

JYU DISSERTATIONS 624

Mira Söderman

“Calcisticamente parlando”

Football language in Matteo Renzi’s
political rhetoric



UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AND
SOCIAL SCIENCES

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ABSTRACT

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This study examines “football language” in the political rhetoric of former Italian Prime Minister, Matteo Renzi. Since the early 1990s, concepts, metaphors, idioms and vocabularies originating from football have formed a salient political language deployed by politicians in Italy. Renzi is one of the most prominent examples in this regard. The study analyses how Renzi used football terminology in his political rhetoric during a period that extends from the early 21st century until 2018, how his language changed through different political and institutional contexts, and assesses the possibilities and limitations of this kind of speech for political analysis. Theoretically and methodologically, the study builds upon the intertwinements of politics, football, and rhetoric.

Football language formed an important, albeit often neglected, part of Renzi’s politics and rhetoric under the period under scrutiny in this study. Renzi used football to create an original political profile and legitimated his demands for change by widely employing football imagery in his political rhetoric, which contributed to creating the aura of an innovative politician and leader. Thus, football language contributed to his rapid political ascent from the mayor of Florence to prime minister. As a football-using politician, Renzi’s innovativeness lie in his creative use of football terminology and its introduction into the context of centre-left politics in Italy. Contrary to common interpretations that deem former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi as the best example of this phenomenon, in terms of the purview and content of his football speech, Renzi can be considered the most innovative football-exploiting politician in Italy.

The study contributes to the research on political languages by identifying the language of football as a prominent political language in Italy and analyses its significance for Matteo Renzi’s politics. As such, the study also contributes to the research on contemporary Italian politics and Renzi’s politics and rhetoric in particular by examining his political action and thought through his language. In addition, the study participates in debates concerning the intertwinements of politics and football in liberal democracies, arguing that displaying an interest in football continues to be something that is presumed to bring political prestige at least in countries like Italy with a considerable football following.

Keywords: Matteo Renzi, football language, Italian politics, political rhetoric, the PD

TIIVISTELMÄ (ABSTRACT IN FINNISH)

Söderman, Mira

“Jalkapallokielellä sanottuna”: Jalkapallokieli Matteo Renzin poliittisessa retoriikassa

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Tässä väitöskirjassa tutkitaan “jalkapallokieltä” Italian entisen pääministerin Matteo Renzin retoriikassa ja poliittisessa toiminnassa. Jalkapallokielellä viitataan pelistä lainattuihin käsitteisiin, metaforiin, puhetapoihin ja sanastoihin, joita on käytetty Italiassa “poliittisena kielenä” 1990-luvun alkupuolelta alkaen. Renzi toimii tutkimuksessa malliesimerkkinä politiikasta, joka käyttää pelin puhetapoja osana politiikkaansa ja retoriikkaansa. Tutkimuksessa analysoidaan Renzin käyttämää jalkapallokieltä ja siinä tapahtuneita muutoksia ajanjaksolla, joka ulottuu noin vuodesta 2006 aina vuoteen 2018. Tutkimus myös arvioi tämän puhettavan tarjoamia resursseja, mahdollisuuksia ja rajoituksia politiikassa. Teoreettisesti ja metodologisesti työ pohjautuu politiikan ja jalkapallon pelimäisten piirteiden analyysiin, mikä mahdollistaa politiikasta puhumisen jalkapallon termistöön nojautuen.

Jalkapallokieli on merkittävä, joskin vähälle huomiolle jäänyt osa Renzin retoriikkaa ja politiikkaa. Renzi käytti sitä luodakseen omaperäisen poliittisen profiilin ja legitimoimalla muutosta vaatimukseen politiikassa retorisesti nojautumalla laajaan jalkapallokuvastoon, mikä loi hänestä kuvaa innovatiivisena poliitikkona ja johtajana. Näin jalkapallokieli siivitti myös hänen nopeaa nousuaan Firenzen pormestarista Italian pääministeriksi. Renzin puhettavan omaperäisyys liittyy vivahteikkaan jalkapalloterminologian käyttöön ja tämän puheenparren tuomiseen osaksi Italian keskustavasemmiston politiikkaa. Vastoin yleistä tulkintaa, jonka mukaan entinen pääministeri Silvio Berlusconi olisi tämän puhettavan edustavin esimerkki, Renziä voi pitää omaleimaisimpana jalkapallokieltä käyttävänä poliitikkona Italiassa sekä tällaisen puheen soveltamisalan että sen luovutuksen perusteella.

Tutkimus ottaa osaa politiikan kieltä ja retoriikkaa koskeviin tieteellisiin keskusteluihin identifioimalla jalkapallon poliittiseksi kieleksi Italiassa ja analysoimalla sen merkitystä Renzille. Samalla tarkastellaan Italian nykypoliitikkaa erityisesti Renzin politiikan ja retoriikan näkökulmista. Lisäksi tutkimus pureutuu politiikan ja jalkapallon suhteisiin liberaaleissa demokratioissa, joissa jalkapallotuntemuksen osoittaminen saattaa edelleen tuoda poliittista valtaa ainakin jalkapalloa laajasti seuraavissa maissa.

Avainsanat: Matteo Renzi, jalkapallokieli, Italian politiikka, poliittinen retoriikka, PD

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In November 2007, the Finnish newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* ran a small story about the annual technique and skill competition organized by the Football Association of Finland. The hyperbolic title of the piece “Mira Söderman voi olla tulevaisuuden tähti” (Mira Söderman could be a future star) was prompted by the freestyle football artistry that I had displayed in the competition. In the piece, I hesitated to speculate on my future as a footballer and stated—even though I was not yet familiar with the word “contingency”—that it is unwise to stake everything on football because something unpredictable may always happen that forces you to revise and change your plans.

Finishing my dissertation with a bright future as a footballer hopelessly behind, I can conclude that luckily, there are other interesting playgrounds beyond football pitches. In a sense, writing a dissertation is also a playful activity: you have to follow certain rules but at the same time it allows room for creativity and imagination, uncertainties and contingencies are part of the game, and the outcome is often something different than what one expected before starting the project. Perhaps this is why the project gave me so much pleasure, despite the occasional setbacks that are a constant in academic life.

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Vaasa 26.3.2023
Mira Söderman

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND APPENDIX

CGIL Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro
DC Democrazia Cristiana
DS Democratici di Sinistra
EU European Union
FI Forza Italia
IV Italia Viva
M5S Movimento Cinque Stelle
PCI Partito Comunista Italiano
PD Partito Democratico
PdL Popolo della Libertà
PDS Partito Democratico della Sinistra
PPI Partito Popolare Italiano
PRC Partito della Rifondazione Comunista
PSI Partito Socialista Italiano

FA Football Association
FIFA Fédération Internationale de Football Association
FIGC Federazione Italiana Giuoco Calcio
IFAB International Football Association Board
UEFA Union of European Football Associations
VAR Video Assistant Referee

APPENDIX: Renzi's football language

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ABSTRACT

TIIVISTELMÄ (ABSTRACT IN FINNISH)

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1 INTRODUCTION

Si vince giocando all'attacco, con il catenaccio un gol si prende sempre. E se lì davanti non hai chi segna la partita la perdi. – Matteo Renzi

The aim of this research is to examine football language in the political rhetoric of former Italian Prime Minister, Matteo Renzi. By “football language” I refer broadly to specific concepts, metaphors, and vocabularies emanating from the game such as tactics, player positions, technical tricks and laws of the game as well as the language of fans, commentators, and pundits, which all have their own characteristics and phraseology. In this research, I consider Renzi the paradigm of a politician who relies on football in his political rhetoric and study his political action and thought through his football parlance. The period under examination extends roughly from the early 21st century until 2018 and covers Renzi’s political rise from regional administration in Florence to prime minister.

Football vocabulary and expressions have played an interesting, albeit neglected, part in contributing to Renzi’s rapid ascent in Italian politics during the period under scrutiny in this study. Renzi represents one of the most intriguing, albeit not always successful, figures of recent years in Italian politics. He gained popularity as a mayor of Florence with his audacious plans to “scrap” (*rottamare*), that is, to rejuvenate the political establishment of Italy. In February 2014, at the age of 39, Renzi was appointed Prime Minister of Italy, only a few months after he had conquered the leadership of the largest centre-left party, *Partito Democratico* (henceforth the PD). In December 2016, after an unsuccessful attempt to reform the Italian constitution, Renzi resigned as prime minister. After the PD’s poor performance in parliamentary elections in spring 2018, Renzi stepped down as party secretary, and lamented as the epigraph states: “You win by playing offensively, but with catenaccio you always risk conceding a goal. And if you don’t have a goal scorer there at the top, you will lose the match” (Renzi 2019, 54). *Catenaccio* refers to an (in)famous defensive tactic in football developed in Italy in the 1960s (see section 4.3), a football concept that Renzi regularly uses in his political rhetoric, as this study will later demonstrate.

The point of departure for this study is, to quote John G. A. Pocock (1987, 27), the “surprise followed by pleasure at discovering a familiar language”, used in a new context. By this I refer to the observation that Renzi and many other Italian male politicians frequently use football phrases outside their original context to analyse politics and to make it intelligible for his audiences.

I was first introduced to this phenomenon as an exchange student in Florence (2011–2012) and then as an intern in Rome (2014–2015), periods during which I also had the opportunity to follow Renzi’s career “on site”: first when he served as the mayor of Florence and then as prime minister of Italy. Because I had been a footballer in my youth and a keen follower of the game after, this parlance awakened my curiosity. As I got more acquainted with Italian football vocabulary by reading books about football, by browsing Italian sports papers, and by attending the matches of Italy’s top professional league, *Serie A*, during my visits to Italy, I understood how pervasive this language was in politics and even came to appreciate some creative, albeit not always convincing attempts to employ it in political battles. I also noticed that despite the hegemony of English, Italy has persistently stuck to native football expressions, perhaps best exemplified by the fact that Italians call the game *calcio*, which is not a variation of the English term “football”. Because of my status as a foreigner, who would certainly not hear similar language used by politicians in my native Finland apart from a few exceptions, this habit appeared to me as something that deserved a more detailed examination.

Football¹ is not only the most followed sport of Italy, but also an increasingly prominent language of politics and public debate since the early 1990s (see section 1.2). Politicians employ football jargon in their speeches, and political pundits and journalists continually fill their stories with metaphors, analogies, and idioms originating from football. At the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, a question that frequently cropped up in the public debate regarding the economic situation of Italy was if the Italian economy would be “relegated to Serie B” (De Biasi and Lanfranchi 1997, 91), which refers pejoratively to the second highest football division of Italy. Sociologist Franco Ferrarotti and journalist Oliviero Beha, in 1983, traced expressions like *governi di serie A e B* (governments of Serie A and B) or *catenaccio in Parlamento* (catenaccio in the parliament) and tried to motivate academic research on this curious linguistic phenomenon (Ferrarotti and Beha 1983, 44), albeit with modest success. Despite politicians regularly resorting to football expressions in their rhetoric and that this habit is a trendy topic for popular accounts or essays (e.g. Lala and Nichil 2021; Triani 1994), the subject has not managed to provoke much curiosity among political scientists and the interest of academic research is focused almost exclusively on former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, who built his party *Forza Italia* upon football symbolism in 1994 and frequently deployed football lexicon in his speeches.

