

Social Media and Leadership in the 2023 *Partito Democratico* Primaries: A Comparative Study of Elly Schlein and Stefano Bonaccini

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Abstract

This article examines the 2023 Partito Democratico (PD) primary election in Italy, comparing the digital campaign strategies of Elly Schlein, current PD Secretary, and Stefano Bonaccini, the long-serving President of the Emilia-Romagna region. Using qualitative content analysis of their campaign manifestos and social media data from Facebook and Instagram, the study explores how digitalization and personalization shaped their leadership styles and electoral performance. Findings show that, despite similar policy agendas, Schlein's inclusive, interactive, and grassroots-oriented communication generated stronger online engagement and follower growth, contributing to her unexpected victory. Bonaccini's campaign, though well-funded and institutionally supported, relied on more traditional political communication. The research argues that Schlein's success marks a partial shift within the PD towards a more digital, personalized form of leadership while highlighting the structural resistance that continues to hinder full organizational transformation.

Keywords: Political Communication; Political Campaigns; Social Media; Italian Politics; Digitalization; Personalization; Content Analysis; Digital Leadership

Introduction

This paper contributes to the growing political science literature on the use of digital media by political actors to shape voter behaviour and build electoral support (Gerbaudo 2022; Peña and Gold 2023; Minguzzi 2023; McLaughlin 2024). It draws on the classic theoretical tradition that compares the electoral arena to the economic marketplace (Downs 1957), where candidates compete for voter preferences much like firms compete for consumers. In the contemporary context, the rise of digital technologies has profoundly transformed this dynamic. Advanced marketing tools, data analytics, and micro-targeting techniques now play a central role in campaign strategy, influencing not only electoral outcomes but also the broader processes of political mobilization and leadership formation (Dommett 2019).

Building on this theoretical framework, the paper examines the 2023 leadership campaign of the *Partito Democratico* (PD), Italy's Democratic Party, focusing on the two candidates who reached the final runoff held on February 26, 2023: Elly Schlein and Stefano Bonaccini. The central objective is to assess whether Schlein's victory in the primary election can be explained, at least in part, by two defining trends of contemporary politics: personalization and digitization.

While acknowledging multiple factors influence electoral success, this study aims to provide preliminary empirical evidence on how digital communication strategies and online presence affect political performance. Specifically, it examines whether more effective digital organization and campaign design correlate with a higher likelihood of electoral success.

By analysing campaign strategies through this lens, the paper aims to provide a first step toward validating, through further empirical investigation, the hypothesis that digital campaign competence can serve as a significant advantage in political contests. In doing so, it positions Schlein's victory not only as a personal and political milestone but also as a case study through which we can understand how digital infrastructure and personalization strategies may enhance the competitiveness of candidates in modern electoral campaigns.

To explore this, the research is guided by two main hypotheses: the first focuses on the key topics each candidate emphasized to shape their public image; the second examines their respective digital communication styles and strategies throughout the campaign:

H1: Schlein emphasizes different issues in her political manifesto and digital communication compared to Bonaccini, reflecting the age and political sensibility of her target audience. This differentiated program may have attracted electorate outside the party (particularly younger individuals and members of the LGBTQ+ community) who likely contributed to her victory.

H2: Schlein's digital campaign was more direct, accessible, and interactive—especially across social media platforms and her personal website—resulting in more effective communication and faster growth of her online following.

Elly Schlein's leadership, at the time of her election, appeared to mark a turning point for the PD, offering a valuable case study to examine how personalization and digitalization can be strategically leveraged within a political campaign.

To test these hypotheses, the study is structured in two main parts, which define the core sections of the paper. The first part analyses the candidates' programmatic motions and their official campaign websites. Using NVivo qualitative analysis software, key excerpts from the candidates' manifestos were coded according to predefined categories. Content observation of the

candidates' digital platforms and newsletters provided further insights into how each campaign used digital tools to organize and engage supporters (Kreiss and McGregor 2017; Dommert 2019).

The second part of the analysis focuses on the candidates' activities on Meta platforms—specifically, Facebook and Instagram—drawing on established research on digital campaigning (Enli and Skogerbo 2013; Stier et al. 2018; Koc-Michalska et al. 2020). Data were collected using the CrowdTangle API and analysed using Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic modelling (Blei et al. 2003; Blei 2012) to identify the dominant themes in each candidate's social media posts. Additionally, the study monitored user engagement and follower growth in the weeks preceding the primary vote, offering a comparative assessment of the effectiveness of their digital outreach strategies.

Theoretical Framework

The Italian political arena has long served a dynamic political laboratory for innovations, both nationally and internationally. In recent decades, Italy has witnessed major transformations in political communication and organization: from Forza Italia and Silvio Berlusconi's pioneering personalization of politics (Calise 2000) to the digital experimentation of the Five Star Movement, Matteo Salvini's *Lega*, and Giorgia Meloni's *Fratelli d'Italia* (Gerbaudo 2018; 2022; Nunziata 2021; Giordano and Antonucci 2023).

Digitalization and personalization represent the two main drivers of transformation in contemporary politics (Calise and Musella 2019). The widespread diffusion of digital technologies and the rise of the so-called “platform society” (van Dijck et al. 2018) are affecting all political actors, from parties and their leaders to public administration (Musella 2022b; Borriello 2025). These changes extend far beyond communication, disrupting traditional mechanisms of organization and representation in democratic systems (Chadwick and Stromer-Galley 2016; Kreiss and McGregor 2017; Borriello 2023).

