



Analyzing ideological disparities in multi-speed membership parties: the case of the Italian Democratic Party

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Abstract

Party organizations are undergoing notable transformations. The existing literature commonly indicates a shift towards participatory models and membership forms that blur the distinction between party members and sympathizers. These transformations have significant implications for internal party unity and coherence. This study examines the ideological cohesion among members, sympathizers, and voters, using the Italian Democratic Party as a case study from 2009 to 2023. Using an original dataset integrating survey data from multiple sources, the article explores ideological shifts among members, sympathizers, and voters over time, highlighting both similarities and differences. The findings reveal that while members and voters differ significantly across all periods, members and sympathizers exhibit substantial ideological convergence in most organizational cycles, diverging only during more center-leaning leadership phases. Moreover, the probability of self-positioning to the left of the party increases as we move from voters to sympathizers, and from voters to members: deeper involvement is associated with a more extreme ideological alignment. All in all, organizational embeddedness influences ideological positioning across membership strata.

Keywords Ideology · Intraparty democracy · Italian politics · Multi-speed membership · Party membership

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Introduction

Nowadays, more than ever, Western European political parties can hardly be regarded as unitary actors. From the presence of different “faces” (Katz and Mair 1993) to the growing autonomy of party MPs and ministers (Katz and Mair 1995, 2002; Bardi et al. 2017), from the strengthening of party leadership (Blondel and Thiébault 2010; Musella 2018) to the existence of intra-party factionalism (Emanuele et al. 2023), it is necessary to consider parties as internally stratified organizations. This stratification entails a proliferation of competing interests and expectations (e.g., Katz 2014), fueling tensions between responsibility and responsiveness (Mair 2009; Bardi et al. 2014; Kerremans and Lefkofridi 2020).

In recent decades, the shift toward the so-called cartel party model (Katz and Mair 1995) has further consolidated the role of party elites and public office holders, while weakening grassroots organizational functions. As party membership has declined (Mair and Van Biezen 2001; Van Biezen et al. 2012; Van Haute and Gauja 2015), many parties have adopted participatory formats and flexible membership models granting differentiated rights, responsibilities, and influence to members, sympathizers, and supporters (Scarrow and Gezgor 2010; Gauja 2015; Hooghe and Kölln 2020).

This transformation is particularly evident in the adoption of inclusive procedures for candidate and leadership selection, with open primaries emerging as the most widespread innovation. These involve both members and sympathizers, creating a layered engagement that extends beyond formal membership (Hazan and Rahat 2010; Cross and Katz 2013; Sandri et al. 2015). Though often justified as promoting transparency or renewal (e.g., see Cross et al. 2016), such reforms raise significant concerns. They challenge leadership-grassroots dynamics, redistribute power, and may dilute cohesion: indeed, the inclusion of more external participants – less exposed to partisan norms and deliberation – may undermine ideological consistency at the base (Ignazi 2020), while these participants are also more vulnerable to elite manipulation, weakening the capacity of committed members to shape party direction (Mair 1994; Katz and Mair 1995). As membership diversification deepens, so does the tension between responsiveness and responsibility (Bardi et al. 2014), making multi-speed membership a structural source of organizational strain.

A key framework addressing this is May’s Law of Curvilinear Disparity (1973), which holds that sub-leaders (e.g., activists, delegates) are more ideologically extreme than both elites and passive supporters. This insight has sparked extensive empirical research, with mixed results (e.g., Kitschelt 1989; Norris 1995; Van Holsteyn et al. 2017; Wager et al. 2022; Springer 2024). Yet, few studies have examined how inclusive procedures, in the context of stratified membership, are associated with ideological alignment over time. This gap reflects a broader theoretical blind spot: how “democratization” reforms – especially those expanding participation beyond formal members – are linked to the ideological profile of party supporters. Much of the literature either assumes alignment across party layers or sees divergence as anomalous. However, as we discuss in the theoretical section, if inclusive procedures are institutionalized, they may systematically alter internal cohesion, marginalize “more extreme” party activists in favor of more “moderate” members, or even discourage members from taking part in intra-party activities.



Our study addresses this gap by combining the organizational logic of stratified membership with spatial analysis of ideological alignment. We contribute to two key debates in the literature. First, we provide empirical evidence on the link between ideology and multi-speed membership, a growing but understudied phenomenon in relation to intraparty cohesion. Second, we reassess the relevance of May's Law in a novel context, highlighting both its conceptual value and empirical limits. By incorporating sympathizers (an intermediate and rarely studied layer, as discussed below), we offer a more nuanced account of internal ideological stratification.

More specifically, we focus on a party that adopted "intra-party democratic" reforms early on: the Italian Democratic Party (*Partito Democratico*, hereafter PD), which offers a typical case (Seawright and Gerring 2008) to test the connection between multi-speed membership and intra-party ideological differentiation. Since 2007, the PD has implemented open and sequential primary elections to select its leader, granting voting rights to both members and non-member sympathizers. Its analytical value lies not just in adopting primaries, but in doing so consistently across leadership cycles and political contexts. This institutional continuity allows us to assess whether ideological disparities are short-term anomalies or enduring characteristics of stratified membership.

Our Research Question (RQ) asks: *to what extent, and how, does intra-party ideological heterogeneity manifest across different levels within a party operating under a multi-speed membership model?*

More in detail, by drawing on original survey data on the Italian Democratic Party (PD) from 2009 to 2023, this study investigates whether and where ideological disparities emerge among voters, sympathizers, and members.

Our findings indicate that party members tend to adopt more left-leaning positions, while voters are more centerward. These results suggest that organizational embeddedness is associated with ideological patterns, in line with some of the theoretical arguments advanced by May some decades ago.

