid this paradox, I decided to consider Crimi and Grassi de facto leaders and to examine them here.

[4] Additional information on data collection and arrangement are reported in the Appendix.

[5] There are 26 cases of missing data for three reasons: traditional parties operating many years ago whose statutes cannot be found (f.i. Msi, Pr); newly launched parties still lacking a statute (f.i. An, Fi, Pdci); and personal parties working informally without a statute (f.i. Idv, M5s).

THE RULES FOR CANDIDACY

How to analyse candidacy: a framework

To get a position, a candidate must win a tournament under the current rules of the game, and this holds true both for party leadership and representative public offices. Moreover, and again analogous to general elections, winning a competition for party leadership requires first being a candidate. Even if it is often hidden in the 'secret garden of politics' (Gallagher and Marsh 1988), this first step is no less important than the more visible final election. In fact, different rules can screen aspirants by creating momentum for some, disadvantaging others, and perhaps more importantly, excluding any who lack the requirements for entering.

Once it is agreed that the candidacy stage is important, parties in contemporary democracies can set rules for who is eligible versus ineligible for leadership. Parties establish their criteria along a continuum arranged in terms of inclusiveness and exclusiveness (Hazan and Rahat 2010, 19). Based on my analyses, I identify four types of candidacy rules. First, the most exclusive prerequisite to stand for party leadership is to be a member of a party council; this qualification restricts candidacy to a few party notables with long previous careers, usually numbering no more than in the tens in every party. A second and slightly less exclusive prerequisite is membership in parliament; this is the solution British parties maintain even since the important reforms adopted beginning in the 1960s. Third, a quite permissive rule imposes party membership as the only necessary requisite for leadership, so that any actual field of aspirants depends on the number of formally enrolled members, in theory allowing thousands of potential contenders. Finally, a party might impose no requirements at all for candidacy, which makes every citizen potentially eligible for leadership. Next, I address which candidacy prerequisites political parties in Italy have selected for choosing their leaders.

Basic requirements for candidacy

Figure 1 charts the basic requirements for candidacy to leadership for 48 political parties in Italy from

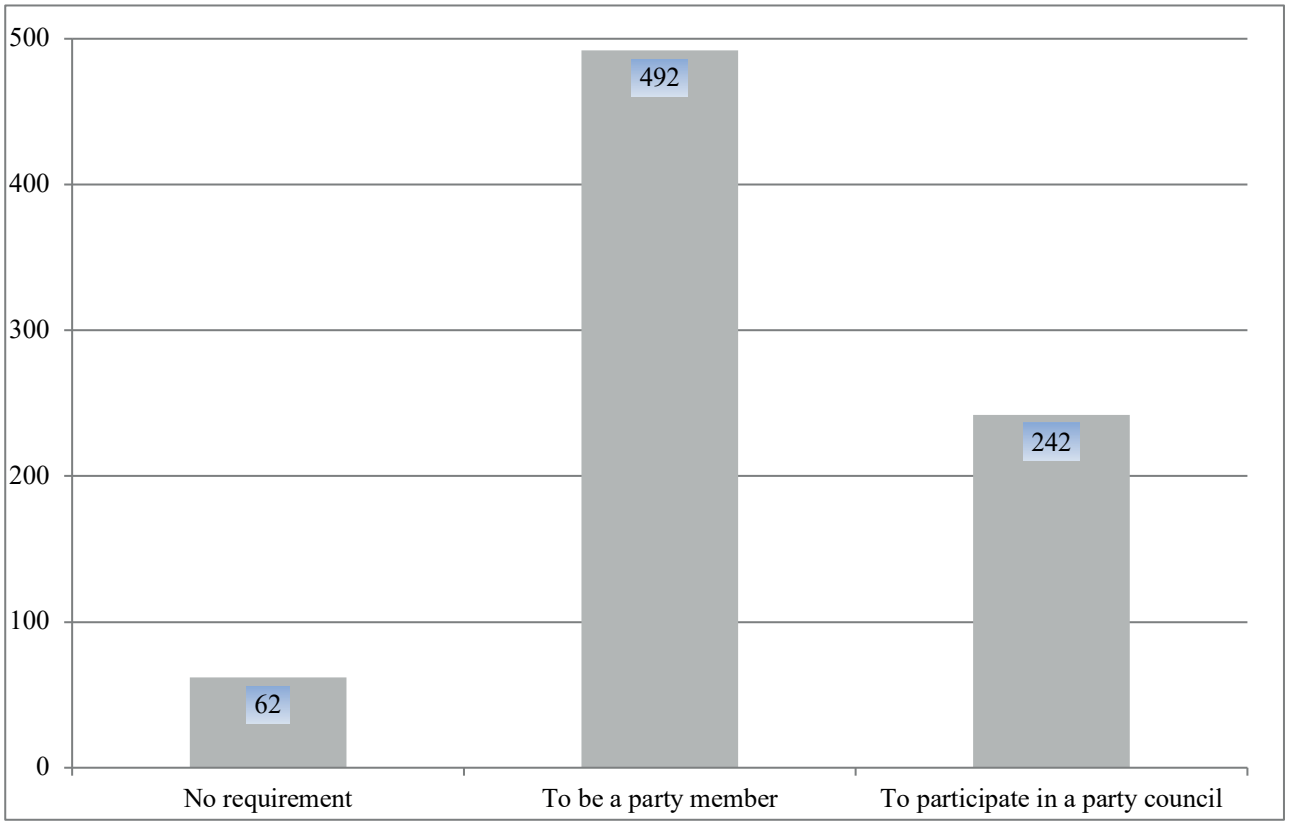

Figure 1. Basic requirements for candidacy for Italian party leadership, 1946–2020. Note: Figures are absolute years of party activity by year presented as party-years (N = 796).

1946 to 2020. Figures are the number of years parties have used a given type of requirement. The first piece of data I found striking is that no party ever required parliamentary representation as a criterion for eligibility for leadership; however, this is hardly surprising because this practice is restricted to Westminster democracies (Cross and Blais 2012), whereas parties in Italy follow an opposite model. Similarly, I only found 62 cases of absent party requirements for leadership candidacy, which applied to only five parties throughout the whole period. Two were long-lasting parties that had launched in the years of the First Republic. The neo-fascist Movimento Sociale Italiano in 1977 rejected the party council as the main entity to select party leaders and meanwhile removed all requirements to stand for the leadership. The case of Verdi is different. Launched in 1986, Verdi initially refused leadership in principle and were directed by a collective board until 1992. Subsequently, a recognisable leadership was created, but a still hyper democratic ideology persuaded the party to adopt the most inclusive candidacy rules. The other parties that imposed no requirements for becoming a leader were the moderate Scelta Civica and Partito Popolare Italiano and left-wing Articolo Uno. All three of these began during the Second Republic, and only Articolo Uno is still operative.