¹ In this dissertation, I have decided to adopt the term “football” instead of “soccer” or “calcio” in Italian. Although soccer would be the most universal term for the game, my choice emphasizes the distinct European origins of the game and connects my study to the established strand of research into “politics and football.”

Renzi makes an interesting example of a politician who relies on football language for various reasons. First, football-inspired utterances have been an integral part of Renzi's political rhetoric at every milestone of his career. Although Renzi does not possess an extensive or glamorous football résumé, he has experience of the game and he has proven his familiarity with it so that he could be regarded as sufficiently credible to use this kind of language. He has been a football referee (*arbitro*) at amateur levels in Tuscany, which he has later recalled as an educational experience for his career as a politician, despite the catcalls referees tend to receive on the pitch (see Renzi 2011, 107–108). Renzi is also a devoted supporter of his hometown club Fiorentina from Florence, a club that wins a trophy once in a blue moon, and thus cannot be easily used as a vehicle to boost political success. He also uses football imagery creatively, appropriating various dimensions of the game and using examples that prove his acquaintance with the history of the game as well as its recent developments.

To briefly recapitulate his career (see also Chapter 3), Renzi started to gain popularity at the time when various centre-left parties in Italy merged into one and formed the PD in 2007. Even though Renzi's political appeal was based on his reputation of an audacious challenger of various political elites and vested interests, which bestowed upon him the epithet *il rottamatore* ("the scrapper"), Renzi has been involved in politics since the early 1990s and was no newcomer to the political arena. Gradually, he earned popularity and national visibility as a dynamic mayor of Florence, a position he won in 2009 by challenging the establishment of the PD, who opposed his candidacy for office. As Renzi's reputation grew, he started to voice demands that the party must be modernized so that it could meet the needs of the time. Renzi was adept at taking advantage of the changes that have taken place in Italian politics, such as the decreasing importance of ideologies and the increasing centrality and focus on individual actors. In his view, the great ideologies of the 20th century have largely lost their persuasive force. In his efforts to reform the PD, Renzi's point of reference was former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who had successfully modernized the Labour Party into New Labour in Britain in the 1990s. Renzi's rapid rise within the hierarchy of the PD was rather surprising, giving his confrontational style and that his ideas and values were often considered rather unorthodox in the context of left-wing politics in Italy. Articulate and quick-witted, Renzi has efficiently exploited his rhetorical skills in politics, a competence that has often been considered as lacking from many prominent centre-left figures.

In late 2013, Renzi was elected the secretary² of the PD. Soon after, in February 2014, Renzi withdrew his support from his party colleague and Prime Minister Enrico Letta, and replaced him as prime minister. As the head of the government, Renzi launched many wide-ranging reforms, such as the labour market reform dubbed the Jobs Act and the educational reform called *La Buona*

² The leader of the *Partito Democratico* is called "secretary" (*segretario*). When the former Communists and Christian Democrats merged in 2007 and formed the PD (see Chapter 3), the new party preserved the term secretary to indicate its leader, while the president of the party has a minor role compared to the secretary. With regard to Renzi, the terms leader and secretary are used synonymously in this study.

Scuola (The Good School). Most importantly, he undertook an ambitious challenge to reform the Italian Constitution, which was given impetus by President Giorgio Napolitano in the aftermath of the 2013 elections. Had Renzi been successful, the constitutional reform would have implied a major restructuring of the institutional and political framework of Italy. In short, the reform proposed the abolition of perfect bicameralism whereby both the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies perform the same legislative duties, the abolition of provinces and thus the centralization of power to the central state, and strengthening of the executive in relation to the legislature (Ceccarini and Bordignon 2017). The reform was rejected in a referendum in December 2016, which led to Renzi standing down as prime minister. He remained, however, as the leader of the PD.

After the poor result in the parliamentary elections in 2018, the PD returned to the opposition and Renzi resigned from the party leadership. Renzi himself was elected to the Senate from Florence. The right-wing populist party *Lega* and the anti-establishment and populist *Movimento 5 Stelle* (M5S) formed a government led by lawyer and academic Giuseppe Conte, a then-independent figure endorsed by the M5S. In August 2019, the *Lega* brought down the government in the hope of having new elections. To avoid fresh elections, the M5S and the PD agreed to form a new government. Renzi supported the agreement, although he had strongly opposed the alliance with the M5S after the 2018 elections.

However, already in September 2019 Renzi left the PD with 24 other deputies and 13 senators including himself and formed a new centrist party, *Italia Viva* (IV), whose leader he became. According to its statutes, *Italia Viva* is a reformist and progressive party that adheres to the republican and anti-fascist values of the constitution and promotes gender equality, individual liberty, and meritocracy, among other things (Statuto di Italia Viva, n.d.). Renzi also played a pivotal part in the operation that made the second Conte government fall and led to the replacement of Conte with the former President of the European Central Bank, Mario Draghi, who became prime minister in early 2021.

Renzi's fascination with football language has continued sustained throughout the ups and downs of his career. Although Renzi has not always been successful in his political pursuits, even as a diminished political force, he has been able to play an active and, at times, decisive role in Italian politics. This research takes a detailed look at how Renzi used football imagery in the political struggles discussed above, how it evolved with the passing of time and through changing institutional roles and contexts, providing a new perspective on his political action, thought, and rhetoric, as well as on the possibilities and limits of this kind of parlance in politics. This said, it is perhaps also useful to emphasize what this study is *not* trying to do. It does not aim at offering a panoramic view of Italian politics or the relationship of politics and football, objectives that would definitely be too ambitious for a study like this. Nor is it intended to give a comprehensive assessment of Renzi as a politician, let alone to cast a moral

judgment whether he should be considered a good or bad politician, or his political objectives worthy of praise or blame.

1.1 Italy as “the special one” for studying football language in politics

The entanglement of politics and football is a prolific area of academic study, which has inspired research on the topic from various perspectives (De Waele et al. 2018; Carr et al. 2021). One manifestation of the intertwinement of politics and football is politicians’ keen interest in the game. Due to the global popularity of the game, politicians are expected to be conversant with football at least in the countries with major football followings. In cultural comparison, as Andrei S. Markovits and Steven L. Hellerman argue, the notable exception remains the United States, where association football has never gained a strong foothold (Markovits and Hellerman 2001). Politicians are supposed to be able to comment on the issues of the footballing world and appear in the stadiums, especially on occasion of major tournaments, while sometimes incidents that have occurred on football pitches have turned into parliamentary interpellations or debates. A condition for participating in these football debates, and an important way of showing interest in the game, is mastering its language, which can be deployed on fields that transcend the football pitch, such as politics. Fluency in football language can offer additional political resources for politicians even from peripheral football countries. Former Finnish EU Commissioner Olli Rehn has described in his memoirs that he sometimes used football-inspired language to argue his views when handling the financial crisis in the EU (see Rehn 2020).

Italy forms an intriguing example to study this topic because of football’s powerful symbolic role in the country and its long sporting tradition in politics (Martin 2011). The popularity of football has long relied on the men’s national team and clubs, while the women’s game has been far slower to grow (see section 2.4). As a four-time world champion (1934, 1938, 1982 and 2006) and two-time European champion (1968 and 2021), the (male) national football team of Italy, *Azzurri*,³ is considered one of the best national teams in the world, and it is usually classified high in the FIFA World ranking for national teams. Serie A, Italy’s highest domestic league, is one of the best football leagues in the world and together with the English Premier League, Spanish La Liga, and German Bundesliga, it has the maximum of four places in the UEFA Champions League, a competition including the first-rate European football clubs. Italy has produced many top-class football players, such as Gianluigi Buffon, Paolo Maldini, and Roberto Baggio, to name but a few. Approximately two-thirds (64%) of adults, that is, 32.4 million Italians, say they are interested in football (FIGC 2020).

³ *Azzurri* (“The Blues”) is the nickname of Italian national team and the colour of their playing kit adopted in 1911 in homage to the House of Savoy (Casa Savoia), a royal dynasty that ruled Italy until it abolished the monarchy and became a republic after a referendum held in 1946.

Against this background, it is clear why an acquaintance with football is presumed to bring prestige for anyone entering politics. Renzi is by no means an exception among politicians or prime ministers who, in one way or another, exploit football for political purposes. Former prime ministers Silvio Berlusconi and Giulio Andreotti are both known for their love of the game, and football formed an important part of their public image and political ethos. Andreotti, a Christian Democrat who always asserted his devotion to AS Roma, was allegedly connected even to the player transfers of his favourite club.⁴ He also occasionally relied on football metaphors in his political interventions. One of the frequent cries of Andreotti, the prime minister of seven different governments, was that he does not like to sit “on the bench” (De Biasi and Lanfranchi 1997, 91).

Berlusconi is arguably internationally the most famous example of a politician who exploited football for political purposes. He undoubtedly took “football politics” further than anyone else before him, constructing his political movement around football symbolism (Porro and Russo 2000). In the early 1990s, Berlusconi famously announced his “entrance to the field” (*discesa in campo*) of politics, a carefully chosen football metaphor to announce that he would run as a candidate in the 1994 elections, and exploited AC Milan’s successes on football pitches, a club he had acquired in 1986. Berlusconi had saved the club from the brink of bankruptcy, brought it back to glory and promised to do the same to Italy, as if governing a football club would make him competent to govern the country. He named his party *Forza Italia* after a popular football chant, called his party activists *azzurri*, mimicking the nickname of the Italian national team, and coloured his speeches with football metaphors (Semino and Masci 1996). In December 1994, when Berlusconi’s first government fell, he presumptuously lamented that he was like a “centre-forward with 30 goals”, whose work was unduly complicated by his own allies, who did not offer him “assists”, and by opponents who allegedly obstructed his attempts to govern the country.⁵ After almost three decades on the political scene, language that draws from football still crops up in Berlusconi’s political rhetoric.