Over the past three decades, the centralization of power in the hands of charismatic leaders (Lowi 1986; Calise 2000; Poguntke and Webb 2005; Bordignon 2013; Musella 2020) has been gaining momentum, aided by technological developments that have transformed the interaction between politicians and voters (Sartori 2000; Roncarolo 2008; Rullo and Nunziata 2021; Dommert et al. 2021; Musella 2022a).

Digitalization has thus enabled the emergence of an innovative party model that applies new technologies not only to communicate with the electorate, but also to organize its internal structure (Katz and Mair 2018; Calise and Musella 2019; Gerbaudo 2018; 2022; Fittipaldi 2021).

The Five Stars Movement reached international fame for its innovative use of the web to interact with the electoral base—along its personalized leadership (Tarchi 2015).

In this evolving context, charismatic leadership has developed into platform leadership (Nunziata 2021; Villaplana and Fitzpatrick 2024), where a leader's charisma increasingly rests on the empathic and direct relation between “followers-voters” and politicians (Campus 2009; Calise and Musella 2019). This relationship, far from being exclusively grounded in political ideologies and programmatic manifestos, is mediated through social media interactions that emphasize aspects of leaders' personal life, with whom voters can identify (Thompson 2005; Gerbaudo 2018; Nunziata 2023).

Digitization has also transformed electoral campaigning, making it more personalized, pervasive, and permanent (Calise and Musella 2019). The earliest examples of data-driven political campaign emerged in the United States, from Howard Dean's 2004 campaign to Barack Obama's and Donald Trump's digital mobilizations (Bimber 2014; Baldwin-Philippi 2019; Valbruzzi 2021). Today, international literature is beginning to analyse the phenomenon of intra-party elections and democracy in light of the digitization process, focusing on the relevance of new technologies in internal communication and participation systems, as well as the process of leaders' consensus-building (Datts and Gerl 2023; Lupato and Meloni 2023). However, data-driven campaigning has now become a global phenomenon. Despite scandals such as Cambridge Analytica, Meta platforms remain among the most widely used tools for reaching voters (Stier et al. 2018; Dommett 2019; Koc-Michalska et al. 2020; Bennett and Gordon 2021).

In this context of continuous metamorphosis, the influence of traditional mass parties, which had dominated Italy until the early 1990s, has steadily declined. Silvio Berlusconi's “descent into the field” marked a radical change in the way politics is done in Italy (Campus 2006; Bordignon 2013). Nowadays, it is difficult to find a party that exists based on long-lasting ideologies and not on a charismatic leader to hold its ranks together.

The PD nonetheless remains the repository of a significant political tradition in Italy, grounded in its two notable predecessors: the Christian Democracy (DC) and the Italian Communist Party (PCI). This heritage continues to shape the PD's internal organization, decision-making structures, and factional dynamics (Pasquino 2009; Bobba and Seddone, 2016; Natale and Fasano, 2017). Some attempts—such as the introduction of primaries (Bolgherini and Musella 2006), Matteo Renzi's experience (Bordignon 2013; Calise 2013; Salvati 2014), or Enrico Letta's “democratic *Agorà*” initiative (Valbruzzi 2021)—have produced limited change, often meeting resistance from entrenched elites. As a result, the PD faces competitive disadvantages compared to other political players in Italy, particularly in terms of personalization and digitalization.

Against this backdrop, Schlein's victory in the 2023 primary election appears to signal a turning point for the PD. Although, almost two years after her election, the drive for innovation continues to face the same internal resistance that thwarted previous reform efforts, Schlein's rise nevertheless symbolizes an ongoing generational and structural shift in Italian politics, where traditional forms of participation are giving way to new, digitally mediated modes of political engagement (Chadwick and Stromer-Galley 2016; Borriello 2023).

Methodology

To test the first hypothesis and examine the core elements of the campaign led by Schlein and Bonaccini, we analysed the candidates' programmatic motions and observed the content published on their official websites (*www.stefanobonaccini.it* and *www.ellyschlein.it*). Two different qualitative research techniques were employed. First, a content analysis of the texts was conducted using NVivo software (Jackson and Bazeley 2019). Second, we examined the content posted on the candidates' personal websites and analysed their design choices. We subscribed to the newsletters from January 26, 2023, to February 26, 2023 to assess the dynamics of digital community engagement.

The two programmatic motions, publicly available on the PD website (*www.partitodemocratico.it*) and on the candidates' platforms, were uploaded to NVivo for qualitative coding. This tool was chosen to enable both in-depth thematic analysis and lexical examination of the texts. Two main nodes were identified—Bonaccini and Schlein—and seven sub-nodes were created representing the main topics addressed in the two documents (Table 1).

Table 1. Nodes and Sub-nodes Used for the Qualitative Content Analysis NVivo

Nodes	Sub-nodes
1: Bonaccini	1: Environment and Digital
	2: Civil and Social Rights
	3: Education, Culture and Tourism
	4: Work and Economy
2: Schlein	5: Party and Political Identity
	6: International Politics
	7: Healthcare

Source: Authors through NVivo software

Based on these categories, we manually coded key excerpts corresponding to each policy area, allowing a comparison of how much attention each candidate devoted to different policy themes and to compare the linguistic structures and communication styles they adopted. After this initial coding, a vocabulary of significant terms was developed¹. Using NVivo's query tools, we then generated word frequency lists and word clouds to identify the most recurrent terms, both across and within categories. The observation of the candidates' websites involved comparing their homepages and the various available sections. The analyses conducted at this stage allow for the partial rejection of H1, while providing empirical evidence in support of H2.