Nearly all Italian parties have reserved the right to restrain access to leadership, though most have enforced only the loose requirement of formal membership. The 492 party-years that party membership was required are accounted for by 36 parties that have mostly been operative in the Second Republic and that individually often only account for a few party-years. Parties chose leaders from members of an internal council in 242 party-years, which were disproportionately accounted for by only a few parties that were operating before 1994. Four of these parties – Msi, Pci, Pri and Psi – accounted for 29 party-years each, and the Partito Repubblicano, which survived the transition to the Second Republic, accounts for a record 75 party-years. In contrast, the short-lived Democrazia Proletaria achieved only nine party-years. The three parties that after 1994 maintained the requirement of membership in a party council are Pds, Rc and Pdci; all are heirs of the late Partito Comunista, thus path dependency appears to have driven these parties' choices.

The above analysis suggests that parties in Italy adopted different solutions to candidacy requirements

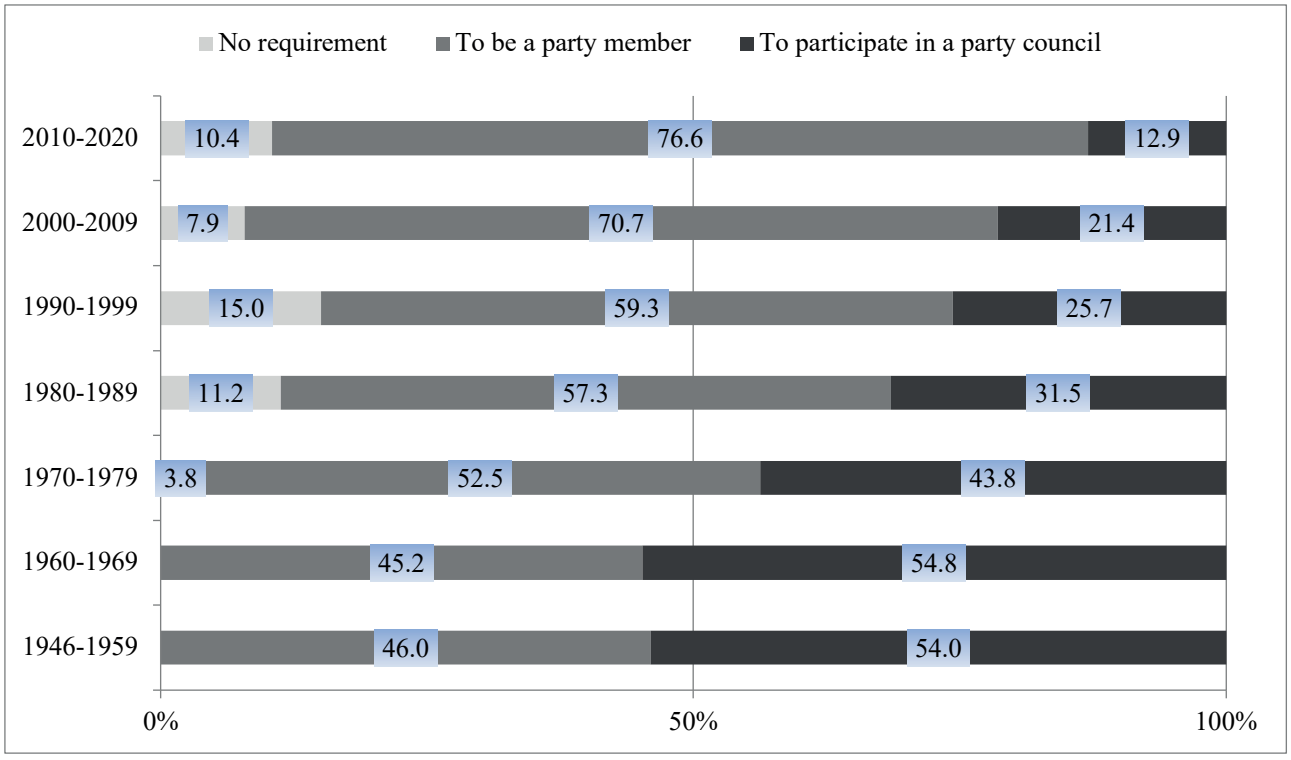

Figure 2. Basic requirements to candidacy for Italian party leadership per decade, 1946–2020. Note: Figures are percentages measuring party-years (N = 796).

Table 1. Basic and Additional Requirements for Candidacy for Party Leadership in Italy, 1946–2020.

Additional candidacy requirements	Basic requirements for candidacy			
	No requirement	Be a party member	Participate in a party council	Total
No endorsement	46	342	233	621
Endorsement by party members	9	113	9	131
Endorsement by party council	7	20	0	27
Endorsement by delegates	0	13	0	13
Endorsement by voters	0	4	0	4
Total	*62*	*492*	*242*	*796*

Note: Figures are absolute values representing party-years.

first in the mid-1970s and then massively in the passage from the First to the Second Republic. As time appears to matter, Figure 2 presents the three adopted solutions distributed by decade. During the first twenty years, party membership was a frequent prerequisite, but membership in a party council was still the predominant requirement for politicians pursuing leadership. Since the 1970s, membership in a party council, the most exclusive requirement, progressively diminished as the main candidacy criterion. Some of the diminishment was accounted for by parties that admitted aspirants with no requirements, but this nevertheless persistent practice never gained wide traction. Instead, party membership came to be by far the predominant requirement for candidacy. In sum, although only a few parties adopted the loosest criterion for pursuing party leadership – mere citizenship with no supplementary requirements – candidacy criteria grew much less strict from 1946 to 2020 as most parties came to merely require party members to be a candidate for the party's leadership.