A reputation acquired on the football field may also facilitate the leap from football to politics. Some former Italian footballers have become members of parliament after their retirement from football. For instance, Giovanni “Gianni” Rivera, an AC Milan playmaker of the 1960s, was a member of the Chamber of Deputies (1987–2001), where he served as an undersecretary of defence (despite his role as an attacking midfielder on football fields). Later Rivera served as a member of the European Parliament (2005–2009). Other sporting figures have also been elected to the Italian parliament. Former CEO and vice-president of AC Milan, Adriano Galliani, was elected to the Italian Senate in March 2018, as a

⁴ “Falcao era dell’Inter. Ma Andreotti alzò il telefono...”, *La Gazzetta dello Sport*, August 15, 2014.

⁵ “Io sono come un centravanti acquistato per fare 30 gol – a cui i compagni non hanno fatto i passaggi giusti e gli avversari hanno spaccato le gambe. Lasciate lavorare il centravanti.” In “Berlusconi: farò cambiare idea a Scalfaro”, *La Stampa*, December 24, 1994.

member of *Forza Italia* party.⁶ Former footballer Damiano Tommasi was elected Mayor of Verona in 2022, running as the centre-left candidate in a traditionally right-leaning city. A defensive midfielder, Tommasi won the Italian championship at AS Roma in 2001 and served as the president of Italian Footballers' Association before embarking a career in politics.

The Italian Football Federation (*Federazione Italiana Giuoco Calcio*, FIGC) was established in 1898 and carried the name *Federazione Italiana del Football* until 1909. It became a member of the International Federation of Association Football, FIFA,⁷ in 1905 and a member of UEFA⁸ in 1954. Since the mid-1920s, the intertwining of football and politics have formed a key characteristic of Italian football (Archambault 2018). In 1926, the Fascist regime took over football and implemented a new set of statutes, which re-organized the game in Italy. The work of three experts—referee Giovanni Mauro, president of Bologna Football Club Paolo Graziani, and an official of the Fascist party and AS Roma president Italo Foschi—led to the introduction of *Carta di Viareggio* (Viareggio Charter), a document that re-structured Italian football (Ghirelli 1972, 88–91). Its main changes included the professionalization of the game in Italy, a ban on foreign players, and the re-organization of football championships (Ghirelli 1972, 90–91). The professional championship, Serie A, was established in 1929.

During the 20th century, not only have dictatorships harnessed football for political power but also in liberal democracies politicians are increasingly aware of the political potential of the game (Markovits and Rensmann 2010, 8–9). According to historian Fabien Archambault, around one-fourth of the roughly 120 clubs who have played in Italian professional football leagues since 1945 were managed, at least at some stage, by a member of parliament (Archambault 2018, 119). This is not surprising in the light of the fact that in Italy, the game does not have a similar working-class label attached to it as it has, for example, in Great Britain, and the game is tellingly referred to as the *beautiful game* (see Brera 2018). Football enjoys great popularity among people irrespective of gender, age, class, and political affiliations. Thus, it is very common that politicians are football enthusiasts and that they engage in football debates and use football language to formulate their political ideas. In the mass media this interest often becomes framed as a dubious attempt to gain votes by trying to look like an “average Italian” or, as Rocco De Biasi and Pierre Lanfranchi (1997, 95) have put it, “to express a form of genuine normality.” Such an analysis, however, tends to be overtly malicious. In most cases, politicians' interest in football is genuine and this holds true even when the game is simultaneously used for political purposes, as the example of Berlusconi proves.

⁶ Similar figures who have used football to advance their political careers can be found in other countries as well. After his career, Brazilian football player Romário was first elected to the Chamber of Deputies and later to the Senate (see Doidge and Shaustek de Almeida 2015).

⁷ The international governing body of association football, FIFA (*Fédération Internationale de Football Association*), was founded in 1904.

⁸ The Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) was established in 1954.

Obviously, one should not overestimate the role of football in building a successful political career. There are plenty of Italians, obviously also among politicians, who simply dislike football and do not follow the game or follow other sports instead. Romano Prodi, professor of economics and a cycling enthusiast, exploited cycling metaphors in the 1996 electoral campaign, highlighting his humble and hardworking style compared to his centre-right opponent Berlusconi, who capitalized on his celebrated football team (McCarthy 2001, 204). However, since many Italians are self-confessed football fans, it may become an asset to be conversant with football at least on some level. This was grasped by President Sandro Pertini, who denied an interview before the 1982 World Cup because he did not consider himself as a connoisseur of football (Beha 1987, 70). However, during the tournament Pertini got inspired to give some tactical advice to the team based on his reading of Carl von Clausewitz: "*O i nostri si decidono ad attaccare sempre, in ogni fase del gioco, oppure contro il Brasile e Argentina saranno botte.*"⁹

Football is debated in fascinating detail and complexity in Italy. De Biasi and Lanfranchi (1997, 87) have claimed that "the Italian football spectator is often a sort of 'theorist' on his favourite sport, equipped with a sophisticated lexicon, exercised at a high level of abstraction." New terms are regularly introduced to football jargon in proportion to the game's developments and simultaneously some terms fall out of use, such as *libero*,¹⁰ which became unpopular due to changes in the offside rule¹¹ and the game's tactical progress. Sociologist and journalist Pippo Russo (2005, 41) puts it metaphorically when he maintains that the history of football is "a graveyard of roles overwhelmed by the technical tactical evolution" (*un cimitero di ruoli travolti dall'evoluzione tecnico-tattica*).

In the early years, the language of football was English also in Italy. The first tournament, held in May 1898, attracted little audience and the few who understood the game used English terminology to discuss it (Ghirelli 1972, 26–27). However, as early as in 1915 *Annuario Sportivo Italiano* published a complete glossary of terms translated from English to Italian and in the 1940s Italian terminology was employed effortlessly to discuss the game (Papa and Panico 2002, 102). The Italianization of football vocabulary was connected more widely to the Fascists' goal of linguistic autarchy (Stella 1988, 143), and to the myth that the game of football had originated from the medieval *Calcio Fiorentino* (Florentine football), a game that mixed elements that resemble present-day

⁹ "Either our team decides to attack always, at every stage of the game, or they will be beaten by Brazil and Argentina." See "Pertini agli azzurri: Non fate le ballerine", *La Stampa*, June 25, 1982.

¹⁰ *Libero* refers to a defender who is, by definition, *free* from man-marking duties and whose main duties included acting as the last rock of the defence and clearing the ball away if an opponent has escaped past the defence. It can be argued that in modern football, the role of *libero* has not completely disappeared, as other players have partly taken over the tasks of that role. For example, these days some goalkeepers operate in the same area of the pitch as the *libero* once did.

¹¹ The offside rule is codified in Law 11 in the Laws of the Game (IFAB Laws of the Game 22/23) and it regulates the positioning of the players on the field and determines the sanctions for offside offences. The rule has undergone several modifications since the laws were first codified in 1863.

rugby and football. However, despite discussions during the 1920s that favoured the adoption of English terminology because of the international character of the game, the Italianization of football vocabulary met little resistance, as the interest in game analyses and commentaries grew and it was thought that the demand is best met by translating key terms and concepts into Italian (Papa and Panico 2002, 210–211).

Sports journalism has played a considerable role in how football is discussed and debated in Italy (Dietschy and Pivato 2019, 177–181). These days, there are several Italian newspapers mainly focused on football—the most famous is the pink-coloured *La Gazzetta dello Sport* founded in 1896—and they offer their readers rather complex analysis of the games and issues surrounding the game. Italy has produced several famous sports journalists, whose inimitable style and different conceptions of football have enriched the debate about the game. Giovanni “Gianni” Brera¹² (1919–1992), for example, was pivotal in introducing neologisms and inventing new words to the Italian football lexicon (Stella 1988, 149–151). Brera believed that football deserved to be analysed with seriousness and sophistication (Brera 2018). As a tenacious proponent of a defensive playing style, Brera entered into fierce debates with other sports journalists, especially Gino Palumbo, who advocated for an attacking style of play (Foot 2007, 308).

The continuous evolution of the game allows politicians who follow football to use the game’s development and changing vocabulary as a source of inspiration for their political action. Renzi, for example, used the term “false nine”¹³ to analyse the defeat of the PD in the 2018 parliamentary elections and the lack of leadership the party displayed. Also, the increasing use of technology brings new words to the football dictionary, which are at least potentially applicable in political debates. For instance, the acronym VAR stands for *video assistant referee*, which allows video reviews of certain decisions of the referee during the match. VAR became known throughout the world with its introduction at the 2018 FIFA World Cup, following trials in several major football leagues.

To conclude, Italy is certainly not the only example of a country where football and politics are deeply intertwined and where football is used as a prominent “language” of politics. Yet, what makes it a politically interesting example is the popularity and regularity of football language among leading politicians and their creativity and swiftness in adopting new or recycling of old football words, concepts, and ideas in political analysis, which is due to the high sophistication and detail that the game is followed and debated in Italy. Because of this, Italy can for good reasons be considered “the special one” to study this phenomenon, to borrow a formulation made famous by football manager José Mourinho, who originally coined the term as a nickname for himself.

¹² Brera had a degree in political science from the University of Pavia and he wrote his master’s thesis about Thomas More’s *Utopia* (see editor’s introduction in Brera 2018).

¹³ *False nine* refers to a striker who, for tactical reasons, drops “deep” into the midfield, rather than staying close to the penalty box and the opponent’s defending line. Lionel Messi at FC Barcelona was a famous exponent of this role.

1.2 Football as a political language

It has become commonplace to talk about football as a “language”. Football, like other sports, invites a connoisseurship and everybody who witnesses it are some kinds of experts on the matter (Benjamin 1989, 155). Considering this, and the enormous amount of people who follow football throughout the world, football can simultaneously be considered a *special* language as well as a *public* language (Bergh and Ohlander 2018), specialized jargon that an enormous amount of people masters more or less fluently. Football is also commonly claimed to be a *universal language*. This refers to the idea that football itself is a form of communication that transcends words, and the universality of the rules of the game allows the players and followers to understand each other regardless of their mother tongue (Markovits and Rensmann 2010).

In the early 1970s, the Italian writer and filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922–1975) put forward an analysis of this kind and suggested that football is a language in its own right. Pasolini was an enthusiastic fan of Bologna Football Club, and he often wrote about football and its language. In 1971, Pasolini presented his idea about football as a “language” in a column titled “Il calcio è un linguaggio con i suoi poeti e prosatori” published originally in *Il Giorno* (Pasolini [1971] 1982). In the article, Pasolini argued that football was a genuine semiotic system and thus a language of its own. According to Pasolini’s imaginative interpretation, when letters and phonemes constitute the minimum unit of a spoken-written language such as Italian or English, he named the minimum unit of football language the *podema*, which would be the kick of a ball. Accordingly, the endless combinations of these constitute football words (*parole calcistiche*) and the whole of the football words form a discourse. In the article, Pasolini also made a distinction between poetic or prosaic football. Poetic football was dribbling, and since the best dribblers in the world for him were the Brazilians, they were also the best example of football poets. In contrast, football prose was based on organization, exemplified by the Italian *catenaccio*. In his view, the only poetic moment of football prose was the counterattack, and the best football poet is the top-scorer of the season.