In the second stage of the research, we analysed the candidates' social media activity using LDA topic modelling (Blei et al. 2003) to identify the main themes of their campaigns (Minguzzi 2023). We extracted all posts published by both candidates on Facebook and Instagram between January 26 and March 26, 2023 using the CrowdTangle API. The primary election date (February 26) served as the midpoint, enabling comparison between the pre- and post-election periods. The dataset included 365 Facebook posts and 289 Instagram posts. No additional filters were applied, as the objective was to analyse the full scope of campaign communication within the selected timeframe. To account for platform-specific affordances, posts were divided into two separate matrices, one for Facebook and one for Instagram, to avoid oversimplification².

After automated lemmatization in T-Lab software, the datasets were analysed through LDA topic modelling. Initially, seven themes were requested, mirroring the NVivo sub-node structure (Table 1). However, preliminary extractions showed redundancy, so the number of themes was reduced to five for both datasets (Table 2).

¹ The vocabulary was developed by researchers through the removal of less relevant parts of the text for analysis—such as conjunctions, articles, adverbs, pronouns, and prepositions—which carry little weight in shaping the political language of the two candidates. This allowed for the identification of the most frequently used nouns, adjectives, and verbs in the campaign platforms, providing a solid basis for generating the respective word clouds.

² For both Facebook and Instagram, the matrix takes into analysis the following variables: PageName, which is the profile of the two candidates; Date of the post (Date), divided into pre- and post-election; type of media present in the post (MediaType); total interactions with the individual post (TotInteractions); and the number of comments to the post (Comments). In the case of Instagram, Likes to the posts were also taken into account, while for Facebook the variables PositiveInteractions (“like”, “love”, “wow”, “care”) and NegativeInteractions (“angry”, “sad”, “haha”) were added. Moreover, even in cases where the variables are the same for the two matrices, the modes are different: in the case of MediaType, we have “Link”, “Photo”, “Status” and “Video” as modalities on Facebook; where only “Photo” and “Video” are considered on Instagram.

Table 2. Topic Modelling (LDA) Results

Dataset	Facebook	Instagram
Extracted Themes	1. Electoral Campaign 2. Investments 3. Political Opposition 4. Popular Participation 5. Solidarity and Rights	1. Electoral Campaign 2. Investments 3. PD Renewal 4. Popular Participation 5. Solidarity and Rights

Source: Authors' elaboration through T-Lab software.

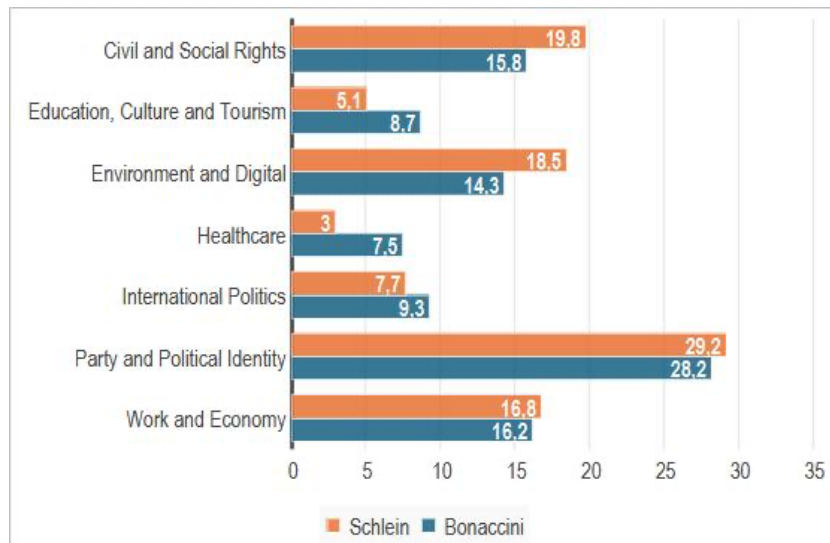
The themes identified were largely consistent across both platforms, with one notable difference: “PD Renewal” emerged on Instagram, while the analogous theme on Facebook was “Political Opposition.” Although overlapping conceptually, these themes emphasize different aspects of the candidates’ messaging.

For the purposes of this paper, the analysis focused primarily on the pre-election period, to better capture the candidates’ strategic use of digital platforms during the active phase of the campaign. The next sections present the findings of the research, one analysing the political manifestos, the second, the personal websites of the two candidates during the electoral campaign; finally, the latter concentrates on social media.

Thematic and Stylistic Features of the Candidates’ Manifestos

The qualitative content analysis of the programmatic documents (Figure 1) reveals a broad thematic alignment between the two candidates, consistent with the intra-party nature of the competition. However, subtle differences emerged in the emphasis and framing of key issues, reflecting distinct political identities and campaign strategies (Gagliardi 2020; Gressi 2023; Meli 2023).

Figure 1. Qualitative Content Analysis of Candidates' Manifestos: Distribution of Thematic Areas (% of total text)



Source: Authors

Schlein positioned herself as the “left-wing outsider,” having rejoined the PD only in December 2022 after leaving in 2013. Her campaign emphasized ideological renewal, social justice, and a clear progressive identity, resonating with youth and minority voters (Seddone 2023). Schlein’s approach aligns with existing literature on “outsider” candidates (Judis 2016), which has often been closely linked to populist mobilization (Fittipaldi 2021). Conversely, Bonaccini built his candidacy on administrative competence and long-standing party experience—as a member of the PD since 2007 and former PCI affiliate—projecting the image of a “good administrator.” Bonaccini’s candidacy should be read as a systemic one, aligned with the party’s organizational characteristics and evidenced by the direct support of most of PD mayors and regional governors across the country. Notably, the President of Emilia-Romagna won the first round of the primaries, open only to party members, but, for the first time in the party’s history, failed to secure confirmation in the second round on February 26, 2023.