The article proceeds as follows: Section 2 outlines the theoretical framework. Section 3 presents the case selection and the data. Section 4 discusses findings from the empirical analysis. Section 5 provides our concluding remarks.

Multi-speed membership and intra-party ideological diversity

The renewal of party membership

The ongoing decline in party membership has sparked extensive debate over whether political parties remain credible instruments for citizens' representation and involvement (Scarrow and Gezgor 2010; Whiteley 2011; Van Biezen et al. 2012). As Gauja (2015) argues, membership figures and their erosion have important organizational implications. Members are not mere financial contributors but key organizational assets in different fields: "resourcing the organization, injecting policy ideas and maintaining links to voters, and providing legitimacy to the party in the eyes of the public" (Gauja 2015, p. 234). They also help achieve party goals by ensuring electoral loyalty and upholding ideological commitments (Granik 2005). Furthermore,



party members play a vital role in supporting party activities by contributing both tangible and intangible resources – for example, campaigning, canvassing, participating in public events, or donating (Duverger 1954; May 1973; Scarrow 1994, 1996; Seyd and Whiteley 1992; 2004). Scholars have examined how individuals engage with parties as members, identifying differences in membership incentives, levels of intra-party commitment, and socio-political profiles (Van Haute and Carty 2012; Van Haute et al. 2013; Van Haute and Gauja 2015; Kölln and Polk 2017). Overall, party membership is inherently heterogeneous, particularly in today’s multi-speed membership contexts, where varying levels of engagement are formally recognized.

Concerning this latter process, in her seminal contribution, Scarrow (2015) highlights how parties increasingly acknowledge diverse affiliation patterns, including multi-speed membership. This model allows individuals to join parties with varying levels of participation, authority, and benefits (Webb et al. 2017; Gomez and Ramiro 2019; Hooghe and Kölln 2020; Gomez et al. 2021). On the one hand, parties adopt a catch-all strategy to broaden their base, even by engaging less politically active individuals (Webb et al. 2017). On the other hand, as Power and Dommert (2020) note, this approach serves strategic aims by incorporating new or inexperienced supporters into election campaigns with the goal of future mobilization. Parties have also introduced intra-party democratic mechanisms to foster participation in internal affairs (Cross and Katz 2013; Cross and Pilet 2015; Sandri et al. 2015). This trend aligns with the logic of multi-speed membership, reflecting the “imperfect overlap between partisan activists and party members” (Scarrow 2015, p. 29). Open primaries exemplify this participatory framework, allowing both members and supporters to contribute to candidate or leadership selection, regardless of their level of engagement.

The organizational implications of these processes carry significant weight, as they potentially jeopardize party cohesion, going beyond the mere transparency and democracy rhetoric (Ignazi 2020). Moreover, the implementation of inclusive procedures could result in the marginalization of the (more troublemaker) party activists and the empowerment of the more “steerable” members (Mair 1994, p. 16; see also Van Holsteyn et al. 2017, 472–473; Ignazi 2020; Wager et al. 2022, p. 945). Similarly, these procedures could result in a pseudo-empowerment of a wider group of people, given they are offered a limited set of choices (already decided elsewhere) (Mair 1994, 16–17; Pasquino and Valbruzzi 2016; Aylott and Bolin 2021).

From a membership standpoint, the provision of equivalent privileges, regardless of varying levels of involvement, can potentially diminish members’ inclination to engage in intra-party activities, as their influence ultimately becomes diluted within the larger selectorate sympathizers (Seddone and Sandri 2021). Indeed, a party member is not the same as a sympathizer. Oftentimes, party members represent values, interests, and, most importantly, a value-based allegiance to the party that are entirely distinct from those of sympathizers (i.e., Webb et al. 2017; Hooghe and Kölln 2020; Gomez et al. 2021). The implications of this mismatch are not trivial, as politicians may be inclined to consider the preferences of the broader group when in office (e.g., Hazan and Rahat 2010). It follows that elites, such as Members of Parliament (MPs), may have “more than one master” (Katz 2014), and this can substantially impact their decision-making.



All in all, there are substantial consequences both organizationally (in terms of internal party cohesion) and systemically (regarding the capacity to formulate policy proposals) stemming from the above-described processes.

May's law framework in the context of multi-speed membership mechanisms

Intra-party heterogeneity can also be examined from a different perspective. Even among traditional party members, there are notable variations in activism, motivation, and attachment to the party line (Scarrow 1996; Seyd and Whiteley 2004; Heidar 2006). These differences become more pronounced when compared to mere sympathizers, making it essential to clarify how distinct forms of affiliation are defined and structured within a party's life. In this context, ideological orientation emerges as a key axis along which party members may diverge (Kitschelt 1989; Dalton 2002). This matter does not represent a novelty in political science. A foundational contribution is May's (1973) seminal article, which distinguishes among three party layers: "top leaders" (MPs, ministers), "sub-leaders" (delegates, primary voters), and "non-leaders" (uninvolved sympathizers, passive supporters). According to May, these strata may exhibit distinct ideological "opinion structures". The pattern known as the "Special Law of Curvilinear Disparity" (hereafter, May's law) (May 1973, 139–141) is characterized by having the most radical positions typically concentrated among the sub-leaders, while top leaders occupy more centrist positions and non-leaders lean most strongly toward the center.¹ May's law has inspired a wide array of subsequent research.