Along the lines presented above, in this dissertation football will also be treated as a “language”, yet from a different angle. Namely, here football is considered a *political language*. Political languages are, as J. G. A. Pocock (1987, 21) has theorized, mostly “sub-languages: idioms, rhetorics, ways of talking about politics, distinguishable language games of which each may have its own vocabulary, rules, preconditions and implications, tone and style.” These languages may originate from various disciplines and fields of expertise, either more theoretical or practical, which can be abstracted to a more general or detailed level. In the edited volume *The Languages of Political Theory in Early Modern Europe*, four political languages were identified and analysed: the languages of natural law, classical republicanism, commerce and the commercial society, and science of politics (Pagden 1987). Robert Hariman, in comparison,

has identified what he defines as four “styles” of political conduct: the realist, courtly, republican, and bureaucratic, which he studies through a reading of texts representing each style (Hariman 1995). With its emphasis on the means of rhetoric, Hariman’s concept of style comes close to the concept of political language, but it stretches even further to include additional aspects such as manners, charisma, and taste.

The concept of political language suits well for the purposes of this study because it refers to more specialized “ways of talking about politics” than natural languages. However, it is also more wide-ranging than, for instance, the concept of metaphor (cf. Semino and Masci 1996), as not all the statements of Renzi necessarily include metaphors but also other figures of speech. In addition, some metaphor theories, like that proposed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, emphasize the idea that metaphors connect two *completely* different kinds of things (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). As Lakoff and Johnson put it: “The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 5). However, in this study I argue that politics and football, although certainly not identical activities, are not totally or completely different kinds of things, as some metaphor theories would lead us to think. It is the interplay between similarities and differences that enables politicians to analyse politics by resorting to football language in vivid and interesting ways (see section 2.2).

Unlike Pocock, whose main interest lies in the emerging and vanishing of political languages (see Pocock 1987, 21), I have adopted what could be described as an “agent-centred” (Steinmetz 2011) approach to the study of political languages, as my interest lies in the rhetorical uses of football language (*parole*) by political agents rather than in the language systems (*langue*) as such.

According to Patrick McCarthy (1997, 338), “each country produces its own kind of political language, shaped by its history and culture.” Although these political languages are perhaps not as confined in the nation state context as McCarthy argues, if we look at the Italian context, the period from the end of the war until the early 1990s was characterized by the competition of two ideologies and political cultures, Catholicism and communism, which translated into a competition between the *Democrazia Cristiana* (DC) and the *Partito Comunista Italiano* (PCI). According to McCarthy’s (1997, 340) interpretation, these parties were both “communities united by belief”, which was reflected in their respective languages. The DC could resort to religious language, while the PCI drew their inspiration from Gramscian vocabulary, which enabled them to denote their belonging to a particular ideology and international community.

Italian political language from the post-war period until the 1990s is often accused of exaggerated obscurity and vagueness. Umberto Eco (1988, 102) has listed concepts such as *equilibri più avanzati* (more advanced balances) or the famous *convergenze parallele* (parallel convergences), as examples of cryptic, although not empty language. Indeed, these concepts served as tools to reconcile the political objectives of the two opposing parties, and therefore, the obscurity was often deliberate (McCarthy 1997; 2001; Croci 2001). Eco (1988, 104–105) has

even argued that Italian political language was fundamentally undemocratic at that time. Because the political context was blocked, that is, only one of the parties, the DC, was legitimate to govern, and the PCI was forced into the opposition, the point of political language, according to Eco, was not so much to persuade the public but rather to communicate with other political groups.

Scholars agree that the political turmoil of the early 1990s, prompted by changes in the international status quo and investigations into political corruption in Italy (see Chapter 3), affected both the functioning of democratic political institutions and the language in which politics was debated in Italy. The once powerful DC collapsed and gave birth to several small parties and the PCI was forced to re-invent itself due to the demise of communism. According to McCarthy (1997, 337), “just as politics was changed by the Clean Hands investigation, so political language changed too.” The end of ideological confrontation and the dismantling of the party field meant that political actors could no longer be confined in the ideologies of the past and draw their inspiration from conventional languages, which would have resulted in hardly convincing ways to interpret the changes that Italy was going through. Therefore, politicians were encouraged to experiment with new ways of doing politics and to develop new languages and rhetoric to interpret the changes.

Moreover, new political parties and political figures emerged who shaped the way politics was discussed and debated in Italy. During the post-war period up to the 1990s, Italian politicians were mostly intellectuals of humanist backgrounds and formations, who were used to expressing themselves eloquently, rather than managers or technocrats, who spoke in a much more concrete way (Eco 1988, 104). The corruption investigations in the early 1990s contributed to discrediting the parties that had governed Italy, and inventing new ways of speaking was also means to emphasise distance to them and to signal the belonging to a new era of politics (Campus 2002).

One of the first exponents to reject the traditional parties and their politicians was the regionalist *Lega Lombarda* led by Umberto Bossi. They adopted a vulgar and anti-intellectual “language of the bars in the Milan hinterland”, which was based on opposition to centralization, immigration, and southerners rather than on any credible claim of regional independence (McCarthy 1997, 342–344). However, Bossi, who applied this brand of language during the early and mid-1980s by imitating other regional movements and their styles, did not manage to make the Lega a widely attractive political alternative.

The most adept political actor to claim an innovative approach was Silvio Berlusconi with his newly established party *Forza Italia* (Campus 2002, 177), yet he did so without abandoning everything that was associated with the old; intimidation against the threat of communism was and continues to be a constant in his rhetoric. Berlusconi, too, aimed at concreteness, but contrary to Bossi’s fierce language of protest, he adopted a more polite tone. He emphasised his successes as an entrepreneur, for which he was a prestigious figure for the Italians (McCarthy 1997, 345), and made repeated references to football in his speeches (Semino and Masci 1996). Although Berlusconi was the main

protagonist in adopting and systematically using football terms in his political interventions, he did not create a “new language”. He rather picked up a pre-existing language, which was already familiar to most Italians from television and sports papers, and which was occasionally used also before his entrance onto the scene. However, after Berlusconi the habit to use football phraseology spread quickly and became more common (Tosi 2001, 119–123).

Renzi came of age during this period that saw the dismantling of old political references and the appearance of new political forces on the scene. It was also a period when he became interested in political matters and active in party politics. In 1996, he joined the centrist *Partito Popolare Italiano* (PPI), the principal successor to the DC, which had fallen apart in 1994 (see section 3.4). Renzi understood well the importance of persuasion and language in politics. He is a gifted rhetorician, and these skills could be expected to be honed further by his academic studies in law, which prepares students to present a cause persuasively and to evaluate the power of different arguments, as already Max Weber (2007, 172–173) noted regarding the presence of trained lawyers in politics.

The focus of this study lies on Renzi, who also made use of football language and turned it into a resource of his own politics. While a comparative study between different politicians who rely on football in their rhetoric would go beyond the scope of this dissertation, the forthcoming analysis will offer some glimpses of how other political actors, pundits and scholars entered in debate with Renzi and replied to him drawing from football. These excerpts from other actors reveal that Renzi was effective in dominating the agenda and ways of speaking about Italian politics, if only for a rather brief period. These quotes also illustrate that football language is not only an individual rhetorical style of Renzi but that other actors employed it too, which highlights that “many different things can always be done by different writers with a given ‘language’” (Skinner 1988, 107). Politicians may, and indeed often do, use the language of the game in highly partisan and sometimes even contradictory ways, and they can develop individual ways to use some terms or concepts as they take part in political debates. Given the culture of *campanilismo*, a strong local patriotism and devotion to one’s own city which characterizes Italian football, we can perhaps speak of various football languages, which offer diverse rhetorical resources to politicians depending on their competence regarding the game and their creativity in employing its language in political struggles and debates.

Due to football’s ability to attract and unite large numbers of people, it might be tempting to conclude that football vocabulary is used by politicians because of its seemingly non-political character. Berlusconi, for example, adopted the term *azzurri* to refer to his party activists in 1994 precisely because it would be alien to traditional party politics (Tosi 2001, 118). The choice was an attempt to distance himself from the discredited political elite of the time. While the fascination with football imagery partly lies in its independence from ideologies, to treat football as a “political language” means to emphasize the idea that football is not a “neutral” language. On the contrary, like any political language it is used to make political statements and promote certain points of views, to

voice dissent and criticisms, to provoke the audience, and to shape our perceptions of the world. The political character of football language is most apparent in situations when different politicians formulate alternative perspectives on the issues at hand and contest each other's ideas by exploiting the same language.

Finally, though football language is often associated with Berlusconi's political trajectory, no political actor, group, or alignment can claim to have a monopoly on it. In other words, I do not find the debate if football is a "right-wing" or "left-wing" language to be a fruitful one. Politicians of all persuasions, some more successfully and forcefully than others, have used the game's terminology as a part of their political rhetoric and to promote their own views and standpoints. The tactical concept *catenaccio* offers an illustrative example of how the same football terms can be used by opposing political forces for their own purposes by highlighting different aspects of them. *Catenaccio* has turned out to be a fitting metaphor for political ideologies across the political spectrum. It is often seen as a legitimate tactic for underdogs because it offers them means to overcome initially stronger teams. That is also why philosopher Antonio Negri, in an interview with *Libération*, interpreted it as a tactic which resembles "class struggle".¹⁴ During the so-called First Republic, the term could have been embraced equally by the Communists, who were able to praise the disciplined and collective spirit of the style, as well as by Christian Democrats who, by maintaining the status quo in Italian politics, can be interpreted as resorting to *catenaccio* (Jozsef 2016).

However, it is also true that the Marxist understanding of football as a vehicle that consumed energy and distracted workers from more pressing concerns of class struggle has persisted in Italy but also elsewhere in Europe. Left-leaning intellectuals in Italy have traditionally treated the game, if not with outright derision, by at least maintaining a certain intellectual distance to it. An illustrative example of this is that the left-leaning daily *La Repubblica* was born in 1976 without sports pages (Dietschy and Pivato 2019, 177). The British Labour Party as well as the social democrats in Germany (SPD) and in Austria (SPÖ) also took a cautious view of football because it attracted their primary constituency, namely male industrial workers (Markovits and Rensmann 2010, 59–60).

