

Italy: Elly Schlein shock win in Partito Democratico leadership race

Sunday 5 March 2023, by [KELLAWAY Dave](#) (Date first published: 1 March 2023).

Dave Kellaway reports on the election of Elly Schlein to leader of the PD in Italy.

Just like Jeremy Corbyn in 2015, even Elly Schlein could scarcely believe it. All the polls and insiders had suggested she would lose by at least ten percentage points or more. She lost the members' vote by 53% to 35% before the open public vote. Instead, she easily won by seven percentage points. Her opponent was Stefano Bonaccini, the twice-elected governor of the PD (Partito Democratico, or Democratic Party) stronghold of Emilia Romagna. He had already picked Schlein, a relative newcomer to the PD, as his number two in his administration.

Posts by comrades and friends on social media indicate that left-leaning and progressive voters have welcomed her victory. This is understandable given the continued decline of the PD (barely 20% of the vote), the extreme weakness of the radical left (1% of the vote), and the tepid reaction of the labour movement and social movement to the ongoing bosses' offensive. People on the left who have deserted the PD in despair at its support for neo-liberal policies were glad to see somebody from the leadership actually saying something left wing. Quite a few people have referenced the progressive actor, Nanni Moretti, who, in one of his films, shouted in frustration at the TV screen, which was showing a meeting of the forerunner of the PD, 'Say something, anything that is left wing'.

But will Schlein really change the PD? Is this a Corbyn moment for the party? Will it revert to a more traditional social-democratic approach? Will it move away from openly bourgeois political forces led by people like Calenda and Renzi and form coalitions with more progressive forces?

Just after the results came in I messaged Franco Turigliatto, ex-senator and leader of Sinistra Anticapitalista, who sent me his immediate reaction:

"People have joked that the PD have even managed to lose its own primary elections. It is the first time that the broader, 'outside' vote overturned the choice of the actual membership! But Schlein's victory certainly reflects the concerns of part of the electorate and of political tendencies that want a more militant PD that steers to the left. She will create hopes and some illusions that it is difficult to see turned into reality. It is unclear how much new political space the new leader can create. Certainly she could get the PD to do a bit more in terms of people's democratic or human rights and perhaps also on social/economic issues. We will wait to see what position she will take on the question of war and military alliances. I have my doubts that she will be able to intervene with an effective progressive line on the central question of workers' living standards and the relationship of forces in the workplaces. She is likely to put Conte's Five Star Movement into some tactical difficulty."

Following the primary the PD made a big deal of the million or so voters who turned out to vote in Sunday's election. This reflects the activist base that the party still retains and it is unlikely other political currents could achieve the same numbers. The vote represented one in five of the voters it

gained in September's general election. However when Veltroni was elected in the first primary in 1998 there were well over three million who voted.

Unlike the Corbyn victory those half million people who voted for Schlein have not joined the PD as activists. Although there may be an increase in people joining or re-joining the PD this is unlikely to be on the scale or militancy that we saw with the Corbyn surge. In 2015 lots of young people who had been involved in the struggles around tuition fees came into Labour. The primary vote in Italy does not have that link with active struggles.

One similarity with the Corbyn story is the way Schlein tapped into the revulsion many PD supporters had for Matteo Renzi who was the PD leader and Prime minister who pushed through anti-working legislation like the Jobs Act which actually made jobs less secure. Corbyn benefitted from a similar rejection of Tony Blair's pro-business and pro-Iraq war positions. Schlein actually resigned from the PD in protest at Renzi's leadership.

Whilst both candidates had promoted their credentials as opponents of the existing PD leadership and apparatus and promised a total renewal, Schlein could play that role more convincingly. Despite a fashionable makeover with new glasses and a new style beard, Bonaccini still walked, talked, and looked like the traditional PD political manager. He made sure he distanced himself from Renzi during the campaign, but his record shows he was a political friend and ally. The veteran Emilia-Romagna governor castigated Schlein and the other candidates for being embarrassed to talk about business. In his region, there has been a long-term alliance between local businesses and the party. From the start, he said he was ready to meet post-fascist Meloni, the current prime minister, once he had won.

Schlein, on the other hand, was much more forthright in her criticism and opposition to Meloni and since her election, she has promised firmer resistance to her. During the campaign, a student had been attacked by fascists outside his school. The headteacher then wrote a very strong anti-fascist letter, recalling the values of the Italian constitution and how exalting frontiers can lead to such violence. The education minister and other MPs from Meloni's party, Fratelli d'Italia, stepped in to say that the head was wrong. Schlein went to Florence and sang Bella Ciao, the traditional anti-fascist song.

Elly Schlein also benefited among the wider primary electorate from being younger (37), and the potential first ever woman leader of the PD. She is also clearly much more open to working alongside Conte's M5S movement who have made a tactical turn to defending some progressive policies. I know quite a few left-leaning people who voted for the M5S in recent elections since they saw it as better than the PD. I am sure some of these put in a vote for Schlein. A lot of left people resented what they saw was the division of 'left of centre' forces. There was no agreement between the PD and the M5S at recent elections, which made it easier for a united hard-right coalition to win the general election (still with less than 50% of the vote).