Additional requirements for candidacy

Beyond the basic prerequisites just examined, parties can adopt additional requirements to further circumscribe candidate pools. For instance, some parties that want only party members as candidates can impose a length of active membership for eligibility to run for leadership. The only party in Italy with this requirement is Lega Nord, which initially admitted for candidacy only members who had been active for at least five years, and this time limit has been later extended to ten years[6]. In other political systems, some parties have established age limits to foster leader turnover, but this never happened in Italy. Instead, the typical additional requirement in Italy is a formal endorsement from party actors to be verified with signatures. The intended aim of this practice is to avoid frivolous entries lacking viability, but that eventually could alter the competition among main candidates and influence the results. Table 1 shows the requirements parties in Italy have added beyond the baselines. The first row of the table shows that in 621 out of 796 party-years no parties required that a candidate has a party endorsement to be eligible for party leadership – a striking 78 per cent. Rather, when endorsements are required party members are the most common endorsers, while few parties have envisaged party councils and congress delegates, and only Fratelli d'Italia has requested ordinary voters, for only a few years at that.

Two intriguing cases in Table 1 are Democrazia Proletaria and Partito Popolare Italiano. Following the tradition of Communist parties, Dp restricted leadership candidacy to members of the *Direzione Nazionale* – a party council composed of 60 officials – but also introduced the novelty of the endorsement by party members. Strangely, the moderate Ppi mixed the most inclusive arrangement for candidacy – no requirement at all – with the severe requirement of an endorsement by the members of a party council. No Italian party ever required endorsement by legislators for eligibility to party leadership.

THE CHANGING SELECTORATES OF THE ITALIAN PARTIES

How parties select their leaders

In their pioneering book, Hazan and Rahat (2010), in the process of proposing a general framework for analysing political recruitment, identified two

[6] Lega Nord, statute 2002, art. 10; Lega Nord, statute 2012, art. 10. The requirement for ten years of membership has been maintained in the various statutes of the Lega per Salvini premier, the heir of the Lega Nord launched in 2018.

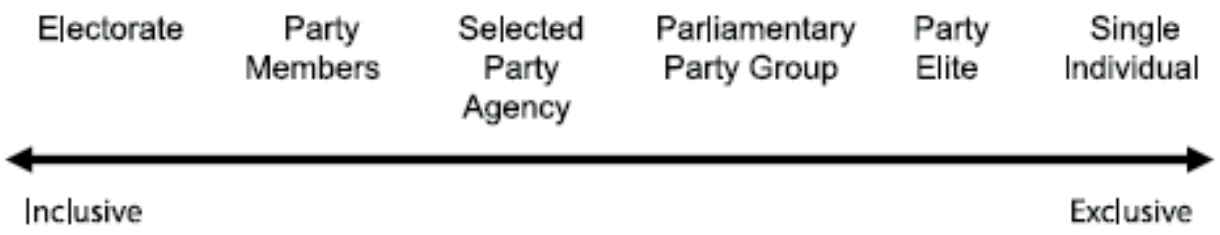

Figure 3. Classification of the selectorates for party leadership by level of inclusiveness. Source: Kenig 2009, 435.

dimensions necessary to categorise selection methods: selectorate and decentralisation. Because most prior researchers have emphasised the former, I focus on selectorates as well, with the aim of answering the seemingly simple question of who selects a party's leader. To start with, Figure 3 presents the six existing selectorates in their order of inclusiveness versus exclusiveness (Kenig 2009); the figure shows the most exclusive selectorate to be a single individual, which is uncommon in modern democracies. It operates infrequently when the outgoing leader or the spiritual chief of a religious party is wholly empowered to choose the new leader. A party's elite comprises a restricted group of political professionals or party notables who have been empowered to select the leader, though sometimes informally. The 'emergence' of the Conservative leader by a magic circle before the 1963 reform is often cited as an exemplary case (Punnett 1992; Stark 1996). In other cases, a party elite may follow a tight regulation, for instance when it determines that an internal board of party officials is entrusted to choose the party leader, as happens in the Swedish party system (Aylott and Bolin 2020a). The parliamentary party group has been a recurrent selectorate in the Westminster democracies, although most parties in the United Kingdom and Canada have adopted reforms to enhance internal democracy (Quinn 2012; Pruysers and Stewart 2018). Continuing the range in Figure 3, by 'selected party agency' Kenig means the party congress – also said conference or assembly – practised by most parties in Western Europe. In this case, all party members elect from among themselves teams of delegates in a number usually varying from some hundreds to a couple of thousands. The delegates convene at the party's congress to elect all the party councils and the party leader. Finally, when party members or the whole electorate are empowered, we enter the 'primary zone' (Cross et al. 2016, 23-24). Primaries can be used for selecting both leaders and candidates, and they are the most recurrent examples of internal democracy. Primaries are closed when members are the enabled selectors and open when all voters have the upper hand.

Figure 3 presents all existing methods of selection as 'simple'. Hazan and Rahat (2010, 35) argue that methods are simple when a single selectorate chooses a candidate or leader, but real politics is more intricate; researchers have in fact found that most parties follow more complex selection procedures (Hazan and Rahat 2010, 36; Cross et al. 2016, 29-34). In these cases, would-be leaders and candidates face more than a selectorate. Given that these multiple selectorates inescapably feature different levels of inclusiveness, assessing and even just categorising these complex methods is challenging, and researchers have not agreed on any definitive solutions (Hazan and Rahat 2010, 49). Here I prefer to condense complex selection methods to simpler ones using the most inclusive selectorate as a reference criterion. Admittedly, this is a disputable procedure affected by subjective choices, but what are the impacts of this decision?

Of the 796 total party-years from 1946 to 2020, statutes empower single selectorates to select candidates under simple methods in 769 party-years. This left 27 party-years in which parties chose candidates following complex methods, only 3.4 per cent of the total; moreover, only three parties accounted for these 27 party-years. Given this small size, I am confident that these methodological choices had no real impact on my results. Among the three parties that used complex methods to select candidates, in the years 2009-2012 Italia dei Valori selected its leader in a congress of delegates elected by party members and integrated by three types of 'superdelegates', namely the members of the *Esecutivo Nazionale* (a party council), the national legislators and representatives elected in local institutions[7]. In the same vein, Centro Democratico provides for a congress of 1,000 delegates along with national

[7] The 2012 statute also included representatives from international institutions. This obscure provision could be referring to members of the European Parliament.