Gradually such a strong rejection of football started to become obsolete. In 1982, politician and trade unionist Luciano Lama, for example, argued that the interest in football and in politics are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, he saw football as a way of relating with the people that might prove useful in politics: "*Comprendendo le 'minime' passioni della gente, come una squadra di Pallone, si può più facilmente accedere alle grandi*"¹⁵ (Lama 1982, 73). Renzi was by no means the first politician in Italy or beyond to grasp the potential football possessed in mobilizing the people. Yet, he represents probably the most innovative attempt

¹⁴ See "En Italie, le *catenaccio*, c'était la lutte des classes", *Libération*, June 2, 2006. Available at https://www.liberation.fr/hors-serie/2006/06/02/en-italie-le-catenaccio-c-etait-la-lutte-des-classes_43099. Accessed April 6, 2022.

¹⁵ "Understanding the smallest interests of the people, such as an enthusiasm for a football club, you might get access to the great ones more easily."

to accommodate football language within the context of centre-left politics in Italy. At the same time, Renzi must have been aware that this kind of rhetoric might seem deliberately provocative and potentially forbidding for those who considered football as a distraction from more meaningful political questions.

1.3 The research material and literature on football

The primary research material of this dissertation consists of the following six books authored by Renzi: *Tra De Gasperi e gli U2* (2006), *A viso aperto* (2008), *Fuori!* (2011), *Stil novo* (2012), *Oltre la rottamazione* (2013) and *Avanti* (2017), which are complemented by selected newspaper and other material that will be discussed shortly.

To preserve some necessary temporal distance to the topic of this study and to avoid an unending expansion of the research material and research itself, I have decided to exclude Renzi's most recent books, *Un'altra strada* (2019), *La mossa del cavallo* (2020), *Controcorrente* (2021) and *Il Mostro* (2022), out of the analysis. This is also to maintain analytic lucidity that would be difficult when analysing topical political questions such as those treated in the most recent books of Renzi. However, I will comment the contents of these books briefly in this section. I have also decided to exclude parliamentary debates from the analysis, as Renzi was only elected to the Italian parliament in 2018.

In addition to the books authored by Renzi, I have also used selected digitalized newspaper material mainly but not limited to *Corriere della Sera* and *La Gazzetta dello Sport*, including Renzi's interviews and commentaries from other contemporaries. I have used other material retrieved from his online homepage (<https://www.matteorenzi.it>), such as party conference motions and speeches. From a temporal perspective, the primary research material covers Renzi's rise from local politics to national politics, which provides an opportunity to assess what kind of impact the changes in Renzi's institutional roles and settings had on his rhetoric.

Writing books has formed an important part of Renzi's political action since the early stages of his career (see Ventura 2015). Penned accounts from active politicians can serve several purposes; in Renzi's case, they have worked as means for establishing his preparedness for office and for introducing independent policy lines from the party, as electoral manifestos, and later also as means to correct what Renzi regards as misinterpretations of his political action. Furthermore, the books provide Renzi's personal perspective on the most important milestones of his career and some major political events he was involved in. They include some interesting reflections on politics and political action that are not necessarily bound to any specific political struggles. For example, the books include reflections about what constitutes a good politician or how a politician should take decisions. In other words, they are topics that are more difficult to address in hectic day-to-day political debates, but which nevertheless can function as important signs of political quality, preparedness,

and character and which can be discussed in greater length and detail in the format of a book. Next, I will briefly summarize the central narrative of each book.

Tra De Gasperi e gli U2 (2006) and *A Viso Aperto* (2008) were published when Renzi served as the president of the province of Florence. The former can be interpreted as a sort of prelude to Renzi's demands to bring about a generational turnover in politics, which was crystallized in the slogan of *rottamazione*, launched a few years after the publication of the book. The publication of *A Viso Aperto* preceded Renzi's run for mayoral election in Florence and can thus be interpreted as Renzi's way to establish himself as somebody worth following on the political scene. Contrary to other books of Renzi which are under scrutiny in this work, *A Viso Aperto* does not consist of a coherent body of text. Instead, it is a collection of writings of a newsletter (*E-News*) that Renzi started to send via email to his supporters and followers in 2000. The book includes a total of 242 E-News messages from the period when Renzi worked as province president, from 2004 until 2008, leaving the E-News messages from 2000 to 2003 uncovered. Effectively, E-News are usually short commentaries regarding day-to-day political issues. The book is divided into 10 thematic chapters covering a variety of topics. An entire chapter of the book is dedicated to sport, and it deals mostly with football.

Fuori (2011) and *Stil novo* (2012) were published when Renzi served as the mayor of Florence. *Fuori* narrates Renzi's political ascendance from province president to the mayor of Florence. The title of the book, which can be translated as "Get out!", refers to Renzi's intent to revitalize the city by bringing new faces to the city government (*Facce nuove a Palazzo Vecchio*), as one of his campaign slogans stated. Analogously to post-match commentaries in football, the book reveals the political strategies applied in the contest for the mayoralship, which consisted of challenging the party establishment, and lays the foundations for Renzi's subsequent attempt to conquer the party leadership in 2012. *Stil novo's* central narrative consists of *exempla* that are drawn from Renaissance Florence and intended as instructions to present-day Italy. Although it is less polemical than *Fuori* it contains criticisms towards the centre-left. The gist of the book, as the title of the book hints, deals with themes of political style and artistry, topics that in Renzi's opinion have long been neglected by the centre-left in Italy. The cultural references of the book range from Dante to the Catalan football manager Josep "Pep" Guardiola.

Oltre la rottamazione was published shortly after the 2013 parliamentary elections and resembles an ad hoc pamphlet when compared with other works presented here. It is an analysis of what led to the disappointing electoral result and an account of the political missteps the PD took after the elections from Renzi's point of view. Renzi also stakes out the future steps the party should adopt. In this sense, *Oltre la rottamazione* corresponds to an electoral platform for the future leadership contest that was held in late 2013. During his time as prime minister (February 2014–December 2016) Renzi did not publish any books. *Avanti* (2017) was published in the year following the defeat in the constitutional referendum, which led to Renzi's resignation as prime minister. The book covers

Renzi's time as prime minister of Italy and the main political decisions taken during that time. It can also be interpreted as Renzi's apology, in which he tries to correct what he regards as misinterpretations of his political action and to justify why he acted the way he acted.

Of the books I have excluded from the analysis, *Un'altra strada* (2019) represents, in a way, a prelude to Renzi's departure from the PD. *La Mossa del Cavallo* (2020) and *Controcorrente* (2021), instead, are prompted by topical political events and debates. The former outlines Renzi's visions about reformist politics in a post-pandemic era and goes through the events that brought the PD and M5S in the government together in late summer 2019. The latter was effectively Renzi's lengthy response to the question of why he brought the second Conte government down in the middle of the coronavirus pandemic in early 2021. In *Il Mostro* (2022), Renzi goes through the legal cases and some political events he has been involved in recently. All these books include football concepts, metaphors and phraseology, and although I have made no systematic analysis of them, I will take a brief look at his more recent football language in Chapter 8.

In contemporary politics, the expansion of issues on the political agenda raises the question over the authorship of the sayings of politicians. To my best knowledge, Renzi does not rely on ghost writers. When presenting his book, *La Mossa del Cavallo*, via Facebook in May 2020, Renzi outlined that a politician should leave the writing of a book to a ghost writer only in case he has nothing relevant to contribute to political debate (Renzi 2020b). This echoes Hannah Arendt's (1958, 179) idea that "[i]n acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world." In other words, writing is a manifestation of political quality for Renzi, something that reveals that a politician has something relevant to say, "beyond the 140 characters of a tweet" (Renzi 2017, 232). Even when the speeches or writings of a politician are multi-authored works, the language and rhetorical strategies must be consistent with the style of the speaker. A politician always has the final say about the content and style of his speeches, and he can deviate from pre-determined plans and improvise precisely like a footballer in a match can dispense with tactics.

The works authored by Renzi, and in general by politicians themselves, are inevitably biased and often include rationalization or self-justification of the past events. Notwithstanding this one-sidedness, they provide unique viewpoints to their own thoughts and understandings and offer interesting perspectives on political action and practice as experienced by those whose actions can potentially have significant consequences for a great amount of people. James David Barber (1974, 467) has put it very simply why politicians' actions deserve a closer look: "[P]olitics is politicians; there is no way to understand it without understanding them." One way of doing this is to pay attention to how politicians themselves describe and analyse the situations they find themselves in. Kari Palonen (2005) has also argued that politicians' way of acting and speaking can be understood as "political theorizing" done by the agents themselves. Following this idea, Renzi can be treated not only as a politician but

also as a political theorist, for whom football served as an inspiration for political action, even to the extent that sometimes his own political manoeuvres resembled some memorable performances from football pitches.

The novelty of the approach of the study lies also in the attempt to examine Renzi's football utterances within the context of the game, that is, to explicate the football terms that he uses by recurring to their original context and uses. The study of football language entails that one must also take the game "seriously" and dwell upon the actual developments of the game from which the language originates. Concerning the sources regarding football, this has meant that journalistic or popular works on football, especially regarding the history of the game and tactics have often resulted valuable for the purposes of this study, because unlike strictly academic studies on football, they comment the matches, incidents, tactics and other game-related aspects that also Renzi refers to. Regarding British football, Matthew Taylor (2008, 85–86) has observed that scholars have not wanted to engage in debates about tactics, player formations or other issues pertaining to the sphere of game, but that they have been more interested in the related phenomena, such as different manifestations of football fan culture. In Italy, the same kind of observation was made by politician and football-enthusiast Walter Veltroni, who already in the 1980s urged scholars to turn their attention to the pitch where the game happens, instead of studying the crowds and their behaviour in the stadium (Veltroni 1982, 10).

On some occasions, I have also used footballers' memoirs to explain certain terms, concepts, and ideas. Although this might seem like stretching of appropriate literature, the protagonists of the game often can offer interesting insights to the game. Understanding the football context of certain football concepts and expressions serves also the purpose of interpreting the political point of Renzi's statements. The way Renzi uses the terminology of the game proves that he plays with connotations and nuances related to certain concepts and terms, albeit he does so implicitly. Obviously, not all statements are equally interesting and deserve equally detailed consideration. Some ideas expressed in football language clearly stand out as original and potentially innovative, but even conventional football expressions can be revealing, especially regarding the pervasiveness of football in Renzi's political thinking.

It should be mentioned that the aim of the dissertation is not to offer a comprehensive history of Italian football. Good accounts have already been written by others and from several angles, although they often lack the history of women's football in Italy. The most comprehensive of recent histories is John Foot's *Calcio* (2007), while journalist and football pundit Mario Sconcerti's (2014) *Storia delle idee del calcio* focuses on the history of tactical developments of the game in Italy and beyond. Journalist and author Antonio Ghirelli's (1972) *Storia del calcio in Italia* offers an analysis of football in relation to sociopolitical developments in Italy, while Gianni Brera's (1975) *Storia critica del calcio italiano* is, unlike the title would suggest, not a history in the strictest academic sense of the word, as it is filled with anecdotes, opinions, and even gossip. Instead of trying to offer a comprehensive history, this study will concentrate on certain

selected topics and aspects that serve the purposes of the narrative, and contextual developments, such as the forming of international and national institutions, are mentioned insofar as they contribute to building the argument.