Theoretically, Kitschelt (1989) puts forward three extensions to May's law: first, "parties appeal to individuals with a wide variety of beliefs", where 'pragmatists' are opposed to "ideologues" (ibidem, 406); second, more extreme intra-party militants are easier to find only under specific conditions (ibidem, 407); third, "curvilinearity becomes more probable, the more loosely coupled a party organization is, [meaning] that parties impose few constraints on the militants' participation in meetings and decision-making processes" (ibidem, 409). Testing this framework on the Belgian ecological parties, Kitschelt (1989) finds empirical support for a nuanced version of May's Law. Then, Norris (1995), analyzing the 1992 UK election, shows that local constituency officers – sub-leaders in her framework – are not consistently the most radical group, and instead fall between voters and leaders in ideological terms. A more recent contribution by Kölln and Polk (2017) on Swedish party members shows that individuals often locate themselves differently on the left–right continuum compared to the position they attribute to their own party. Although the analysis involves only two layers (members and their perception of the party), it nonetheless highlights an ideological incongruence, albeit one that is not consistent with a curvilinear pattern.

Adopting a longitudinal perspective, Van Holsteyn et al. (2017) document persistent ideological disparities within Dutch parties across the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, but find no empirical support for May's Law. Similarly, Wager et al. (2022), focusing

¹ For revised formulations of May's Law, see Kitschelt (1989, 400–403), and Kölln and Polk (2017, 19–20). On the related ideological incongruence between elites and voters, see, for instance, Gaasendam et al. (2021). Finally, on congruence in leadership contests, see, e.g., Vandeleene et al. (2024).



on the British Labour and Conservative parties between 2015 and 2020, uncover only limited evidence of the curvilinear dynamic. Then, Bäckersten (2022), in a study of Swedish parties from 1985 to 2018, concludes that a curvilinear opinion structure appears only among the more ideologically extreme parties. Springer (2024), drawing on German survey data from 1998, 2009, and 2017, identifies multiple ideological configurations – only one of which aligns with May’s original formulation.

In sum, there is no scholarly consensus on where and when intra-party ideological disagreement emerges, nor on the precise configurations it may take (see also Polk and Kölln 2020). However, the ongoing transformation of party structures in Western Europe – especially the expansion of participatory mechanisms to non-members and the normalization of multi-speed membership – warrants a renewed analytical use of classical stratification models such as May’s Law (Kölln and Polk 2017).

So, while recent studies have shown that internal party diversity may not always follow the curvilinear structure originally theorized (e.g., Van Holsteyn et al. 2017; Wager et al. 2022), the broader intuition that different levels of party engagement relate to different ideological profiles remains analytically fruitful. In this regard, the shift towards more flexible membership styles underscores the value of examining ideological differences within the lower strata of party affiliation – namely, members, sympathizers, and voters – to better understand the organizational implications of these reforms.

Rather than formulating formal hypotheses, we advance a set of theoretically grounded conjectures rooted in organizational sociology and spatial models of party affiliation.

In line with the broader logic of May’s Law, we expect that individuals’ ideological orientations systematically vary with their degree of organizational embeddedness. Party members – more exposed to partisan norms, internal deliberation, and value-based organizational commitment – are likely to hold more cohesive and extreme-leaning positions (Scarrow 1996; Seyd and Whiteley 2004; Heidar 2006). Sympathizers, who engage more selectively (e.g., through open primaries) but lack sustained organizational ties, may exhibit more centrist and fluctuating orientations. Voters, whose connection to the party is primarily electoral and transactional, are expected to be the most ideologically heterogeneous and center-leaning group.

These conjectures, while building on the intuitions behind May’s Law, do not assume a strict curvilinear pattern among party strata. They are also compatible with more recent contributions that introduce the concept of *ideological misfits* – individuals whose positions diverge from their party’s official line (Van Haute and Carty 2012). Although originally applied to formal members, this notion can be extended to people having looser connections to the party, such as sympathizers and voters, who, due to weaker exposure to partisan norms, may be especially prone to ideological incongruence.

We therefore adopt May’s Law not as a deterministic model, but as a heuristic framework to investigate whether and how organizational embeddedness relates to ideological extremity. This interpretive flexibility is particularly suited to contemporary party systems, marked by multi-speed membership and consolidated inclusive elite selection procedures.



Case selection and data presentation

Case selection

While it has become common for European parties to grant their members voting rights on key decisions, not so many parties extend these rights to people without a formal party membership, such as sympathizers (Scarrow et al. 2022, 210–211). Among the rare exceptions, the Italian Democratic Party (PD) stands out – both for its central role in the Italian party system and for the temporal consistency of its inclusive procedures (Sandri and Venturino 2013; 2020).

More specifically, the PD was created in the fall of 2007 from the merger of the Democrats of the Left (*Democratici di Sinistra*) – a left-wing party, heir to the Italian Communist Party (*Partito Comunista Italiano*) – with The Daisy (*La Margherita*, *Democrazia è Libertà*), one of the many parties that emerged after the disappearance of the Christian Democracy (*Democrazia Cristiana*) in the early 1990s (Bordandini et al. 2008). Ideologically, the PD thus emerged from the fusion of a post-communist party with a post-Christian democratic party. This hybrid origin shaped the party's internal dynamics, with successive leaders leaning toward different ideological traditions (Bordandini et al. 2022). Since its inception, the PD has had nine leaders: six elected through open primaries and three appointed by party delegates at the National Assembly (Pasquino and Valbruzzi 2017). This relatively high turnover unusual by comparative standards (Pilet and Cross 2014) allows us to observe ideological variation diachronically across different leadership cycles (see Table 1).

Between 2009 and 2023, the party alternated between government and opposition, including support for two technocratic cabinets (Monti, 2011–2013; Draghi, 2021–2022). While leadership changes provide important context, our focus lies on the participatory structure these cycles entail.