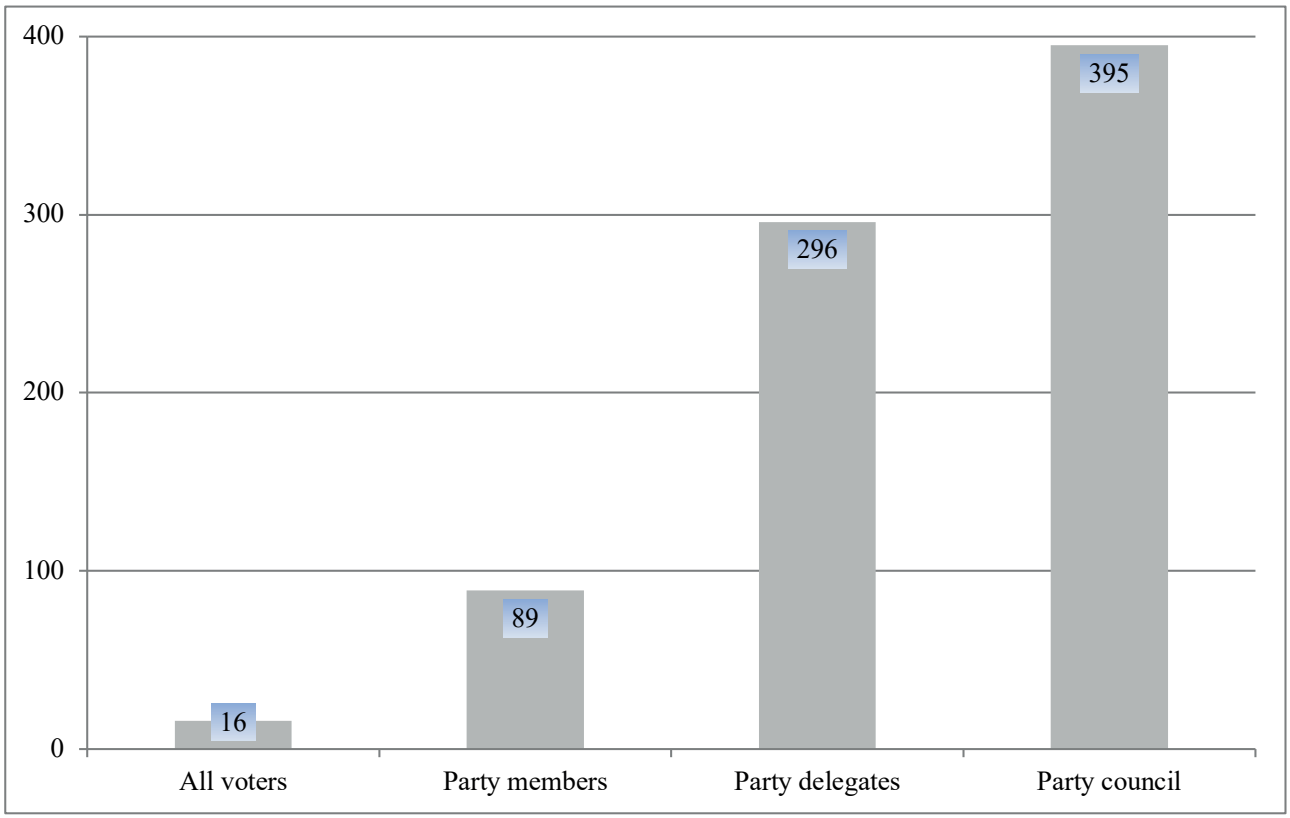

Figure 4. Selectorates used by Italian parties to select their leaders, 1946–2020. Note: Figures are absolute values presented as party-years (N = 796).

legislators and local public officers to select leaders. The Partito Democratico, however, since 2007 follows the most inventive complex procedure to select party leaders in three stages (Venturino 2015): First, party members screen three from all aspirants; second, all eligible voters can choose from among those three in an open primary election; third, if no candidate gains a majority of votes, then the Assemblea Nazionale – a permanent party council here temporarily operating as an electoral college – holds a runoff between the top two primary candidates. Following the reasoning above, I categorised the method of Italia dei Valori and Centro Democratico as selection by a congress of delegates and the Partito Democratico's process as selection by open primary election[8].

[8] I should add that in the five contested primaries to date, the winning candidate gained a majority of votes and thereby curbed the role of the party council. Moreover, the statute adopted in 2019 limits access to open primaries to two candidates, which clearly ruled out the Assemblea Nazionale. The new method will be used in the primaries scheduled in 2023.

Who select(ed) the Italian party leaders?

Political parties in Italy, although they are numerous, have not used all the possible methods I discussed above to select their party leaders. For instance, whereas parties in English-speaking democracies have empowered parliamentary groups, no Italian party ever preferred such a solution. Moreover, no party in Italy has ever let a single individual select the party's leader. This could appear strange given that researchers have identified Italy as a country with notable personalisation of its political parties (Rahat and Kenig 2018, 200); it seems intuitive that highly personalised parties would be particularly suited to empowering their incumbent leaders to select their heirs.

I speculate that this did not happen in Italy for a variety of reasons. First, whereas in some countries such as France, the personalisation of leadership dates to the 1960s, this personalisation only began in Italy in the mid-1990s after the demise of the traditional party system. In other words, personalisation in Italy is a pervasive but recent trend. Second, some Italian leaders are extremely resilient. Consider for instance the case of Silvio Ber-