In this study, football is studied and treated as a “text”, which means that I look for football in Renzi’s texts and speeches, and relate them to other written accounts of and commentaries on football. Recurring to visual sources, such as film or television material of the matches, has not been necessary. In a sense, the “linguistic turn” has become commonplace also in football, where expressions referring to textual interpretations such as “reading the game” (*leggere la partita*) are regularly used to refer to interpretations of how the game unfolds. The development of the game has contributed to the emergence of new concepts and terms, while others have vanished as anachronistic. The regular introduction of neologisms ensures that football will continue to stimulate the imagination of politicians and offer new possibilities for political analysis.

1.4 The contributions of the study

The contributions of this study can be divided roughly in three. First, the study contributes to the research on contemporary Italian politics and political languages and rhetoric. Second, the study contributes to shed light on Matteo Renzi’s politics and rhetoric, and to assess his political profile, style, and methods. Thirdly, the study contributes to the thriving strand of research about politics and football. I shall briefly elaborate these below.

Parliamentary democracies are ruled by using words, and given the significance of rhetoric for any successful politician (Martin 2014), it is of the utmost importance that politicians pay attention to how they address the public, formulate their demands, and express their ideas. Considering that Renzi’s rhetorical skills and abilities to persuade are widely acknowledged, there has been surprisingly few studies on his rhetoric. Previously, political scientist Sofia Ventura has provided an interesting and sharp analysis of Renzi’s “storytelling” as a part of his political action (Ventura 2015; 2019, 240–253). Her analysis reveals how Renzi employs easily recognizable narratives and plots to acquire and maintain power. According to Ventura, the main structure of the story mimics a fairy tale where the “good” administration of Renzi fights the “old” political establishment and other elites in order to make Italy thrive again.

This dissertation studies Renzi’s politics and rhetoric with an emphasis on a particular and less-addressed feature of his rhetoric: football language. Although several scholars paid attention to the increasing use of football terminology in the political debates of the early 1990s Italy (Croci 2001; McCarthy 1997; 2001), academic analysis of this parlance has remained a curiosity linked to Silvio Berlusconi (Semino and Masci 1996). In this sense, my study adds to the somewhat forgotten strand of research on “political languages” in Italy, but also beyond, and brings it more into the present. It also extends the scope of analysis to Renzi, who may not be as internationally famous for his football language as

Berlusconi is, but this fact makes him no less interesting an example to shed light on this phenomenon, as it was argued previously in this chapter.

Because football language is such a compelling language of politics in Italy, the study will contribute to the research on contemporary Italian politics and Renzi's politics in particular. The evolution of the centre-left party, the PD, which was established in 2007, forms a crucial context of the analysis conducted in this study. The development of the PD, its procedures, institutions, voters, and leader candidates have been analysed comprehensively in several volumes (e.g. Pasquino 2009; Pasquino and Venturino 2014) and articles, which also feature analysis of Renzi's impact on the party framework. Although these studies have been extremely valuable to understand the context in which Renzi operated, the aim is not to contribute to discussions on Renzi's impact on the PD as such or to assess the substance and quality of his political proposals. Instead, the analysis tries to interpret how Renzi navigated this context: how he legitimated his courses of action rhetorically by relying on concepts, metaphors and vocabularies emanating from football, and what meanings and justifications he attached to his own politics (see also section 2.3). Furthermore, the study attempts to describe and define what kind of politician Renzi can be regarded as in the light of the analysis conducted in this study. The study will discuss what is characteristic to Renzi's style of doing politics and what kind of methods he employs when pursuing his goals. Since Renzi is still an active politician, the interpretation offered here will inevitably remain provisional.

Finally, the study contributes to the literature on political aspects of football. *Football and Politics: The Palgrave International Handbook of Football and Politics* (De Waele et al. 2018) is a monumental book on the intertwinements of politics and football in different countries, while *Football, Politics and Identity* (Carr et al. 2021) focuses on questions related to identity politics in association football. In *Gaming the World*, Markovits and Rensmann (2010) look at football and sports in general from the perspective of globalization. This study brings a new angle to these debates by focusing on politics, football, and rhetoric. Football continues to inspire politicians not only in authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, but also in liberal democracies. Familiarity with the game and its language might be used as a political asset, as the example of Italy and Renzi proves in an illustrative manner. The study discusses historical and conceptual affinities and dissimilarities between politics and football, which enable politicians to articulate their propositions by relying on the language of the game.

1.5 The outline of the study

The work consists of nine chapters. The introduction is followed by Chapter 2, which discusses the theoretical and methodological premises of this study. It deals with the intertwinements of politics, football, and rhetoric, and elucidates the reading strategies applied in this work.

Chapter 3 provides an overview of the Italian party framework after the Second World War and the centre-left in this context. It discusses the political dynamics of the post-war context, in which only one party, the DC, was legitimate to govern, and its consequences for Italian politics. The chapter also deals with the years of political turmoil in the early 1990s, in which the end of the Cold War and the exposure of massive corruption networks shook the party system, forcing some parties to change or to renew themselves. The focus is on the transformations of the PCI into *Partito democratico della Sinistra* (PDS) and then into *Democratici di sinistra* (DS) and on the birth of the PD in 2007. The chapter concludes with an overview of Renzi's political trajectory and stands.

In Chapter 4, the interest lies on Renzi's relationship to football, and how his profile is similar to or differentiates from other politicians who want to be associated with the game and use it as a way to boost their political profile and career. The chapter discusses Renzi as a supporter of his hometown club Fiorentina and his experience as a referee at the amateur level. The chapter also outlines some tactical debates Renzi was exposed to when he was young, the echoes of which can still be heard in his rhetoric.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 consist of empirical analysis of Renzi's football language, which is examined in the context of the political struggles at the time. The chapters follow Renzi's career in a roughly chronological order, which allows us to assess how his language changed in both content and scope as he climbed up the political ladder. Chapter 5 begins with Renzi serving as the president of the province of Florence and recapitulates the events that led him to seek the mayorship of Florence in 2009. Chapter 6 then analyses Renzi's time as the mayor of Florence. The chapter shows how Renzi challenged the PD establishment with increasing intensity, culminating in the coalition primaries for the centre-left's candidate for prime minister in 2012. The chapter also deals with the PD's unsatisfactory result in the parliamentary elections in 2013 and how it affected the internal dynamics of the party. Chapter 7 focuses on Renzi's conquest of the PD leadership, his political platform, and his tenure as prime minister. The chapter concludes with Renzi's ousting from power after his unsuccessful attempt to reform the constitution.

In Chapter 8, Renzi's football language and politics is analysed from a more detached point of view. It summarizes what kind of football-inspired vocabulary and symbolism Renzi uses, what its most salient and interesting features are, and how his football language has changed throughout the years, offering glimpses into his more recent football expressions too. The chapter also discusses Renzi as a politician and asks what kind of politician Renzi can be regarded as in the light of this study, how his politics could be understood, and what drives him forward. Finally, Chapter 9 draws the work to a close. It summarizes the main arguments of the work and presents the final conclusions.

2 POLITICS, FOOTBALL, RHETORIC

This chapter will engage in a discussion about the theoretical and methodological premises of my approach. It will concentrate on the connections between politics, football, and rhetoric as well as explicates the style of interpretation.

Section 2.1 will discuss the nexus of the three concepts: politics, football, and rhetoric in the Italian context. The section seeks to understand why football has become, in terms of Beha (1987, 64), an “interpretative key” to politics in Italy. As such, it adds a football perspective to the discussion in section 1.2, which dealt with the changes in Italy’s political languages during the upheavals of the early 1990s. Although references to other popular sports occasionally crop up in the public debate, football has established its position as the paradigmatic game through which politics is analysed and debated in Italy. The emergence and legitimation of football language was partly due to the successes and developments that the game witnessed in Italy during the 1980s. Italy won its third World Cup in 1982 (the first after Fascist rule) and the domestic league Serie A, with its foreign talents, attracted the people.

In addition to the popularity of the game, which is one of the major reasons why politicians resort to and want to be associated with football, the fascination for the game vocabulary can also be explained by the affinities that football and politics, two seemingly distant spheres of life, share. Section 2.2 discusses conceptual and historical affinities between football and politics that partly enable and explain the game’s rhetorical power. The section draws mainly from political theory, as well as football and parliamentary studies. I take contingency, controversiality, and fair play as the conceptual triad, which allows us to pinpoint the similarities and differences between politics and football. These affinities, together with the distinctive vocabulary of the game, allow politicians to verbalize and make accessible certain aspects of politics that might be abstract or otherwise difficult to verbalize.

Section 2.3 elucidates the methodological grounds for my reading of Renzi. The section argues how Renzi’s statements can be understood as *translations* from politics into football language, which require not only political knowledge and rhetorical competence but also proficiency in football and mastery of the

vocabulary of the game. Simultaneously, my interpretations of Renzi's statements can be understood as further translations from football language into the language of political science. Finally, section 2.4 concludes the chapter. Speaking about politics in terms of football is not without problems, and the section anticipates and reviews some often-repeated criticisms related to this topic.

2.1 Football as an interpretative key to politics in Italy

To talk about politics in terms of games or playing has become commonplace among politicians, citizens, political pundits, and scholars. Politicians' language abounds with references to games, while journalists use games as a "frame" through which they cover politics. In political science, game-theoretical models use games as a method of analysing politics, using mainly mathematical models and calculations.

Understood broadly, the ubiquity of this language implies the significance of play and games for human cultures. The Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, in his pioneering study *Homo Ludens* ([1938] 1998), discussed play as a concept that encompasses a wide range of different cultural phenomena. Although Huizinga was not a political theorist, his definition of play as free, meaningful, and rule-bound activity, which is separated from the necessities of ordinary life and carried for its own sake (Huizinga 1998, 7–13), was broad enough to allow observing elements of play in various activities that are sometimes presented as opposites to play, such as politics. He argued, for instance, that parliamentary democratic politics, with its recurrent electoral contests, was "full of unmistakable play features" (Huizinga 1998, 206–207).