In all six open contests, non-members were allowed to vote after declaring support for the PD and paying a symbolic fee (typically €2). Since 2009, all primaries have followed a two-stage format: internal members vote in local conventions, and top-ranked candidates advance to a public vote open to sympathizers and the broader electorate. Therefore, the PD's procedural architecture institutionalizes a form of multi-speed membership (Scarrow 2015), where different levels of organizational embeddedness coexist over time.

Accordingly, the PD qualifies as a typical case (Seawright and Gerring 2008) for detecting systematic ideological differentiation among party strata. First, it exhibits a stable, institutionalized openness, having consistently adopted open and sequential primaries. These rules have created long-term opportunities for individuals who are not party members to participate alongside formal members². Second, the party oper-

² The importance of the stability of these rules can also be appreciated if we asked ourselves what would happen if PD leader selection rules allowed sympathizers to take part also in the first stage of the primary-based selection process, like party members. It might be the case that sympathizers, exposed to members' ideological preferences also in the first stage of the selection process, exhibit ideological preferences different than those shown in the current rule setting, where only members can take part in the first stage. If, in the future, the PD changed its leader selection rules and granted more power to sympathizers, it would be interesting to determine whether these speculations have empirical support.



Table 1 PD party leaders, 2007–2025. Source: Authors' elaboration and update based on Pasquino and Valbruzzi (2017)

Party leader	Period	Selection method	Selectorate
Walter Veltroni	14/10/2007–9/02/2009	Primary	Party members and sympathizers
Dario Franceschini	9/02/2009–25/10/2009	Congress	Party delegates
Pier Luigi Bersani	25/10/2009–11/05/2013	Primary	Party members and sympathizers
Guglielmo Epifani	11/05/2013–8/12/2013	Congress	Party delegates
Matteo Renzi (I)	8/12/2013–19/02/2017	Primary	Party members and sympathizers
Matteo Renzi (II)	30/04/2017–12/03/2018	Primary	Party members and sympathizers
Maurizio Martina	7/07/2018–17/11/2018	Congress	Party delegates
Nicola Zingaretti	3/03/2019–4/03/2021	Primary	Party members and sympathizers
Enrico Letta	14/03/2021–26/02/2023	Congress	Party delegates
Elly Schlein	26/02/2023 –	Primary	Party members and sympathizers

ates through layered selectorates, where organizational embeddedness varies systematically – from members, to sympathizers, to occasional voters – making it possible to trace ideological differences across degrees of internal engagement. Third, the PD inherited an ideologically diverse legacy, born of the fusion between post-communist and post-Christian democratic traditions (Bordandini et al. 2008), which further increases the likelihood of internal heterogeneity. The combination of procedural continuity, stratified participation, and ideological pluralism makes the PD an analytically fertile case for assessing whether internal ideological variation is linked to enduring organizational structures.

Data and method

This study relies on multiple data sources. In the absence of a unified longitudinal dataset, we draw on survey data collected at different time points from partially overlapping sources. While this strategy enables a long-term perspective, it also introduces a key methodological constraint: the need to identify a common set of variables across all waves. Ensuring comparability over time required a rigorous harmonization process focused on isolating consistently measured indicators.

As for the operationalization of the three variables to identify party members, sympathizers, and voters, we define party membership as “an organizational affiliation by an individual to a political party, assigning obligations and privileges to that



individual” (Heidar 2006, 301); then, we define party voters (here, PD voters) as those who have voted for a given party (here, the PD); finally, party sympathizers are those individuals taking part in some party-related activities (here, taking part in the leader selection process) without being formally enrolled in the party’s membership ranks, in line with the logic of multi-speed membership (e.g., Scarrow 2015).

Let us move to the operationalization of these three variables. For PD voters, we used post-electoral surveys conducted by the Italian National Election Study (ITANES), covering the following elections: the 2008, 2013, and 2018 general elections; the 2019 European Parliament election; and the 2022 general election. In each wave, we selected respondents who self-identified as PD voters. These datasets were then harmonized along a common set of variables: age, gender, education, professional status, and ideological self-placement. We also collected data on respondents’ perceived ideological placement of the PD.³ The operationalization of each variable is discussed later in this section.

For PD members and sympathizers, we relied on national exit-poll surveys conducted by the Candidate & Leader Selection (CLS), a Standing Group of the Italian Political Science Association. These surveys were administered during PD leadership primaries in 2009, 2013, 2017, 2019, and 2022.⁴ The data were harmonized along five dimensions: age, gender, education, professional status, and ideological self-placement. Respondents were classified into two groups: *members*, who explicitly declared party membership, and *sympathizers*, defined as primary voters who did not report being formally enrolled.⁵ Following the logic of multi-speed membership embedded in the PD’s open primary format, we consistently treated non-members participating in primaries as sympathizers. The CLS and ITANES datasets were then harmonized to allow joint analysis of all three supporter strata.⁶ A methodological

³ Each ideological placement of the PD was derived from the full sample of respondents in each ITANES survey wave.

⁴ CLS exit polls do not employ a probabilistic sampling of respondents, nor do they guarantee the representativeness of the Italian electorate. These methodological constraints stem from the unique characteristics of the subject being studied (e.g., see Sandri et al. 2020): first, all Italian citizens can take part in the PD leader selection process, irrespective of their ideological leanings or party affiliations, and without the necessity of prior registration; second, by extending the right to vote to individuals aged 16 and older and resident foreigners, the PD leader selectorate can be broader than the Italian electorate; third, the lack of access to a publicly available and comprehensive list of the monitored universe of primary participants impedes the development of a probabilistic sampling design.