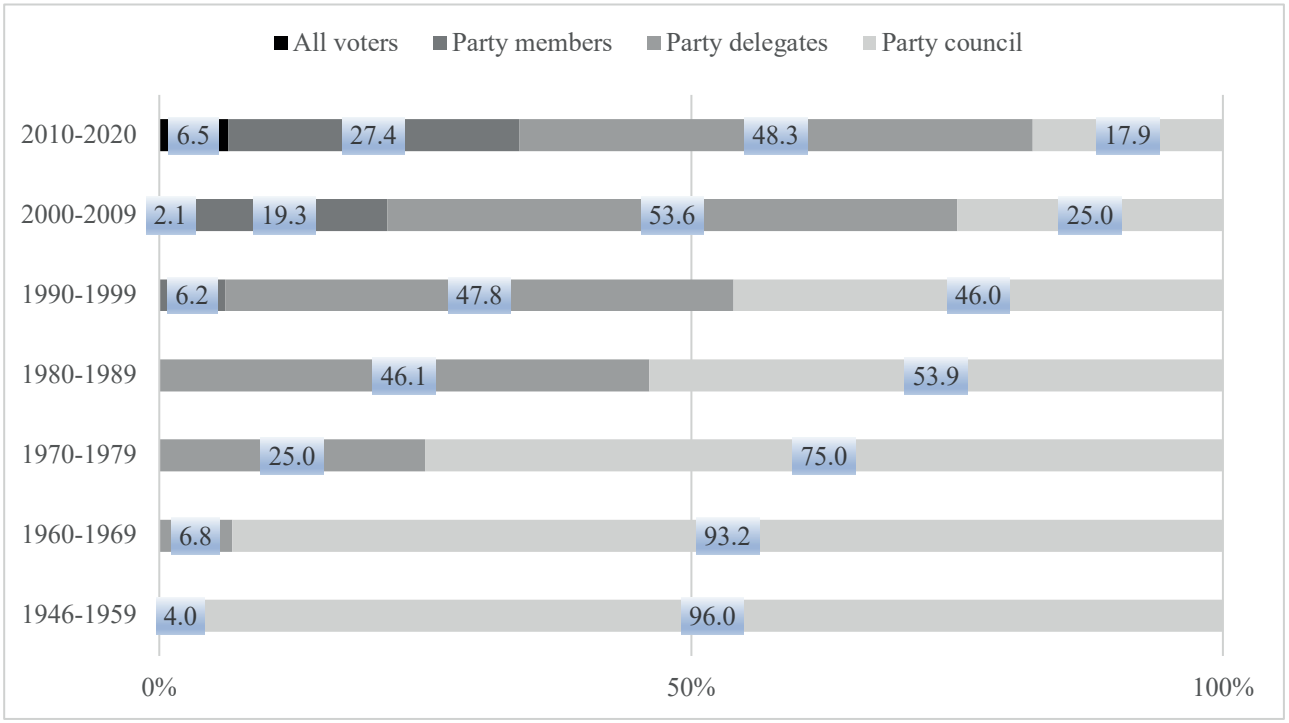

Figure 5. Italian parties' selectorates per decade, 1946–2020. Note: Figures are percentages representing party-years (N = 796).

lusconi, who launched Forza Italia in 1994 and still maintained his leadership in 2021 at age 85; he repeatedly chose an heir apparent to alternate his leadership, but ultimately he never stepped down. Third, current Italian parties are extremely de-institutionalised; therefore, most personal parties simply did not survive the political ends of their founders. Fourth, Lega Nord presents a clear case of how a personal party chose a usual method of selection – a closed primary election – to ease the replacement of the sitting leader by a younger challenger.

All things considered, when analysing the selectorates used by the Italian parties we are left with the four cases reported in Figure 4. The figure shows that the most common has been the party council, a party board designated through proportional systems by delegates during a national congress. These councils take different titles in different parties but are commonly called *Consiglio Nazionale* in the case of Liberal and Christian Democratic parties and *Comitato Centrale* in parties such as Communist and neo-fascist. Progressing towards the inclusive end of the continuum there are congresses of delegates, One-Member-One-Vote closed primaries and open primaries with all citizens enabled even if they are not formal party members. The use of primary elections is spreading beyond the United States (Sandri, Seddone and Venturino 2015) but usually is still reserved for party members. Thus, Italy's experience with open primaries should be considered innovative and intriguing. However, the short-lived Cambiamo! and the Partito Democratico are the only parties that so far have included open primaries in their statutes (Venturino 2015), thus the following analyses are based on only a small number of cases[9].

Figure 5 depicts how Italian political parties selected their party leaders between 1946 and 2020. The figure shows that in the first two decades nearly all leaders were selected by party councils. The only exception was the Partito Radicale, then an unimportant party that entered the parliament for the first time in 1976, which empowered party delegates. During the 1970s, a growing number of party congresses were given the power to select the parties' leaders, and this method steadily expanded to become the predominant method of selection by the 1990s. Because of this shift, party councils gradually lost importance and were only in use by minor parties after 2000.

In particular, the Communist and post-Communist parties – Rc, Pdci and Sinistra Italiana – have main-

[9] Launched in 2019, Cambiamo! never promoted open primaries and has been disbanded in 2021; instead Fratelli d'Italia organised uncontested open primaries in 2014 and 2017 although its statute arranged different selectorates.

tained the party council as the selectorate due to their ideological stances. In the case of Scelta Civica, the persistent use of the party council is certainly attributable to the lack of a ground organisation outside of parliament, and the Partito Repubblicano Italiano has likely been constrained by a mix of these motivations. In the same years, Italia dei Valori, a highly personalised party, initially used a party council but then changed its statute in 2009 to adopt more inclusive methods of leader selection. After paving the way for party delegates, the tiny Partito Radicale was the first to enfranchise its members in 1993, and this practice has been successively maintained by its heirs, Radicali Italiani and Più Europa. During the 2000s, left-wing Verdi and Democratici di Sinistra joined this stance, showing that ideological factors may matter for internal party democratisation.

However, in the following decade, other left-wing parties, e.g. Possibile, Italia Viva, Azione; centre parties, e.g. Popolari per l'Italia; and right-wing parties, e.g. Fratelli d'Italia, Futuro e Libertà and Lega empowered their memberships to select their leaders. Changing from the informal leadership of Beppe Grillo to a formalised method of selection in 2017, even Movimento 5 Stelle empowered party members. Finally, as anticipated, in 2007, the newly incepted Partito Democratico enacted a statute where open primaries were the default method for candidate and leader selections, a practice imitated by the right-wing Cambiamo!

Overall, the Italian parties have followed the same path already travelled by other parties in many democratic political systems. Indeed, they have broadened their methods of leader selection progressively from more exclusive to more inclusive. Moreover, the democratisation in most cases stopped in the middle of the spectrum, as demonstrated by the fact that the congress of delegates, a membership-based method, is still the most common way to select party leaders. However, the Partito Democratico has been the first great European party to use open primaries, paving the way for new forms of party democratisation.