A closer comparison of manifesto content shows Schlein dedicated greater attention to green and digital transformation (18.5% vs. 14.3%) and civil and social rights (19.8% vs. 15.8%), while Bonaccini prioritized healthcare (7.5% vs. 3%) and education, culture, and tourism (8.7% vs. 5.1%). Both candidates devoted similar attention to party identity and renewal, labour and economy, and foreign policy. These proportions reflect differing electoral target groups: Schlein’s younger, progressive base versus Bonaccini’s older, moderate electorate (Bolgherini and Trastulli 2023).

In addition to thematic differences, stylistic contrasts were observed in the manifestos’ length and structure. Bonaccini’s document, comprising 25,766 words across nine sections plus an

Communication Design and Online Engagement Strategies

Schlein demonstrated greater proficiency in digital campaigning, likely influenced by her experience in Barack Obama's 2008 and 2012 campaigns (Schlein 2023). Her website and communications targeted younger voters, women, and minority groups, whereas Bonaccini relied more heavily on in-person campaigning with local administrators. Schlein's younger age and familiarity with social media appear to have enhanced her capacity for digital mobilization (Laor 2022).

We observed the candidates' personal websites between January 26 and February 26, 2023, and analysed their respective campaign newsletters. Both candidates relied primarily on digital platforms as one-directional communication tools, yet their tone, layout, and user engagement strategies differed in significant ways.

From the homepage designs, key similarities and distinctions emerged. Both websites prominently displayed the candidates' slogans and participation calls. Schlein's homepage (Figure 3) is dominated by the slogan "*Parte da Noi!*" ("It Starts from Us!"). The use of the inclusive imperative "Join us!" (*Unisciti a noi!*) and dynamic typography conveys openness and grassroots energy. The absence of the PD logo emphasizes her semi-outsider positioning and focus on bottom-up mobilization rather than institutional continuity. The navigation bar prioritizes engagement-oriented sections—*Parte da Noi*, *Attività* (Activities), and *Partecipa* (Participate)—underscoring a strategy of relational politics and community participation.

Bonaccini's homepage (Figure 4), by contrast, reflects a professionalized and institutional aesthetic. The visual palette—dominated by red and black—evokes authority and determination, aligning with his slogan "*Energia Popolare*" ("Popular Energy"). The inclusion of the PD logo, formal title (*Segretario*), and calls to action such as "*Dona ora*" ("Donate now") and "*Guarda il video della candidatura*" ("Watch the campaign video") indicate a top-down campaign logic oriented toward organizational legitimacy and mobilization of party networks.

Figure 3. Homepage of Schlein's Campaign Website (*ellyschlein.it*), January 27, 2023

Source: *web.archive.org*

Figure 4. Homepage of Bonaccini's Campaign Website (*stefanobonaccini.it*), February 28, 2023

Source: *web.archive.org*

During the observation period, we received five newsletters from Schlein and five from Bonaccini. Both candidates used their mailing lists to share information about upcoming events and to mobilize supporters around key campaign milestones. These messages primarily reminded recipients about important dates—such as the deadline for party registration to vote in the first round, registration on the *primariepd2023.it* platform, the location of polling stations, and participation in the primary election. This functional use of email reflects a minimalist approach to digital engagement, focused on turnout management rather than fostering a sustained, interactive relationship with voters.

In sum, the combined analysis of manifestos and campaign platforms highlights broad thematic convergence but also clear divergences in tone, communication style, and target audience. Schlein's campaign employed a more inclusive, direct, and digitally oriented approach, while Bonaccini's relied on administrative competence and traditional party structures. However, both candidates largely used their digital platforms as "one-to-public" communication channels, with limited evidence of interactive or participatory engagement; far from the more integrated digital mobilization models seen in other European contexts (Peña and Gold 2023).

Analysis of the candidates' activities and interactions on Meta platforms

Meta platforms remain among the most influential social networks and have become central to political communication, particularly during electoral campaigns (Kreiss and McGregor 2017; Valbruzzi 2021). However, information on social media such as Facebook and Instagram runs less fluidly than on other social media, as was the case with Twitter before Elon Musk's acquisition in 2022. Meta's algorithm privileges content produced from followed accounts, thereby reinforcing echo chambers and limiting outreach to non-followers (Stier et al. 2018).

Both Schlein and Bonaccini appeared to use Meta's cross-posting feature, which allows identical content to be published simultaneously on Facebook and Instagram (Facebook 2023). This is supported by the results of the LDA topic modelling, which revealed continuity between the two platforms and five dominant themes across both candidates' posts:

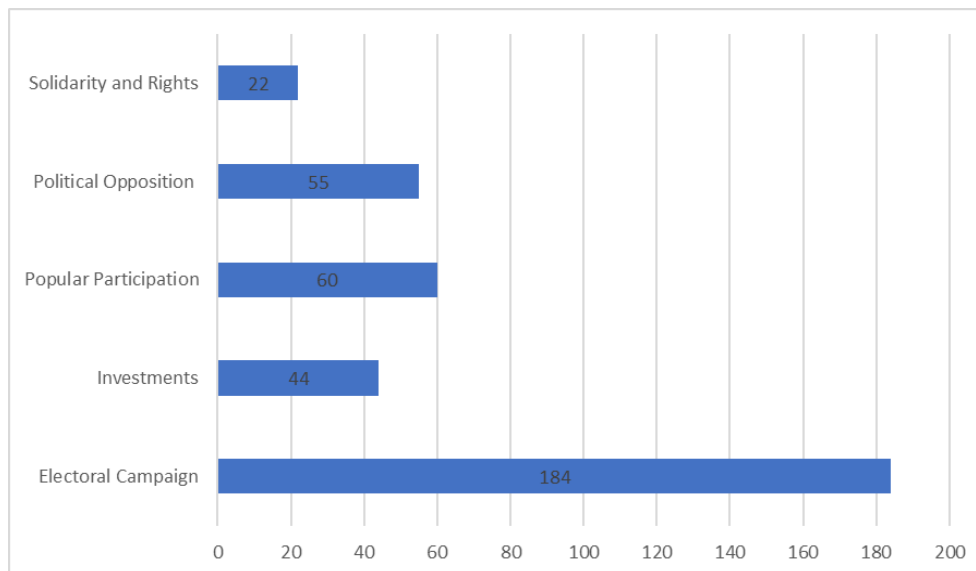
- **Electoral Campaign:** references to the primary election and the action of going to vote, especially enticing registered voters to show up at the gazebos.
- **Investments:** policy-oriented proposals concerning funding for innovation, research, and the public sector.
- **Political Opposition/PD Renewal:** messages about the PD's role in Italian politics. On Facebook, this took the form of broader critiques of the Meloni government (Political

Opposition); on Instagram, it emphasized renewal and repositioning within the left (PD Renewal).

- **Popular Participation:** posts encouraging grassroots activism and participation in events and rallies organized in the run-up to the election.
- **Solidarity and Rights:** references to social causes, memorials, and human rights issues such as anti-discrimination and LGBTQ+ equality.

The dataset also reflects differences in volume and engagement. Bonaccini was considerably more active, posting both before and after the primaries, while Schlein concentrated her online activity before her victory. On Facebook, Schlein accounted for 32.3% (118 posts) of total posts, compared to 67.7% (247 posts) by Bonaccini. As shown in Figure 5, both candidates' posts primarily fall under the Electoral Campaign theme.

Figure 5: Facebook Posts Classified by Emerging Themes

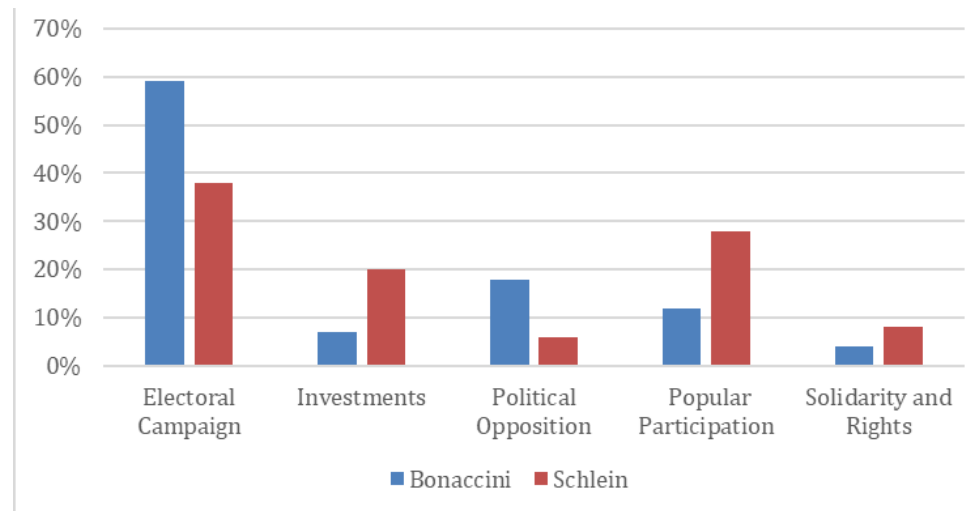


Source: Authors through CrowdTangle API (2023)

Of the 251 posts published before the primary election—148 by Bonaccini and 103 by Schlein—the majority focused on mobilisation. Nearly 60% of Bonaccini's posts related to the "Electoral Campaign" theme, while Schlein's communication was more evenly distributed across topics (Figure 6). Bonaccini emphasized "Political Opposition" (18%), presenting himself as the institutional defender of the PD, while Schlein devoted more attention to "Popular Participation" (28%). Indeed, the latter's posts denote her focus on thanking those who attended the events she took part in, thus trying to maintain an empathetic relationship between the leader and her electorate (Campus 2006; Calise and Musella 2019; Villaplana and Fitzpatrick 2024).