⁵ The inclusive rules adopted in the PD’s open primaries for party leadership selection imply the possibility that the pool of participants includes voters from other parties, not necessarily ideologically close to the PD. This is related to the wider point that primary elections might foster personalization (e.g., see the general argument in Cross et al. 2016; Stewart 2018), whereas candidates for the party leadership emerge as key drivers of voting behavior (on the PD, see, for instance, Martocchia Diodati and Marino 2017). However, our data indicate that this is a rather marginal phenomenon (see Table A1 and Figure A1 in the Appendix). Moreover, the PD primary regulations have formally introduced, during the registration phase, a declaration of commitment to vote for the party. These considerations led us to classify all respondents who, during the survey administration, declared they were not PD members as PD sympathizers.

⁶ Respondents were assigned to one and only one of three strata: PD members (self-declared PD members in CLS), sympathizers (self-declared non-PD members in CLS), and voters (ITANES respondents who reported voting for the PD). Despite the absence of consistent membership data in ITANES, the separation between data sources (CLS vs. ITANES) and the internal coherence of each classification reduce



caveat concerns the classification of PD voters. In our data, individuals are identified as PD voters based on their self-reported vote choice in a single election investigated by each ITANES survey. This broad operationalization may include both consistent supporters and occasional voters whose ideological proximity to the party is weaker or circumstantial. Due to data limitations, we were unable to adopt a stricter criterion – such as repeated voting behavior or explicit partisan identification – that would more accurately capture the depth of affiliation. Accordingly, findings related to PD voters should be interpreted with appropriate caution. For analytical purposes, all observations were grouped into five time points, based on the temporal alignment between national elections and PD primary contests (Table 2).

General election and primary datasets were matched across five time points, each pairing a general or European election with the closest PD leadership primary: 2008 with 2009 (Bersani), 2013 with 2013 (Renzi), 2018 with 2017 (Renzi’s reconfirmation), 2019 with 2019 (Zingaretti),⁷ and 2022 with 2023 (Schlein). This temporal alignment enables the diachronic comparison of ideological positioning across consistent organizational cycles.

Our key variable – respondents’ ideological self-placement – was measured differently across sources, reflecting variation in survey design. To ensure comparability and enable the calculation of ideological distance, all responses were rescaled onto a common 1–10 continuum, where 1 indicates the most left-wing and 10 the most right-wing position. To assess ideological proximity to the PD, we adopted a spatial approach based on respondent perceptions (e.g., Powell 2000; Adams et al. 2005):

Table 2 Dataset composition. Source: Itanes 2008; 2013; 2018; 2019; 2022; Candidate & Leader Selection 2009; 2013; 2017; 2019; 2023

Dataset	<i>N</i>	Point in time (election – primary)	<i>N</i> total	PD voters	PD Sympathizers	PD Party Members	
Itanes 2008	680	1	2008 General election	3792	680	2210	902
CLS 2009	3112		2009 PD primary				
Itanes 2013	332	2	2013 General election	3821	332	2525	964
CLS 2013	3489		2013 PD primary				
Itanes 2018	162	3	2018 General election	3716	162	2512	1042
CLS 2017	3554		2017 PD primary				
Itanes 2019	697	4	2019 EP election	3231	697	1820	714
CLS 2019	2534		2019 PD primary				
Itanes 2022	742	5	2022 General election	2698	742	1445	511
CLS 2023	1956		2023 PD primary				

the risk of overlap. In this regard, Polk and Kölln (2020, 101), in their study of party voters, party members, and candidates for parties in Scandinavian countries, argue “[w]e did not create mutually exclusive groups for any of our analyses [...] for conceptual and empirical reasons. As our discussion above has already made clear, the three levels of the party coincide with different levels of involvement. A level further up in the hierarchy simply adds involvement and does not substitute involvement. Therefore, it would be conceptually incorrect to artificially separate party voters from party members and party candidates. In addition to that, we were also not always able to separate the groups empirically”.

⁷ To align temporally with the 2019 PD leadership primary, we included data from the 2019 European Parliament election. While the 2018 general election would have been a plausible alternative, we prioritized temporal proximity to Zingaretti’s selection in March 2019 and opted for the EP election in May 2019.



we calculated the arithmetic difference between each individual's self-placement and each ITANES sample's evaluation of the PD's position on the left–right scale (in turn rescaled onto the same 1–10 continuum). Unlike expert ratings or manifesto data, this perception-based strategy anchors party placement in how it is understood by citizens themselves, thus capturing cognitive distance in spatial terms (Golder and Stramski 2010). This procedure yields a continuous and directional measure of divergence: negative values indicate respondents to the left of the PD, positive values to the right.⁸ Direction matters, as shown in spatial models which suggest that citizens respond not only to distance but also to its polarity (Rabinowitz and Macdonald 1989; Merrill and Grofman 1999). This approach allows us to track ideological proximity across strata and time points based on voters' own cognitive mapping.⁹ In the next section, we employ descriptive analyses to map aggregate patterns of ideological positioning across the three strata and to address our RQ. These are complemented by an exploratory logistic regression aimed at uncovering the individual-level factors associated with respondents' ideological distance from the PD. Indeed, for ease of interpretation, we recoded the continuous proximity measure into a binary variable: respondents located to the left of the party were coded as 1, and those to the right as 0, where party placement reflects the mean evaluation within each ITANES wave.¹⁰ While this operationalization simplifies the underlying ideological continuum, it provides a clear metric for identifying directional incongruence between individuals and the party.¹¹

The logistic regression includes several control variables. Age is treated as a continuous variable, while gender is coded dichotomously (0=female, 1=male). Education is measured on an ordinal scale: 1=low-to-medium schooling, 2=high school diploma, 3=university degree or higher. Professional status was harmonized into three categories: 0=unemployed, 1=retired, and 2=employed. Finally, a categorical variable distinguishes the three intra-party strata: PD voters, sympathizers, and party members.¹²

⁸ Table A2 in the Appendix provides details about the average and standard deviation across layers and data points.