The consequences of intraparty democracy: alternative selectorates

Although the use of complex methods of leader selection is quite rare in Italy, party statutes do often mention alternative selectorates to the main ones discussed above. As reported in the last row of Table 2, this was the case in 178 of 796 political party-years across the study period of 1946–2020, disproportionately party councils. The reason for this unbalanced distribution is obvious: Selecting a leader may be diversely time- and money-consuming, and while inclusive selectorates demand intensive organisational effort, exclusive selectorates can act quickly with limited costs. Under a party congress method, members vote locally for delegates, and then delegates meet for leader selection. Direct internal democracy can be even more challenging, particularly with open primaries that can require thousands of polling stations nationwide. The primaries and members' referenda launched online by Movimento 5 Stelle prove that intraparty democracy can be fast and cheap. Nevertheless, inclusive selectorates generally continue to be slow and cumbersome, and the speed and efficiency of party councils remain an option for parties under pressure.

Examining individual cases can substantiate my point. First, as shown in the last row of the table statutes do not mention alternative selectorates in 618 out of 796 cases, 78 per cent of the total party-years. In these parties, when leaders voluntarily resign, are dismissed or become incapacitated, the main selectorate automatically receives a time limit to select a new leader, but this practice only applies to twenty parties. Among them, Democrazia Cristiana, Movimento Sociale Italiano and Partito Socialista Italiano in the mid-1970s transformed

Table 2. Distribution of Alternative Selectorates According to Main Selectorate, 1946–2020.

Main selectorate	Alternative selectorate					
	No alternative selectorate	All voters	Party members	Party delegates	Party council	Total
All voters	0	0	0	0	16	16
Party members	76	0	0	2	11	89
Party delegates	147	5	9	0	135	296
Party council	395	0	0	0	0	395
Total	*618*	*5*	*9*	*2*	*162*	*796*

Note: Figures are absolute values representing party-years.

their main selectorates from party council to congress of delegates. When these parties adopted their new statutes, respectively in 1975, 1977 and 1978, all empowered a party council as an alternative selectorate as contingencies. By so doing they in some cases influenced the choices of their heirs after the 1994 earthquake. The effects were marginal in the case of the Christian Democrats in that only Unione di Centro used an alternative selectorate, whereas, after the neo-fascist Movimento Sociale Italiano, Alleanza Nazionale simply accepted the predecessor's choice with the congress of delegates as the main selectorate and a party council as an alternative. In 2008, Alleanza Nazionale merged with Forza Italia to form Popolo delle Libertà under the leadership of Silvio Berlusconi, but when the short-lived Futuro e Libertà per l'Italia split in 2011, the party still maintained an alternative selectorate while adopting One-Member-One-Vote as the main method of leader selection. The same holds true for the initial choices by the Partito Socialista Italiano, which had been replicated by heir parties (Socialisti Italiani in 1994 and Socialisti Democratici Italiani in 1998) until the present Partito Socialista. Launched in 2007, the latter maintained the party congress as the main selectorate and rejected any alternative. Although they consistently allied with the right-wing coalition, even the Nuovo Partito Socialista Italiano – which split in 2001 from Socialisti Democratici Italiani – maintained the double selectorate of congress of delegates and party council.

While the abovementioned parties launched after 1994 accepted the pre-existing practice of the party council as an alternative selectorate, other recent Italian parties began using the same practice for the first time. This was the case with the right-wing Cambiamo!, Nuovo Centrodestra (2014–2016) and that party's successor, Alternativa Popolare (2017–2019), all of which split from Forza Italia. The same held true for the left-wing Democratici di Sinistra (2000–2006) and Partito Democratico (2007–2020), heirs of the Partito Comunista Italiano, for Sinistra Ecologia e Libertà (2010–2016), heir of Rifondazione Comunista, and Articolo Uno (2017–2020) and Azione (2019–2020), the latter two parties split from the Partito Democratico.

Three parties allow for alternative selectorates without a clear hierarchy. Verdi (2012–2020) and Più Europa (2019–2020) provide for party members and a congress of delegates, while Fratelli d'Italia (2012–2017) empowered both delegates and voters. In practice, all these parties defer the choice of the selectorate to the guidelines (*regolamenti congressuali*) issued at the same time of the congress. Although in these cases the statutes are not the main source, remarkably both Verdi and Fdi seem to have adopted an alternative selectorate that is more inclusive than the main one.

HOW RELIABLE ARE PARTY STATUTES? MATCHING FORMAL AND ACTUAL SELECTORATES

Although valuable, all approaches based on the inspection of official documents, such as party statutes and congress guidelines, pose tricky methodological problems as the advocated methodological formalism clashes against the informality of the objects under examination. In the case of political parties, this inconvenience can be particularly consequential because they often escape state regulation; this state of affairs allows their organisations and internal life to be largely self-determined and prone to informality. However, are these drawbacks detrimental to any realistic analysis of party leader selections? Addressing this question requires using the concept of the actual selectorate, that is the selectorate used on the ground irrespective of what is stipulated in the party statute.

Using actual selectorates to examine real leadership choices led to two relevant consequences. First, party statutes are no longer appropriate sources of information, and alternative sources must be used; among these, I found newspaper articles, congress reports by parties' offices and secondary sources from both political scientists and historians to be very useful. Second, although I have used party-years as the unit of analysis for data collected from the statutes, for the actual selectorates I studied the real leader contests in some years. This is because the available number of cases shown in Table 3, where the occurrences of the formal and actual selectorates are matched, shrinks in comparison with the analyses above. Importantly, in the everyday examinations there are more types of actual selectorates than formal types provided by the statutes. In fact, some parties have chosen leaders through informal agreements among their notables, a circumstance that obviously no statute considers. The eight cases reported in the penultimate column are all parties launched during the Second Republic that selected their leaders informally because of pressing situations even though their statutes contained formal procedures[10].

In all cases except for informal party elites, formal and actual selectorates can be matched. The high-

[10] Most of them split from pre-existing parties: Cambiamo!, Azione, Futuro e Libertà, Italia Viva, Possibile, Fratelli d'Italia and Rifondazione Comunista; only Popolo delle Libertà is the result of a merger. The other eight parties are not counted here because when they informally selected their first leaders, they still lacked a statute; Msi is the only traditional party accounted for.

Table 3. Correspondence between Formal and Actual Selectorates, 1946–2020.