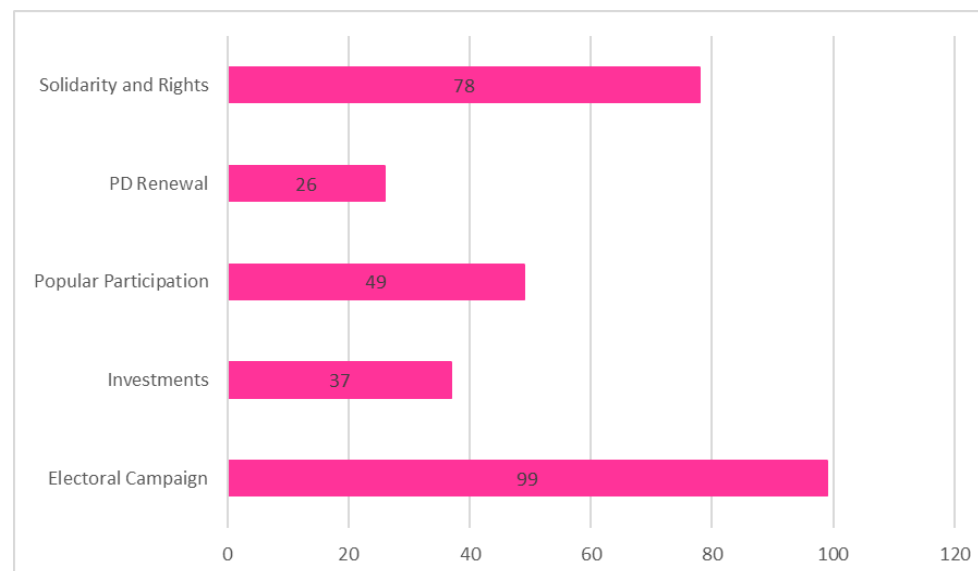
On Instagram, Schlein’s posts account for 37.7% (109 posts) of the total sample analysed, compared to Bonaccini’s 62.3% (180 posts). In this case, “Solidarity and Rights” emerged as a more prominent theme, nearly matching “Electoral Campaign” in volume, 78 posts for Schlein and 99 posts for Bonaccini in total (Figure 7).

Figure 6. Facebook Topics in the Thirty Days before the Elections



Source: Authors through CrowdTangle API (2023)

Figure 7. Instagram Posts Classified by Emerging Themes



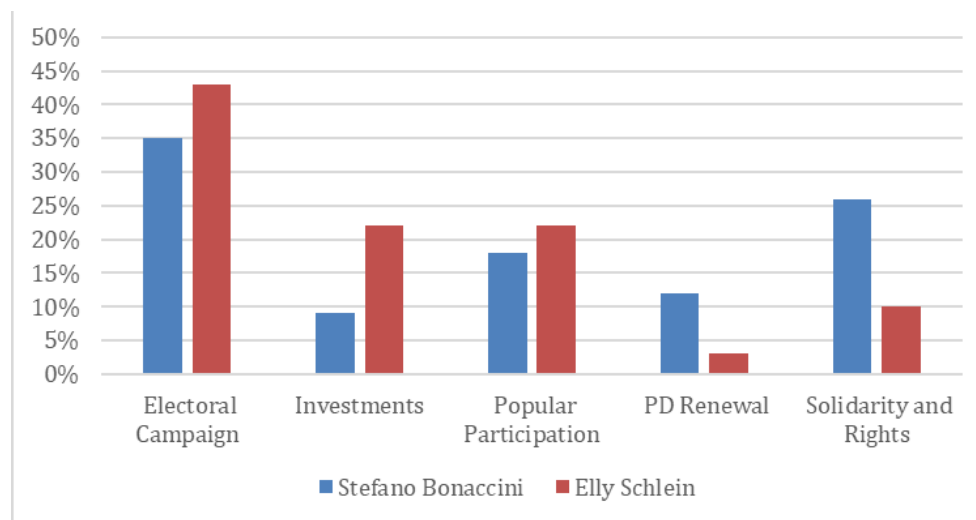
Source: Authors through CrowdTangle API (2023)

In the month leading up to the election, Bonaccini posted 102 times and Schlein 96 times, indicating comparable activity levels (Figure 8). However, Schlein devoted 43% of her posts to the “Electoral Campaign” theme, compared to Bonaccini’s 35%. Both candidates regarded their relationship with the electorate, in person and online, to be essential. This is reflected in the

“Popular Participation” theme, which appears in about 22% of Schlein’s posts and 18% of Bonaccini’s. Bonaccini focused more on “Solidarity and Rights” (26%), while Schlein distributed her focus more evenly between “Popular Participation” (22%) and “Investments” (22%).

Overall, the themes on Instagram appear more evenly distributed across both candidates’ posts. The “Electoral Campaign” theme remains the dominant focus, as Schlein and Bonaccini both emphasize the importance of participation and mobilize out-of-town voters to visit polling stations—an appeal particularly visible in Schlein’s messaging³. Discussions about online voting also feature prominently on Instagram. This emphasis likely reflects the platform’s younger user base, prompting both candidates to maintain engagement by addressing issues relevant to digitally active and first-time voters (Kahne and Bowyer 2018; Presidenza del Consiglio 2022).

Figure 8. Instagram Topics in the Thirty Days before the Elections



Source: Authors through CrowdTangle API (2023)

This analysis suggests that both candidates moved away from the substantive themes of their manifestos, instead embracing a rhetoric shaped by the propagandistic logic typical of electoral campaigning. Their discourse relied on a Manichaean dialectic (Meijers and Zaslove 2021), portraying PD as the principal opposition to the current right-wing government. More than elaborating policy proposals, their primary communicative goal was to mobilize and persuade undecided voters to participate actively in the primaries.

Beyond the “Electoral Campaign” theme, “Popular Participation” emerges as a central focus on both Facebook and Instagram. This reflects a broader trend in contemporary politics, where digital platforms have become essential arenas for fostering visibility and symbolic proximity

³ PD primary election of 2023 was the first Italian election where people living in a different location than their official residence (as it is often the case for students) could vote for the candidates just by going to the PD official gazebos in any public squares and showing their id card. Previously, people had to go back to their hometowns to vote for any kind of election or referendum.

between leaders and voters. As Gerbaudo (2018) argues, the mediatization of participation encourages politicians to cultivate a sense of collective belonging online. Consequently, both Schlein and Bonaccini use social media not merely to inform but to sustain engagement within their follower communities, illustrating how online interaction increasingly complements traditional forms of political mobilization (Peña and Gold 2023; Villaplana and Fitzpatrick 2024).