⁹ Statistical significance of mean differences was assessed through a two-way ANOVA (party stratum × time period) with Bonferroni-corrected post-hoc pairwise comparisons. Full results are reported in Tables A5–A6–A7 in the Appendix.

¹⁰ The distribution of ideological distance (respondent minus party placement) ranges from –7.17 to +2.99. No exact alignment (value=0) was observed in the dataset.

¹¹ We also estimated an OLS model using the original continuous distance variable. The results of this test are substantially compatible, at least concerning the effect of belonging to different party strata, with those of the logistic regression, and are reported in Table A8 in the Appendix.

¹² Descriptive statistics are reported in Table A3 in the Appendix, along with the full description of key variables wording as reported in questionnaires (see Table A4).



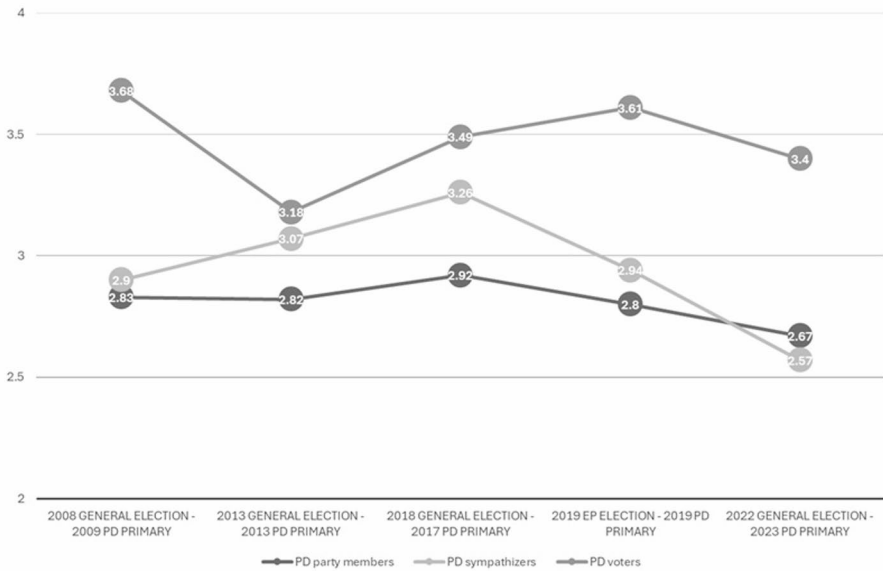


Figure 1 Ideological self-placement within the PD. The ideological self-placement is calculated on a 1–10 scale, where 1=left; 10=right

Table 3 Ideological self-placement within the PD

Election – primary	Party members		Sympathizers		Voters	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
2008 General election – 2009 PD Primary	2.83	1.5	2.90	1.56	3.68	1.69
2013 General election – 2013 PD Primary	2.82	1.36	3.07	1.62	3.18	1.54
2018 General election – 2017 PD Primary	2.92	1.55	3.26	1.62	3.49	1.81
2019 EP election – 2019 PD Primary	2.80	1.58	2.94	1.58	3.61	1.58
2022 General election – 2023 PD primary	2.67	1.63	2.57	1.48	3.40	1.6

Results

We begin our empirical analysis by tracking aggregate patterns of ideological self-placement across the three strata (i.e., members, sympathizers, and voters) over time. This descriptive part maps internal variation before turning to the individual-level logistic regression. Figure 1 displays the ideological self-placement of the three strata, revealing a clear gradient of divergence. In a nutshell, as we move from voters to sympathizers and then to members, the average positioning shifts progressively to the left.

Then, Table 3 reports the average ideological self-placement and standard deviation for each party stratum. The joint reading of Fig. 1; Table 3 helps us better understand the evolution of the ideological positioning of PD members, sympathizers, and voters.

Let us begin with a short comment on the evolution of each stratum's positioning. Among PD members, the 2009 primary election showed a clearly left-wing average



score of 2.83. In subsequent years, (minor) deviations resulted in a more center-leaning orientation, with the peak of 2.92 during the 2017 primary election. More recently, however, a sharper return to the left is observed in 2023, with a score of 2.67 – the most left-leaning value recorded among members across all waves. Then, PD sympathizers followed a trajectory broadly similar to that of PD members. Starting from a left-leaning average of 2.9 in 2009, their self-placement shifted toward more center-leaning positions in 2013 and peaked at 3.26 in 2017, just before the start of Renzi's leadership in 2013 up to his re-selection as party leader in 2017. A clear reversal emerged after 2019 (coinciding with the selection of Nicola Zingaretti as PD leader), with a gradual move leftward culminating in a score of 2.57 in 2023 – the most left-wing value recorded among sympathizers over the entire period. The candidacy of Elly Schlein, who ran as a clearly left-leaning contender (Santoriello and Stavolo 2024), may have mobilized more radical left sympathizers to participate in the leadership selection process.

Finally, the PD electorate consistently positioned itself above 3 on the ideological scale, indicating a more centerward orientation than members or sympathizers. The highest score was recorded in 2017, at 3.49, coinciding with Renzi's reappointment. By 2023, a slight shift to the left is observed, with the average declining modestly.

If we move to a more comparative analysis of the data in Fig. 1 and Table 3, a preliminary point emerges: the ideological distance among members, sympathizers, and voters is not fixed but evolves. For instance, while members remain ideologically stable over time, sympathizers display marked volatility, particularly during leadership transitions.¹³ Second, standard deviation values remain low over time, indicating a generally consistent ideological profile among members, sympathizers, and voters, thereby partly contradicting our expectation of differentiated ideological coherence across these three strata.