Formal selectorate	Actual selectorate					
	All voters	Party members	Party delegates	Party council	Informal party elites	Total
All voters	5	0	0	3	1	9
Party members	0	35	0	1	4	40
Party delegates	2	0	94	0	2	98
Party council	0	0	0	186	1	187
Total	7	35	94	190	8	334

Note: Figures are absolute values measuring leader selections. Grey cells are matching cases.

est correspondence – occurring in 186 cases out of 187 – appears between selections by a party council; the single exception was Rifondazione Comunista when it split from Pci in 1991. Where party delegates were the formal selectorate, the only deviating cases were Pdl and Fratelli d'Italia. As reported above, the latter selected its leader through an informal agreement in 2013 and subsequently through uncontested open primaries in 2014 and 2017; strangely enough, so far Fdi has never selected its leader following its own statute. Out of 40 leader selections by party members, 35 have followed party statutes; the outliers were M5s, Fli, Italia Viva, Azione and Possibile. Finally, when all voters constituted the formal selectorate, what is noteworthy is the high percentage of deviant cases: four out of nine cases. While Cambiamo! activated its informal party elite in 2019, in three cases the Partito Democratico resorted to the abridged procedure outlined by a party council after the incumbent resigned under pressure. Overall, formal and actual selectorates corresponded in 320 of 334 cases, 96 per cent. That is, and not surprisingly, in normal times parties simply adhere to their statutes. As such, I consider the present formal analyses quite accurate approximations of how political party leaders are elected in Italy.

CONCLUSION

The emergence of large and inclusive selectorates for party leadership and candidate nomination elicits, among others, a normative question: Is intraparty democracy democratic? Some critics assert that the supposed democratisation of parties' life is disingenuously practised by party elites to avoid internal opposition and to freely implement strategies for cartelisation (Katz and Mair 1995). On the one hand, one piece of evidence indirectly supports this point of view: in Italy as elsewhere, selections for party leadership positions are often uncontested; a single candidate is proposed, conveying the impression of a 'managed' intraparty democracy (Aylott and Bolin 2020b). On the other hand, it could be conjectured that the hypothesis of manipulation is tailored to the relationships between party leaders and members, including the extreme form of direct democracy envisaged by digital parties (Gerbaudo 2021). Instead, this explication is probably inadequate for the elucidation of open primaries because non-enrolled citizens are too external to the party organisation in comparison to formal members, and hence do not permit easy top-down control.

In any case, normative questions are peripheral in this context. Rather, from a descriptive viewpoint, I have shown through an extensive analysis of parties' statutes how the role of party councils – both for candidacy requirements and selectorate inclusiveness – declined to begin from the 1970s to be replaced by congresses of delegates that have mostly selected the leaders since then. Parties in Italy began taking major steps toward the One-Member-One-Vote method to empower their members in the 1990s. Several parties followed this path during the tremendous challenges of Tangentopoli, and some left-wing parties pioneered the use of open primaries in Europe for selecting both party leaders and legislative candidates (Venturino and Seddone 2017). Since the internal democratisation of the 1990s, Italian parties have only sporadically used mixed or complex selectorates; rather, gradually adopting more inclusive but more difficult to manage selectorates brought about the implementation of faster alternative methods for use under pressure. Finally, although the problem would deserve more consideration, a brief but formal analysis has shown a potentially realistic picture of the parties' actual functioning.

I have used information on formal selectorates and actual leader selections in this study to investigate *when* parties changed their selectorates. Undeniably, such (and similar) data can be exploited to achieve a different purpose and explain the advent of intraparty democra-

cy. In this case, the key research question pertained to *why* parties change. Several possible accounts have been proposed in comparative politics to address this problem. These accounts are usually grounded at the level of the political system, the party system, or the intraparty arena (Barnea and Rahat 2007). For instance, a research inquiry could concern the possible existence of correlations between types of selectorate, considered as a dependent variable, and some characteristics of a given party such as age, left-right location, or family identity. Alternatively, parties could promote internal democracy because of an electoral failure, or after a period when it has been relegated to the opposition[11]. Moreover, a different approach could focus on the *consequences* of different types of selectorates. In such instances, researchers could probe whether alternative methods of selection could render the serving leader more or less accountable to members of party councils, or renew the party by electing young or female leaders. In practical terms, this study only posited a non-causal analysis based on the examination of a single variable. However, an extension towards causal analyses based on the study of possible correlations would appear as a natural development of the present work.

Two additional questions should be addressed to assess the qualities and limitations of this article. First, are the parties analysed in this study illustrative of the entire Italian party system? This problem arises because it is impossible to attain full compliance with my stated criteria. Table A.2 in the Appendix reports several parties that were seated in the Italian parliament at least once – my criterion for inclusion – but were not considered for the empirical analyses because of data lack. In general, these parties are small and not important, but the same holds true for parties that were included in the study. If these excluded parties were considered, they would contribute 355 party-years to the analysis. Conversely, the number of years would be reduced to 130 if regional parties were omitted from the current examination. Hence, the present study's results must be accepted with caution because of some excluded but not irrelevant parties.

Second, is the Italian political system representative of parliamentary democracies? Changes in party systems have occurred in all democracies (Mair 1997), but in Italy the transformations traced a peculiar course. In most countries, new parties emerged beside the old; however, the Italian parties encountered a total demise in the mid-Nineties, and the new parties launched since then never achieved the desired level of institutionalisation (Harmel and Svåsand 2019). Italian party politics has thus underperformed for decades, resulting in Italy being deemed incomparable with other normally working democracies, as noted in Bolleyer's quote reported above. Although debatable, this incompatibility with other democracies remains an open question. It is, however, certain that the diffusion of intraparty democracy only occurred in Italy in conjunction with weak and sometimes totally unconsolidated organisations.

The evidence conveyed in this article has demonstrated that most Italian parties have participated in the 'democratic revolution' involving many parliamentary systems since the Sixties. In the case of Italy, intraparty democracy is said to be a reaction to the impressive loss of legitimacy affecting all parties in recent decades (Ignazi 2012). Some authoritative scholars doubt the suitability of intraparty democracy as a strategy for facing party crisis. Under this point of view, the causes of decline are exogenous to the type of organisation a party might adopt, and therefore incremental expansions of internal democracy cannot revitalise parties under strain (Katz 2013; 2021; Ignazi 2020). If need be, representative democracies will eventually battle their enemies without this weapon.

[11] The characteristics of the electoral systems promise to be an important determinant of the methods for the candidates' selection. Conversely the possible correlation between electoral systems and leaders' selection seems to lack a clear rationale.

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APPENDIX

Table A.1. List of parties included in this study.