A coalition with the M5S might improve the possibility of defeating the right wing coalition but the M5S is not even a social democratic party even though it has promoted and supported progressive reforms like the citizens income welfare reform. It participated in a government with Salvini's reactionary Lega and in Draghi's neo-liberal national government. A PD/M5S coalition has already been tried with the second Conte government and it made little difference - apart from the citizens income - to the overall austerity imposed on working people. It is not some magic bullet for a left wing renaissance.

As Franco Turigliatto points out, a turn by Schlein to some left reformist policies and towards the M5S will create problems for Conte, whose party mopped up a lot of ex-PD voters in the last

election. She has also correctly raised the need to win back the massive number of voters who are so alienated from politics that they have given up voting. Remember in Italy right up to the 1990s, there was around 10% abstention rate; this has rocketed four times.

Diego Giachetti in his article yesterday on the Sinistra Anticapitalista site warns us of not overestimating the quality or differences in the policy debate:

"...during the campaign the political and programmatic debate became more and more replaced by a conflict between personalities This political personality contest is typical of a period of a deep going crisis of politics itself." [1] (my translation)

Giachetti also correctly points out that Schlein also has a mixed coalition of various PD groupings or tendencies that support her. These currents define and limit the political debate inside the party and are like 'moles' that are always working below the surface of the political 'spectacle' and make a real left wing shift a lot less probable. All these currents have done little historically to really change anything. They exist in some respects to guarantee posts, positions, and salaries for their leaders.

Of course it is easier for Schlein *in opposition* to take firmer positions in favour of a minimum wage, against Meloni on the migrants issue, for the right to citizenship for migrant children born in Italy, in favour of decriminalising cannabis, against precarious work contracts, for renewable energy, for gay and trans rights, and so on.

However, the PD is essentially a party that wants to govern and manage the economy in partnership with business. Schlein has to deal with more than half of her membership, who are aligned with this pro-business orientation. In his concession speech, Bonaccini stated his desire to work with her in a united party. Not everybody on his side is so happy. Christina Fogazzi, a well-known entrepreneur in the esthetic/makeup industry, has lashed out at the Schlein team for using social media:

"electoral campaigns based on shitstorms are ugly and not at all left wing"
CORRIERE DELLA SERA, MARCH FIRST

This accusation in some ways sums up the cultural divide between a lot of Schlein's base and the people supporting Bonaccini. Schlein, being under forty years of age, clearly picked up a lot of the younger, graduate voters living in the big cities. She herself is the epitome of the badly used epithet cosmopolitan, as she has a Swiss/US family background, is bisexual, and is currently in a relationship with a woman. Schlein's supporters' demographic is strong among M5S voters too. Her side managed to get three times the interactions on social media that Bonaccini achieved.

Already there are threats from some of this so-called 'reformist' wing to defect to the Renzi/Calenda third pole. Schlein could also make concessions to keep them in—she worked without complex alongside her defeated opponent in the regional administration. Renzi and Calenda are actively trying to break off the more moderate wing of the party, saying the PD is now too left wing. Bonaccini himself has called for everyone to stay in the PD.

The mainstream press has rounded on Schlein denouncing her extremist policies and predicting both a split in the PD and suggesting it will not get into government again with such a leader. In this sense, there is an analogy with Corbyn. Anyone slightly shifting from the centre of gravity of capitalist politics receives this treatment from the business-owned press. One exception is the daily IL Manifesto which still defines itself as communist. Here the danger is in creating illusions about how far left Schlein is. In an editorial, Norma Rangeri even says that she will form a new progressive coalition with the left, both inside and outside the party.

Tactically, the radical left in Italy has to recognise this shift inside the PD leadership. Many PD

voters want a more ecological, feminist, and left wing line. Socialists should support any progressive measures Schlein proposes—particularly if, for example, she opposes Meloni robustly on the murderous attitude toward migrants. Just a few days ago, over 70 migrants, including many children drowned off the Calabrian coast. Meloni has imposed severe restrictions on the humanitarian rescue ships, which makes it more likely such tragedies will occur.

Schlein is better than Bonaccini but she is no Corbyn. Yesterday, she called for a minister's resignation over the tragedy of the 67 migrant deaths off the Calabrian coast. He has implicitly blamed the migrants for taking to the boats. Schlein demanded why the coastguard had not intervened.

Socialists welcome the enthusiasm for more progressive policies that her voters express. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that she will pose the threat that Corbyn did to the interests of big business and imperialism.

Dave Kellaway

P.S.

- Anti*Capitalist Resistance. 01 Mar 2023:
<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/schlein-shock-win-in-pd-leadership-race/>
 - Dave Kellaway is on the Editorial Board of Anti*Capitalist Resistance, a member of Socialist Resistance, and Hackney and Stoke Newington Labour Party, a contributor to International Viewpoint and Europe Solidaire Sans Frontieres.
-

Footnotes

- [1] <https://anticapitalista.org/2023/02/27/il-pd-ha-perso-le-sue-primarie/>