Despite embodying the figure of the traditional “good administrator,” Bonaccini seems to understand the importance of digital media. Between November 2022 and February 2023, Bonaccini reportedly spent about €15,000 to sponsor his content on Meta platforms, compared to €1,820 by Schlein (Gonzato 2023). Nevertheless, Schlein’s growth on both platforms far outpaced Bonaccini’s. On Facebook, Schlein’s followers increased by 5.7% (from 215,470 to 227,787), compared to Bonaccini’s modest 0.53% growth (Table 4).

Although Bonaccini retained a larger base due to his institutional role, his posts generated fewer interactions. Schlein’s posts achieved 295,149 interactions, nearly matching Bonaccini’s 317,116, despite her smaller audience (Table 5). Moreover, her posts accumulated over twice as many views and elicited far fewer negative reactions (Table 6).

On Instagram, the contrast was even more striking. Indeed, while Bonaccini continued to have more followers on Facebook, a platform with an older population (Laor 2020; Boulianne and Larsson 2021), Instagram proved to be a younger and more dynamic social media. In the month leading to the primaries, Schlein’s follower base grew by 30%, compared to Bonaccini’s 5.6% (Table 4). Despite fewer total posts and followers, Schlein’s content generated nearly double the total interactions and exponentially higher video views—658,947 vs. 6,397 (Table 7).

The comparative analysis of Meta activity shows that the two candidates focused on similar themes—a predictable outcome, given that the contest took place within the same party. Both candidates prioritized active interaction with followers over elaborating on the policy content of their manifestos (Boulianne and Larsson 2021). The analysis also highlights the different digital leadership models within the PD. In particular, the analysis of profile activity shows that despite the smaller number of posts published on both platforms and Bonaccini’s large expenditures on Meta platforms to sponsor his posts, Schlein appears to be the more popular candidate.

In light of the nature of the Meta algorithm, Schlein’s case is particularly instructive: she managed to reach non-followers and grow her base, both online and in real life (Stier et al. 2018). Her campaign demonstrates how digital competence can offset structural disadvantages in political organization. Despite Meta’s algorithmic barriers to non-follower outreach, Schlein managed to expand her audience and convert online visibility into real-world political momentum.

Table 4. Growth of Facebook and Instagram Followers in the 30 Days Before the Election

Candidate	Platform	Followers	Follower Growth	Growth (%)
Bonaccini	Facebook	417,310	2,220	0.53
	Instagram	176,807	9,439	5.64
Schlein	Facebook	227,787	12,317	5.72
	Instagram	166,569	38,575	30.14

Source: CrowdTangle API (2023)

Table 5. Interactions with Facebook Posts in the Thirty Days Before the Election

Candidate	Total Interactions	Likes	Comments	Shares	Post Views
Bonaccini	317,116	221,273	46,939	14,397	507,658
Schlein	295,149	179,576	50,401	22,966	1,196,879

Source: CrowdTangle API (2023)

Table 6. Facebook Reactions to Facebook Posts in the 30 Days Before the Election

Candidate	Loves	Wows	Hahas	Sads	Angrys	Cares
Bonaccini	12,692	501	5,663	7,249	5,230	3,172
Schlein	17,450	433	16,243	2,298	2,034	3,748

Source: CrowdTangle API (2023)

Table 7. Instagram Interactions in the 30 Days Before the Election

Candidate	Total Interactions	Likes	Comments	Video Views
Schlein	413,988	402,965	11,023	658,947
Bonaccini	263,986	253,959	10,027	6,397

Source: CrowdTangle API (2023)

Conclusion: Challenges of Leadership and Digital Transformation in the PD

Elly Schlein's victory in the PD primaries in 2023 can be interpreted as the outcome of a complex combination of factors. Based on our analysis of electoral manifestos, candidates' websites, and social media activity, it appears that the campaign was shaped by three interrelated dynamics: personalization, spectacularization, and, most of all, digitization.

The results of the qualitative and quantitative content analysis across social media reveal that, despite limited differentiation in themes, it was the communication style and public image projected to voters that made the difference (Seddone 2023). Schlein adopted a simpler, more accessible communication style aimed at generating greater engagement. This strategy, clearly reflected in both her manifesto and online activities (Santoriello and Stavolo 2024), proved more effective than Bonaccini's more policy-oriented and complex program. Her focus on social and civil rights, green and digital transition helped Schlein attract younger voters and activists outside

the PD's traditional base (Marino et al. 2023; Santoriello and Stavolo 2024). This strategy finds confirmation in the way the campaign was set up through both her personal website and the growth of followers and interactions on social media. In particular, by distancing her candidacy from the party establishment (Marino et al. 2023), even though part of it openly supported her, Schlein was able to capitalize, to some extent, on the emerging "people-palace" cleavage, often exploited by populist actors (Lipset and Rokkan 1967; Müller 2016; Musella 2018; Mény 2019).

This strategy is evident in several aspects: first, the absence of the party logo on the homepage of her personal website, which served as the main hub for campaigning and organizing participation; next, the strong emphasis on his personal history as an activist and the theme of renewing the party leadership, while asserting a more explicit left-wing identity; and finally, in the choice of the campaign slogan itself, "*Parte da Noi!*" ("It starts from us!"), which echoes an "us" versus "them" rhetoric that calls for mobilization and direct voter activism (Meijers and Zaslove 2021).