Party	N	%	Years
1. Partito Repubblicano Italiano	75	9.0	1946-2020
2. Partito Socialdemocratico Italiano	50	6.1	1947-1998
3. Democrazia Cristiana	49	6.0	1946-1993
4. Partito Liberale Italiano	49	6.0	1946-1994
5. Movimento Sociale Italiano	48	5.8	1946-1993
6. Partito Comunista Italiano	45	5.5	1946-1990
7. Partito Radicale	45	5.5	1956-2000
8. Partito Socialista Italiano	45	5.5	1946-1993
9. Rifondazione Comunista	30	3.6	1991-2020
10. Lega Nord	28	3.4	1989-2016
11. Verdi	28	3.4	1993-2020
12. Italia dei Valori	23	2.8	1998-2020
13. Forza Italia	22	2.7	1994-2020
14. Nuovo Psi	20	2.4	2001-2020
15. Radicali Italiani	20	2.4	2001-2020
16. Unione di Centro	19	2.3	2002-2020
17. Partito dei Comunisti Italiani	16	1.9	1998-2013
18. Udeur	15	1.8	1999-2013
19. Alleanza Nazionale	14	1.7	1994-2007
20. Partito Democratico	14	1.7	2007-2020
21. Partito Socialista	14	1.7	2007-2020
22. Movimento 5 Stelle	12	1.5	2009-2020
23. Centro Democratico	9	1.1	2012-2020
24. Democratici di Sinistra	9	1.1	1998-2006
25. Democrazia Proletaria	9	1.1	1982-1990
26. Socialisti Democratici Italiani	9	1.1	1998-2006
27. Centro Cristiano Democratico	8	1.0	1994-2001
28. Fratelli d'Italia	8	1.0	2013-2020
29. Margherita	7	0.9	2001-2007
30. Partito Democratico della Sinistra	7	0.9	1991-1997
31. Partito Popolare Italiano	7	0.9	1994-2000
32. Popolari per l'Italia	7	0.9	2014-2020
33. Sinistra Ecologia e Libertà	7	0.9	2010-2016
34. Possibile	6	0.7	2015-2020
35. Scelta Civica	6	0.7	2013-2018
36. Popolo delle Libertà	5	0.6	2008-2012
37. Alternativa Popolare	4	0.5	2017-2020
38. Articolo Uno	4	0.5	2017-2020
39. Lega per Salvini Premier	4	0.5	2017-2020
40. Nuovo Centrodestra	4	0.5	2013-2016
41. Sinistra Italiana	4	0.5	2017-2020
42. Socialisti Italiani	4	0.5	1994-1997
43. Partito Socialista Unificato	3	0.4	1966-1968

Party	N	%	Years
44. Azione	2	0.2	2019-2020
45. Cambiamo!	2	0.2	2019-2020
46. Futuro e Libertà per l'Italia	2	0.2	2011-2012
47. Italia Viva	2	0.2	2019-2020
48. Più Europa	2	0.2	2019-2020
Total	*822*	*100.0*	–

Note: values are year-party spells. Parties are ranked according to N and alphabetical order.

Data collection

The present study builds on the methodology employed by the Comparative Study of Party Leaders (Cospal) project. Cross and Pilet (2015) proposed this framework, which entails almost 60 variables combined in five sections.

Section 1 involves variables ascertaining party distinctiveness: name, year and country (the latter is not relevant in this instance).

Section 2 concerns variables describing the rules for the selection of party leaders: requirements for candidacy, type of formal selectorate, electoral systems, the role of members and the length and repeatability of the mandate.

Section 3 pertains to variables describing the party condition: participation in government, parliamentary representation, electoral results, left-right location and party family.

Section 4 incorporates variables describing the leadership selections: type of actual selectorate, number of candidates, incumbent eventually running, competitiveness and result.

Section 5 encompasses the characteristics of the selected leader: name, gender, age, previous career, term length and reason for the end of the leadership.

I have used variables from sections 2 and 4 for the present study. The data relating to Section 2 were collected through a content analysis of the party statutes, which were predominantly lengthy documents of a similar format. National party leaders form the core of my analysis; hence, I focused my scrutiny on statute articles pertaining to the central office. From these documents, I collected the information requested by the Cospal project framework, which I reused with minor adaptations. The data with respect to Section 4 were collected through an inspection of newspapers, books of political history, and party reports of congresses and other forms of leadership selection.

Data arrangement

Table A.1 above exhibits the extremely different durations of Italian parties operating since World War

Table A.2. List of parties excluded from this study.

Parties	Number of parliamentary mandates	Highest number of parliamentary seats	Period of activity
1. Südtiroler Volkspartei	15	5	1945-present
2. Union Valdôtaine	6	1	1945-present
3. Partito Nazionale Monarchico	3	40	1946-1959
4. Partito Sardo d'Azione	3	2	1921-present
5. Partito Democratico Italiano di Unità Monarchica	2	8	1959-1972
6. Partito di Unità Proletaria	2	6	1972-1984
7. Alleanza Democratica	1	18	1993-1997
8. Alleanza per l'Italia	1	6	2009-2016
9. Alternativa Sociale	1	1	2004-2006
10. I Democratici	1	20	1999-2002
11. Il Manifesto	1	5	1972-1974
12. La Destra	1	4	2007-2017
13. La Rete	1	12	1991-1999
14. Movimento per l'Autonomia	1	8	2005-present
15. Partito Monarchico Popolare	1	14	1954-1959
16. Partito Socialista Italiano di Unità Proletaria	1	23	1964-1972
17. Patto Segni	1	13	1993-2003
18. Uomo Qualunque	1	4	1946-1949

Note: Lower House (*Camera dei Deputati*); parties are ranked according to the number of parliamentary mandates and alphabetical order.

II. This disparity poses the problem of weighting each party according to its years of activity to avoid inflating the contribution of minor parties to the distribution of a given variable. The extant literature on the survival analysis offers a solution to this difficulty which has been applied in political research to study the mandated length of party leaders (Guo 2010; Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003). In practical terms, this approach simultaneously considers the organisational and time dimensions rather than considering the party as the unit of analysis. In so doing, the unit of analysis is the party-year or a 'spell' denoting the number of years a given party is active. In this study, the *potential* total number of party-years is computed as the product of the number of parties and the number of years (in this case: 48 parties * 75 years = 3,600 party-years). The *actual* number is calculated by tallying the number of years each party has contributed in reality (in this case: 796). This latter computation forms the basis of the calculation of the percentages used in this work.