Then, going into more detail, statistical tests confirm significant ideological variation across party strata (two-way ANOVA: $F=187.23$, $p < 0.001$) and a significant interaction with time ($F=8.20$, $p < 0.001$). Post-hoc pairwise comparisons reveal that members consistently differ from voters across all periods. In some moments, such as in 2009 and again in 2019 under Bersani and Zingaretti, we even observe a sharp gap between party members and voters ($\Delta=0.85$ and 0.81 , respectively).

In contrast, members exhibit substantial ideological overlap with sympathizers in most years, with a statistically significant divergence between members and sympathizers emerging only during Renzi's center-leaning leadership (2013–2017, with $p < 0.001$ in both 2013 and 2017),¹⁴ while voters and sympathizers converged toward more center-leaning positions with no significant differences.

Figure 2 provides a visual summary of the distribution of ideological preferences across strata and time, allowing to assess not only the relative placement of each group but also the degree of internal dispersion and overlap among them.

¹³ See Tables A6–A8 in Appendix.

¹⁴ On Renzi's leadership, see, for instance, Fabbrini and Lazar (2016).



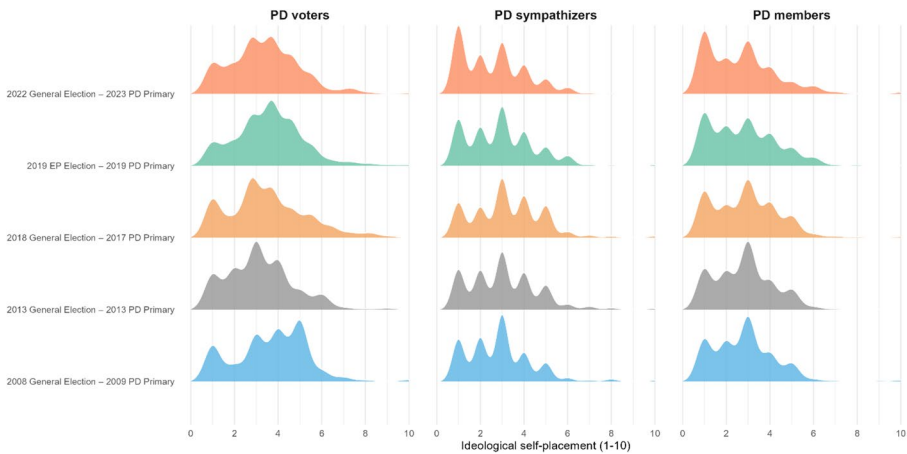


Figure 2 Ideological self-placement distribution within the PD

Among party members, we observe a notable shift toward less center-leaning ideological positions¹⁵. Figure 2 shows that the share of members placing themselves on extreme left positions (scores 1–2) rose from approximately 41% in 2009 to 49% in 2023. At the same time, a trend toward internal polarization emerges: the proportion of members positioning themselves on a more center-left position (score 3) declined from 33% to 26%. In contrast, those self-positioning at the political center remained relatively stable.

Then, PD sympathizers display a generally stable ideological profile over time, with one exception: in 2017, the proportion of sympathizers identifying with more center-leaning positions (scores 4–5) temporarily increased. However, from 2019 onward, the group gradually returned to its earlier, more left-leaning configuration.

Finally, PD voters exhibit a more ideologically dispersed profile. Most respondents cluster between scores 3 and 5, reflecting a center-leaning tendency, but with considerable variation at the margins. Notably, only within the voter group do we find individuals identifying with more center-right or more right-wing positions – virtually absent among members and sympathizers.

To further investigate ideological differentiation within the PD, we now assess whether affiliation with different party strata significantly affects individual positioning along the left–right axis. Moving from aggregate, descriptive patterns to a more inferential, individual-level analysis, Table 4 reports the results of a logistic regression model assessing the factors associated with respondents’ relative ideological positioning vis-à-vis the PD. The dependent variable is coded as 1 for individuals who place themselves to the left of the party, and 0 for those to its right. For ease of interpretation, the model presents odds ratios.

¹⁵ In the following paragraphs, for data presentation reasons, we will comment on data derived from Fig. 2 by clustering respondents’ left-right self-positioning, partly following Barisone’s classification (2020). Nonetheless, we acknowledge the inherent arbitrariness of all attempts to cluster a left-right continuum.



Table 4 Logistic regression on the ideological positioning of respondents vs. the PD

Layer (ref.cat. = PD voter)	Odds ratios	SD	Sig
	1	.	
PD Sympathizer	1.556	0.075	***
PD member	1.869	0.104	***
Year (ref.cat. = 2008 general election – 2009 PD primary)	1	.	
2013 General election – 2013 PD primary	0.284	0.015	***
2018 General election – 2017 PD primary	0.72	0.038	***
2019 EP election – 2019 PD primary	0.967	0.053	
2022 General election – 2023 PD primary	1.268	0.073	***
Age	1.007	0.001	***
Gender (ref.cat.= female)	1	.	
Male	0.949	0.032	
Education (ref.cat.= 1 = low/middle school degree)	1	.	
High school degree	1.117	0.05	**
University degree	1.224	0.057	***
Occupation (ref.cat. =unemployed)	1	.	
Retired	1.06	0.083	
Employed	0.966	0.066	
Constant	0.887	0.076	
Pseudo R-Squared	0.055		
BIC	21769.791		
AIC	21669.180		
Log-likelihood	-10821.59		
N	16,973		

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$

Results from the logistic regression confirm a clear stratification effect. Compared to PD voters (the reference category), both sympathizers and members are significantly more likely to position themselves to the left of the party. This likelihood increases across levels of organizational embeddedness: as we move from voters to sympathizers, and then from voters to members, the probability of leftward positioning increases progressively.