The same logic is reflected in her social media communication. Despite a substantial disparity in resources—Bonaccini invested roughly ten times more than Schlein in digital advertising—he failed to achieve comparable engagement. Bonaccini demonstrated an understanding of the relevance of digital platforms in modern political communication, but his campaign remained primarily focused on consolidating his image as a "good administrator," grounded in his record as President of Emilia-Romagna. This institutional profile appealed to party insiders and local administrators but also reinforced his association with the political establishment, inadvertently amplifying Schlein's appeal as a "left-wing outsider." As a young, internationally educated woman and member of the LGBT+ community, Schlein embodied a progressive, anti-establishment (populist, even) identity that resonated strongly with non-party voters—whose participation ultimately proved decisive to her victory (Grimaldi 2023; Boldrini and Vicentini 2023).

However, it is important to note that, in absolute terms, the candidates' digital investments remain modest compared with both Italian and international benchmarks. For instance, Giorgia Meloni spent approximately €150,000 on Meta advertisements in the month preceding the September 2022 general election (Leo 2022), while US presidential candidates collectively spent nearly \$200 million on digital advertising in 2020 (Valbruzzi 2021). Kamala Harris alone reportedly invested \$57 million since launching her 2024 presidential campaign (Andringa et al. 2024). Schlein's previous experience with Barack Obama's 2008 and 2012 campaigns likely helped her optimize limited resources and achieve significant online growth. Nevertheless, the relatively low

level of digital investment by both PD candidates confirms a broader underutilization of the digital sphere within the party.

Considering the research hypotheses, H1 is only partially supported, while H2 is fully confirmed. Schlein did not diverge significantly from Bonaccini in terms of policy content, as both manifestos demonstrated substantial overlap. What made the difference was the communication strategy and better use of social media, which supported the construction of a specific public image of Schlein that succeeded in gaining the trust of non-party members. The results highlight the importance of charismatic voting versus opinion voting for electoral programs (Almagisti and Zanellato 2023) and the influence of digital communication in organising the campaign. What emerges from the trends that were recorded in the post-primary election period is that Schlein has the potential to be a digital leader, as can be confirmed by her 139,308 new followers on Instagram in the month following the primary.

Yet, her first two years as party secretary have been marked by significant challenges. The entrenched oligarchic structure of the PD, fragmented into often competing factions (Calise 2013; Grimaldi 2023), has created a difficult environment for any leader seeking to reconcile divergent positions while maintaining unity and internal cohesion. Furthermore, the party's old guard and leadership cadres have resisted digital transformation, as it threatens to disrupt the traditional power structures typical of twentieth-century mass parties. Finally, the electoral results achieved since the beginning of her tenure, most notably the June 2024 European Elections and several regional contests, have shown that Schlein's leadership has not yet been strong enough to assert itself fully, either within the party or across the broader left-wing political landscape. Consequently, the process of building a credible alternative to the right-wing coalition led by Giorgia Meloni remains fragile. On a more positive note, despite the national dominance of the right, the PD secured twenty-one seats in the European Parliament—three more than in the previous term—making it the largest delegation within the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (European Parliament 2024). The party also achieved encouraging results in several regional and municipal elections.

In summary, the process of constructing a personalized and digitally integrated leadership within the PD remains incomplete. While the US Democratic Party has evolved into a “data-intensive” organization that systematically leverages digital tools for both campaigning and internal mobilization (Valbruzzi 2021), its Italian counterpart still uses social media primarily as an electoral communication tool, rather than as an instrument for continuous engagement or organizational innovation. However, this limitation is not unique to Italy. Across Europe, primary elections are employed unevenly: while long institutionalized in the UK for both Labour and the Conservatives

(Alexandre-Collier and Avril 2021), they have emerged in Spain as mechanisms promoted by new parties like *Podemos*, pushing mainstream formations to adapt despite elite resistance (Barberà and Rodríguez-Teruel 2021).

Finally, although scholars have increasingly examined the personalization of intra-party elections, few have done so through the lens of digitalization. This represents a valuable avenue for further research, ideally through comparative analysis across national contexts.

Since her election, Schlein's digital presence—her website and newsletters—has changed only marginally. While her Meta followers have grown in number⁴, the progress has slowed significantly compared to other Italian political leaders, such as Giorgia Meloni, Matteo Salvini, Giuseppe Conte, and Matteo Renzi⁵.

In conclusion, while the PD remains far from achieving a fully personalized and digital leadership, the party's ability to adapt to these transformations will be crucial for its future viability. The challenge of digital modernization, already evident in Schlein's campaign, is not merely strategic but existential for the survival and renewal of the Italian center-left.

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⁴ In the month following her victory in the PD's primary election — between February 25 and March 27, 2023 — Schlein's Meta profiles grew of 21.31% on Facebook and 95.45% on Instagram. (CrowdTangle 2023). On the other hand, her personal website has recently been updated (May 2025) to fit better the image of a left-wing leader, moving from the pink and purple of her primary election to green and red, the colours of the Democratic Party. The logo of the party is also now visible on the homepage. On the other hand, her personal website has recently been updated (May 2025) to fit better the image of a left-wing leader, moving from the pink and purple of her primary election to green and red, the colours of the Democratic Party. The logo of the party is also now visible on the homepage.

⁵ On June 3, 2025, Elly Schlein's Meta accounts count about 398,000 followers on Instagram and over 326,000 on Facebook. These numbers, though growing, are still far behind those of other Italian party leaders such as Giorgia Meloni (3,8 million followers on Instagram and 3,1 million on Facebook), Matteo Salvini (2,3 million followers on Instagram and half a million on Facebook), Giuseppe Conte (1,7 million followers on Instagram and 4,4 million on Facebook), and Matteo Renzi (288,000 followers on Instagram and 1,1 million on Facebook).

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