More specifically, this parlance is widespread because it allows us to approach politics from various angles (Palonen 2006, 262). The fascination of this vocabulary lies in its versatility, as it can be used to invoke various aspects related to playing and games, such as rules, players, and the polarity between playfulness and seriousness (Palonen 2006, 262–263). From this perspective, the Italian term *gioco* (like the French *jeu* or the Spanish *juego*), which refers at the same time to "play" and "game", captures this richness better than the English terminology, which makes a differentiation between them. Also, "game" is a very generic concept, and politics can sometimes be paralleled with some archetypal games or forms of play. Inspired by Huizinga's work, the French sociologist Roger Caillois (1961), has categorized four paradigms for play and game: *agôn* (competition), *alea* (luck), *mimicry* (simulation) and *ilinx* (vertigo). This scheme can be used to indicate some paradigmatic games to which politics is compared, such as football, chess, lottery, or theatre, all of which inform different understandings and conceptualizations of politics.

Although politicians in Italy at times resort to languages that originate from other sports,¹⁶ the paradigm of the game is undoubtedly football. Beha observed in 1987 that football offers an interpretative key for analysing Italian politics: “[L]’Italia calcistizzata di fronte alla quale ci troviamo, offre con il calcio essenzialmente una chiave di lettura per la sua vita politica” (Beha 1987, 64). Apart from being a rather pessimistic and dark account of the excesses of football fanaticism in Italy, Beha’s remark should also be understood as an observation that in Italy politics is increasingly conducted through the language of football. On one hand, this can be explained by the immense popularity and following of the game by Italians as well as the prestige that Italian football enjoys, which is why many political figures want to be associated with the game.

Football started to overtake cycling as the most popular sport in Italy from the 1950s onwards (Dietschy and Pivato 2019, 131). The Superga air disaster in 1949, in which the entire football team of Torino, later dubbed *Grande Torino*, died, contributed to the shifting of sympathies to football, and the death of Fausto Coppi, an Italian cycling icon, in 1960 further contributed to the decline of the popularity of cycling (Dietschy and Pivato 2019, 131). Although the 1960s were a hard period for the Italian national team, the successes of Helenio Herrera’s Inter and Nereo Rocco’s AC Milan in that decade’s European club competitions contributed to the growing popularity of football in Italy.

The 1980s were marked by cultural, economic, and political transformations (Ginsborg 2001). Italy had left behind the “years of lead” (*anni di piombo*) characterized by political violence both from the political right and left, but the political instability was still reflected in the frequent changes of government. Italy also saw economic revival after years of terrorism and the 1979 oil crisis. The expansion of commercial and colour television, together with the popularity of football, contributed to consolidating a new mass culture in Italy (Ginsborg 2001, 108–119). When it comes to football, having superseded the years of lead, Italy entered, as Beha (1987) put it referring to football, the “years of leather” (*anni di cuoio*). These years were characterized by what Ferrarotti and Beha (1983) called the “footballization of Italy” (*calcistizzazione dell’Italia*), that is, a period that saw an increasing interest in football, which spilled outside stadiums and pervaded various other fields, such as politics.¹⁷ There was nothing uplifting in Ferrarotti’s and Beha’s analysis; on the contrary, they saw footballization as encouraging harmful factionalism and tribalism, according to the worst logic of football support (*tifo*) culture.

An important event that gave a stimulus for the footballization of Italy was the country’s third World Cup victory in 1982. The unexpected hero of the team, Paolo Rossi, summarized the significance of the victory for Italy as follows:

¹⁶ In addition to football, other popular sports in present-day Italy are motorsports (perhaps thanks to the excellence of the Ferrari brand), tennis, and volleyball (FIGC 2020). The popularity of cycling was especially high during the 1940s and 1950s due to the competition between two famous cyclists, Fausto Coppi and Gino Bartali.

¹⁷ Dave Russell (2007), too, speaks about the “footballization of English society” and dates its emergence to the mid-1990s. However, his emphasis is on the manifestations of “footballization” in the popular culture rather than in politics.

Da anni, forse dai giorni che misero fine alla Guerra, non c'era stata una simile festa di popolo. Da anni a questa nostra Italia contraddittoria e divisa, sfiduciata e amaramente ironica, delusa e disfattista, non capitava nulla di così bello. Il titolo mondiale risveglia un sentimento di orgoglio nazionale, di dignità, di coesione, di fiducia.¹⁸ (Rossi 2002, 154)

John Foot (2016) has convincingly demonstrated how the victory was connected to the stories of national unification and identification, and how it contributed to what Ferrarotti and Beha had called the footballization of Italy. Foot describes the victory as both collective and individual “story of redemption”, analogous to the heroic stories told about the Italian unification (*Risorgimento*). Not much was expected from the Italian team that set off the tournament as an underdog, overshadowed by the match-fixing scandal (*Totonero*), which had also involved some of the players of the national team. However, as Foot continues, Italy went on to beat some of the favourites of that tournament, such as Argentina, Brazil, and West Germany. Paolo Rossi, who had been involved in the match manipulation scandal, transformed from a villain into a hero by scoring some memorable goals in the tournament. The finishing touches to the story were applied by President Sandro Pertini, who became associated with the success of the team, and who Foot considers the very first example of a politician who exploited the connections between politics and football, also preceding Berlusconi (Foot 2016, 355–356).

During the 1980s, Serie A became one of the most attractive leagues in the world. In 1980, the ban on foreign footballers¹⁹ was lifted and by 1988 three foreign players per team were permitted. Many foreign top-class players, such as Diego Maradona, Michel Platini, Marco Van Basten, and Falcão played in Italy.²⁰ During the 1980s, Italian football saw some important tactical innovations that challenged the previous orthodoxies of Italian football, and they were strongly opposed by some football pundits (for a more detailed discussion see section 4.3). Although Italian football has been tarnished by several scandals over the years, they have not managed to shake the game's position as the most popular sport in the country and as the most popular sports language that politicians rely on.

For Renzi, too, the paradigmatic “game” to make sense of politics is football. Football offers a language with which he seems to be most at ease, resorting to it frequently and using it flexibly and exploiting several different aspects of the game (see Chapter 4). He uses the game as an inspiring medium through which

¹⁸ “For years, maybe since the days that saw the end of the War, there had not been a similar popular celebration. Nothing so beautiful had happened in years to this contradictory and divided Italy of ours, discouraged and bitterly ironic, disappointed, and defeatist. The World Cup victory awakens a sense of national pride, dignity, cohesion, and trust.”

¹⁹ The ban on foreign footballers in Italy has undergone several changes over the 20th century, as it has been repeatedly partially lifted and then reimposed again. An account of these changes since 1946 can be found in John Foot's *Calcio* (2007, appendix “Rules regarding foreign players in Italian football”).

²⁰ The transfers of top-class players were further accelerated by the Bosman ruling in 1995, which permitted free movement of players within the EU. The Bosman ruling refers to a decision made by the European Court of Justice in favour of Belgian footballer Jean-Marc Bosman, which allowed the players in the EU to transfer to another club without a transfer fee paid to their old club when their contract expired.

to analyse politics and his own as well as other politicians' political moves. He even theorizes about politics through football.

Occasionally, he also makes references to other sports or games, such as basketball, cycling, and chess.²¹ However, as I have not mastered the finer points of other sports, their history, rules, and terminology as I have with football, the analysis of other potential game-inspired languages in Renzi's rhetoric are left out of the analysis. This choice permits a more detailed examination of the chosen perspective, while at the same time it is perhaps useful to mention that it does not imply that there are no other potential political languages in Renzi's rhetoric, only that these lines of enquiry are left for others to identify and study.

Renzi also frequently talks about politics as a game without specifying exactly what kind of game, which can be traced in expressions such as *mettersi in gioco*, which appear in slightly different forms and wordings in Renzi's rhetoric and could be translated as "taking a risk" or "putting oneself in the game". While I have excluded this sort of general references to games, it could still be argued that not all Renzi's utterances presented in this work can be categorized under the label of "football language" but more generally under the umbrella of "game language", which could be interpreted as referring to some other sports as well. What falls under the label of football language is partly a question of interpretation. Yet, as it was argued before, football is *the* sport through which Italian politicians, including Renzi, analyse politics. For example, when Renzi refers to himself as the "captain of the team", the statement should be understood in the context of the PD leadership race, which Renzi very clearly presented in terms of football and thus the statement can be plausibly categorized as football language.

Partly, politicians' choices between different sports or game languages reflect their personal preferences and diverging understandings of politics. The question is not whether some sports or games are more political than others, but rather that different games or sports can be understood as offering different theoretical insights into politics, each having their relative strengths and limitations when used to analyse politics. In the next section, the dimensions which most seem to enable the connection between politics and football are discussed: contingency, controversiality, and fair play.

2.2 Contingency, controversiality, and fair play

This section will delve deeper into the relationship between politics and football, focusing on the conceptual and historical affinities between the two. These conceptual linkages, together with the distinctive vocabulary and language of the

²¹ The title of Renzi's book, *La mossa del cavallo* (2020), suggests an interpretation of politics as game of chess, and the bizarre move of the knight, to which the title refers, is a metaphor for an innovative and surprising political move.

game, allow politicians to form connections between the two and to interpret politics by relying on the terminology originating from the game.

Following the conceptualisation of Claudia Wiesner, Taru Haapala and Kari Palonen (2017), politics is understood here as a contingent, controversial, and rule-based activity. This conception suits the purposes of this discussion as it allows us to look for politics beyond institutional political practices and in phenomena that are traditionally not regarded as political, such as the game of football (see Palonen and Söderman 2020). Controversiality refers to the elementary condition for politics, as there is no politics without the plurality of voices and demands that are somehow in conflict. Contingency has become a popular concept in political science and political theory in recent decades. Although a multifaceted concept, it usually has to do with indeterminacy or uncertainty (Schedler 2007). Here, following the idea of Wiesner et al. (2017), it refers to the uncertainty of actions and outcomes: in politics one can always choose between different options regarding not only alternative policies but also when and how to promote one's cause, and the outcomes of political struggles result from clashes of opinions, negotiations, and politicking that regularly produce outcomes that nobody could anticipate. Politics also involves rules and regulations of different kinds, originating from different types of institutional and organizational contexts. The idea of fair play refers to the ideal that governs parliamentary-style politics, the respect for opponents as well as the rules of the game, and thus guarantees an approximately level playing field for the participants and controls contingency and conflict.

Football, too, is controversial in the very elementary sense that there are two teams playing against each other, who must take into account the performances of their opponents. The result of a football match as well as how the game unfolds is not known in advance. They are, in a word, contingent, and dependent on the tactics and moves of the players on the pitch. Football is also a rule-based activity. It has 17 constitutive rules, complemented by the idea of fair play, which institutionalize the means through which one can legitimately achieve the objective of the game. Although the laws of the game exclude certain moves, they nevertheless allow for a number of different courses of action.