A temporal trend also emerges. The likelihood of respondents placing themselves to the left of the PD increases from the earliest time point (2008–2009) to the most recent one (2022–2023), peaking in the final wave. This suggests a growing tendency across all strata – members, sympathizers, and voters – to perceive themselves as more left-leaning than the party over time.

Among control variables, several patterns warrant attention. Age shows a positive and significant association with leftward positioning. The interpretation of this finding is not straightforward given the PD’s dual ideological heritage (post-Communist and post-Christian democratic), with older cohorts possibly including both more left-wing and more center-leaning people.¹⁶ Higher educational attainment is also associated with a greater likelihood of positioning to the left of the PD, in line with previous research linking education to the voting behavior for this party (e.g., see Maraffi

¹⁶ On the link between age and vote for the PD, see, for instance, Chiramonte et al. (2022).



2018). By contrast, gender and occupational status are not significantly associated with ideological distance.

Discussion and concluding remarks

This study investigated the link between different forms of party affiliation – voters, sympathizers, and members – and ideological positioning within a party operating under a multi-speed membership model. Drawing on harmonized survey data covering 15 years of the Italian PD's life, we examined whether organizational differentiation corresponds to ideological stratification at the grassroots level.

The results indicate that this is the case: the PD's internal universe is ideologically layered, and these layers reflect differing degrees of organizational embeddedness. PD members display a consistently more left-wing profile compared to voters, a difference that is statistically significant across all time points. However, members and sympathizers show substantial ideological overlap in most periods, diverging significantly only during phases of a more center-leaning party leadership.

However, we do not find statistically significant evidence of a more (less) coherent ideological positioning (i.e., a larger (smaller) difference in the standard deviation values) among the three party strata under examination. Finally, a multivariate logistic regression analysis shows that the probability of self-positioning to the left of the PD increases as we move from voters to sympathizers, and from voters to members. These patterns confirm expectations from both organizational theory and spatial models: deeper involvement is associated with a more extreme ideological alignment.

These findings contribute to two central theoretical debates. First, regarding multi-speed membership, they show that expanding participatory rights to individuals with a loose connection to the party increases inclusiveness but also introduces ideological complexity. The grassroots base becomes stratified into overlapping layers, confirming concerns raised by recent organizational scholarship (Scarrow 2015; Hooghe and Kölln 2020). Despite the fact that not all layers exhibit distinct ideological profiles (members consistently differ from voters, while members and sympathizers show substantial ideological convergence in most organizational cycles), these patterns suggest a structural feature rather than a contingent outcome.

Second, our results speak to May's Law of Curvilinear Disparity. We find that members are more left-leaning than voters, aligning with one of May's core intuitions, and with recent empirical evidence on Nordic countries, where members of Swedish, Danish, and Icelandic Social-Democratic parties are more left-leaning than voters (Polk and Kölln 2020). Yet, the expected curvilinear pattern does not consistently hold: sympathizers do not occupy a stable intermediate position. Indeed, in most periods (2009, 2019, 2023), sympathizers are statistically indistinguishable from members, clustering together in the left-leaning portion of the ideological spectrum. A distinct intermediate position emerges only during the more centerward leadership cycles (2013–2017), when sympathizers position themselves significantly to the right of members but to the left of voters.

This nuance aligns with more recent empirical evidence questioning the generalizability of May's Law (e.g., Van Holsteyn et al. 2017; Polk and Kölln 2020; Wager et



al. 2022; Springer 2024). May's insight remains theoretically valuable, but its empirical formulation requires revision in light of modern party structures.

These dynamics also bear on the broader tension between responsiveness and responsibility (Mair 2009; Bardi et al. 2014; Kerremans and Lefkofridi 2020). While multi-speed membership extends participation, it also incorporates segments that are not necessarily aligned with the party's ideological core: as prior works have noted (Katz 2014; Kölln and Polk 2017), this may undermine both policy clarity and internal party cohesion.

Naturally, this study has some limitations. Although our data span leadership cycles, we do not model the influence of leaders' profiles, discursive styles, or broader political contexts. Given the increasing personalization of politics, at least in some countries (Marino et al. 2022), future research should explore how leadership shapes, or responds to, grassroots ideological structure. So, further investigations are warranted: if, in the future, data collection efforts gathered data on PD members' (sympathizers') attitudes not just during primary elections, but also in other moments of this party's life, it would be possible to understand whether, and to what extent, there are relevant ideological differences in members' (sympathizers') attitudes when comparing primary election periods and other party life moments.

Moreover, our unidimensional operationalization of ideological distance, though effective for a spatial comparison, does not capture other relevant cleavages – such as cultural or libertarian-authoritarian axes – that may intersect with economic positions (e.g., see Maggini 2022). Future research might adopt multidimensional measures, as also advocated by Polk and Kölln (2020), by incorporating attitudinal items or latent class analysis to uncover potential cross-cutting patterns.

Furthermore, we do not include party elites in our data, which precludes a full test of May's tripartite model. A further task for future research is surely to incorporate elite surveys, manifesto data, or parliamentary votes to help trace ideological continuity (or divergence) across a greater number of party strata, from the leadership to the grassroots.

A final yet central element worth underlining is that, in this article, we have focused on a single (albeit very interesting) case, the Italian PD. Therefore, future comparative studies, integrating our findings with the existing strands of research on party organizations and ideological heterogeneity, might yield a better understanding of political parties, their members, sympathizers, and voters.

In sum, our findings reveal a structured ideological differentiation within a major Western European party. Such diversity might not be inherently destabilizing per se, but it may bring about dire consequences for political parties at different levels. All in all, understanding how parties navigate such internal heterogeneity remains a key challenge for the study of party organizations in contemporary democracies.

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