Contingency is the key concept linking politics and football. Electoral contests form the clearest instances of contingency in democratic politics: if the result were known in advance, the contest would lose its meaning. Although the concept of contingency is hardly ever mentioned in the everyday parlance about football, its presence can be found in the descriptions of the game, like in the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano's (2013, 243) definition of football as "the art of the unforeseeable", or in phrases like "the ball is round", which suggests that the game is unpredictable both in terms of results and moves on the pitch. The contingency of results forms the main attraction of football and makes the game meaningful: match-fixing or other attempts to violate it are always firmly condemned. Moreover, in totalitarian systems football functioned as an escape from the total control of the regime (see Glorizova 2018). In the Soviet Union, for example, the citizens did not have much freedom of choice in many areas of

life, but they could choose the team they rooted for, and football matches offered an “unpredictable spectacle”, the results of which were not pre-determined (Edelman 2009).

In addition to the contingency of results, football includes a myriad of other contingent factors such as game tactics, the rules of the game, and moves of individual players, which both enable and confine contingency (on the politics of football tactics, see Wiesner, Haapala and Palonen 2017, 215–222). Palonen (1998) has differentiated between different facets of contingency in political theory: the Machiavellian *fortuna*, which refers to the hazardous or capricious contingencies that cannot be controlled, and Weberian *Chance*, which refers to opportunities and occasions that can be grasped and used to one’s own benefit. Whereas the Machiavellian contingency cannot be completely neutralized but only tamed, Weberian contingency refers to contingencies as possibilities and resources that can be used to gain advantage over one’s opponent (Palonen 1998), even when they would initially be unfortunate occurrences such as own goals. A football team can, for example, deviate from pre-determined plans and gain an advantage over the opposing team by such a surprise move. The expressions of Machiavellian *fortuna* concern, for example, changing weather conditions or refereeing mistakes that can always take place and change the course of a match, although one cannot completely predict them, let alone control them.

The variety of football tactics can be interpreted as different approaches for how to handle the contingency of the game, ranging from prudent and result-oriented styles like Italian *catenaccio* or its Swiss precursor *verrou*, to improvising and aesthetic styles like Dutch *totaalvoetbal* (in Italian *calcio totale*) or Brazilian *jogo bonito*. The vocabularies related to these styles are often evoked by politicians in political battles. As the study will show, one of the most frequent cries of Renzi was that the PD should get rid of the defensive *catenaccio* and adopt a more attacking playing style when it comes to persuading new constituents, even when it risked alienating its former core electorate. Different football moves or techniques are ways to reveal possibilities in the game and exploit them, and politicians sometimes use these concepts to describe their political manoeuvres (on Renzi’s interpretation of *cucchiaio*, see section 7.3). Thus, contingency regularly figures in football language in both its Machiavellian and Weberian forms, which were discussed above.

The concept of fair play has its origins in parliamentary rules and procedures. Huizinga, who wrote *Homo Ludens* in the 1930s, a period during which several authoritarian regimes were established around Europe, was acutely aware of the value of fair play in politics. He saw it as a distinctive feature of parliamentary democratic politics, arguing that

The mood and manners of parliamentary democracy were, until recently, those of fair play both in England and in the countries that had adopted the English model with some felicity. The spirit of fellowship would allow the bitterest opponents a friendly chat even after the most virulent debate. (Huizinga 1998, 207)

Football and parliamentary democracy are two institutions with distinctively English origins. That it was precisely England that became “the

cradle and focus of modern sporting life” (Huizinga 1998, 197) was not coincidental, but intertwined with the political developments and especially with the strengthening of a parliamentary regime. Norbert Elias (in Elias and Dunning 1986) has made this link explicit and argued that the development of modern sports was essentially connected to the “parliamentarization” of political conflict, that is, the calming down of periods of violent confrontations and to the consolidation of a parliamentary regime and practices in England during the eighteenth century. This shift meant that political disagreements were settled in a civilized manner through rhetoric and persuasion and following the rules and practices of the parliament.

Elias goes on to argue that this political development saw a corresponding change in the “sportization” of the leisure activities and sports-games (Elias and Dunning 1986, 34). By this he means that the same class of people—mainly aristocracy and gentry—who learned to settle their political disagreements in a parliamentary manner were influential also in the roughly simultaneous development of modern sports-games, which were characterized by stricter constraints on violent conduct, written and more precise rules as well as a stricter enforcement of these rules. In other words, the parliamentary style of a rule-based and procedural way of treating political questions seemed to offer a model for how to handle the controversies in a non-violent way without mitigating them (see Palonen 2019), an approach that can be used to varying degrees in other types of institutions and organizations as well. In this sense, parliamentary practices provided a paradigm for football rules, which became codified in 1863 by the Football Association (FA) based on the rules devised by students at the Cambridge University. The decision was preceded by a debate regarding acceptable levels of violent behaviour and the use of hands, after which hacking and handling the ball became excluded (Collins 2017).

Palonen (2019) has studied the concept of fair play in the parliamentary context. According to him, it forms the core of parliamentary style of politics and presupposes respect for rules and opponents as well as ensures that all the members of the parliament have fair chances to participate in the debate and influence its outcomes. In this sense, fair play works as the supreme, yet undefined, principle that guides the workings of the parliament and allows parliamentarians to raise controversies regarding the interpretation of rules (ibid.). For example, what is considered “unparliamentary language” cannot be defined in exact terms, which is why controversies regarding acceptable and unacceptable language are periodically raised in parliaments (Ilie 2001).

The connection of fair play to the parliamentary tradition is often only vaguely recognized and many identify the concept originating from the philosophy of sport. This was demonstrated by Berlusconi who addressed the Italian Senate in 1994: “*Accetto il gioco duro, ma esigo che sia corretto. ... [L]’ho imparato dal calcio, una passione ed un’arte fatalmente imparentate con il fair play*”²² (Berlusconi 1994). Although Renzi seldom explicitly turns to the concept, fair

²² “I accept a tough game, but I require that it is fair. ... I have learnt it from football, a passion and an art inevitably related to *fair play*.”

play is a principle that informs his political thinking too, which is seen for example by his demands to treat Berlusconi as a legitimate political opponent and his generous acceptance of defeats, all markers of fair play in democratic confrontation.

Fair play is a fundamental principle that governs football, also in Italy, which is sometimes accused – often for justified reasons – as lacking the culture of fair play.²³ Antonio Gramsci (1994, 73), when writing about football in 1918, observed that “[t]here is movement, competition, conflict, but they are regulated by an unwritten rule – the rule of fair play.”²⁴ Fair play is regularly evoked by football institutions as well. The International Football Association Board (IFAB), which dictates and occasionally revises the rules of the game, explicitly relates fair play to “the philosophy and spirit of the Laws”, stating that “Football must have Laws which keep the game fair – this is a crucial foundation of the ‘beautiful game’” (IFAB Laws of the Game 22/23). This points to the previously discussed idea of fair play as the supreme principle that complements the written rules, which can also be used to legitimize revisions to written rules.

Examples of guarantees of fair play can be found in the written rules of the game, such as the numerical equality between the teams and the presence of a referee, who enforces the rules and sanctions their violation. Furthermore, fairness informs the way football league systems are organized, so that the teams of roughly equal strength compete against each other (although much remains to be done regarding the implementation of financial fair play rules). Fair play includes also, as Gramsci wrote, “unwritten” rules that the players are expected to master. However, interpretations of what is fair on football pitch are partly subjective and open to dispute, and the contingency of the game ensures that the line between fair play and foul play can never be determined in definitive terms. Mastering both written and unwritten rules is an asset for all kinds of players, whether parliamentarians or footballers.

The question of why football language is used, instead of some other sports, could be elucidated by comparing football to other sports or games, which Renzi occasionally refers to, such as the previously mentioned basketball, cycling, and chess. Unlike basketball, football is a low-scoring game played with the feet, a seemingly banal fact which, however, makes the manipulation of the ball a tricky task. These features make football more open-ended both in terms of results and actions on the pitch. In other words, the aspect of contingency is more accentuated in football, which has also given rise to a rich tactical and technical vocabulary that politicians often deploy to analyse their own political performance as well as that of others. Contrary to cycling, which prohibits direct

²³ In Italy, the most blatant violations of the fair play ideal regard match-fixing. In 2006, a scandal dubbed *Calciopoli* was revealed in Italy, involving several prestigious Serie A teams such as Juventus, AC Milan, and Fiorentina. The scandal exposed a network of contacts between club officials and referees, aimed at influencing the outcomes of matches. Juventus suffered the hardest punishment: it was stripped of two league titles and relegated to Serie B.

²⁴ In the article Gramsci contrasts football with a traditional Italian card game *scopone* and puts forward the idea that football, although reflecting capitalist ideas, also incorporates some important ideals, such as the idea of fair play.

obstruction of other contestants, football is a game where one must relate one's actions to the performances of the opposite team which, as Jean-Paul Sartre famously noted, makes everything more complicated (Sartre 1991, f.n. 35). Battles between political forces are indeed often narrated by resorting to terms such as teams (*squadre*), opponents (*avversari*), partisanship (*tifo*) and tactics (*tattiche*) that accentuate the confrontation and to describe how politicians relate their own actions to those of their opponents. Finally, football has its own procedural language, consisting of concepts such as offside (*fuorigioco*) or penalty kick (*calcio di rigore*) which, however, require interpretation when applied and thus allow tactical uses that are not possible in chess, where the potential moves of the pieces are strictly governed.

To summarize, I have tried to argue that the main characteristics that football and politics share – contingency, controversiality, and fair play – form a sufficient conceptual basis that allows meaningful “translations” from politics into the language of football, which will be discussed more in detail in the next section. I have particularly stressed the similarities, since I think that the idea of similarities between politics and football is more counterintuitive than the evident differences between the two.

Obviously, the differences between politics and football should be born in mind as well. The results of football matches do not have similar (potentially serious) consequences for people's lives as political decisions usually do in the form of laws. These can touch upon profoundly important questions concerning rights, inequalities, material well-being, even life itself, which motivates people to concern themselves with politics, to try to influence it, and to take a stand on issues they find important. Football, instead, allows us to step “out of 'real' life”, as Huizinga (1998, 8) put it when referring to games. The fascination for the game is indeed often based on the idea that it offers an escape and a break from ordinary life and its necessities and duties. As such, it also gives people the possibility to remain ignorant about the game if one so wishes, without this indifference having any harmful effects on one's life.

We may also think that politics involves confronting numerous opponents on several playgrounds (especially in multiparty systems), which makes it a much more complicated “game” than football, which consists only of two teams playing against each other at once. Although politics is often described as a sort of “team play” (teams being often either parties or parliamentary groups), politics allows and perhaps encourages individual initiative also when it goes against one's own party or some general consensus (like Renzi's challenge on the PD party establishment demonstrated).

Yet, from the rhetorical point of view, it is partly the simplicity of football that makes it such a compelling language of politics. Since politics often deals with abstract and sometimes perplexing ideas and concepts, football language can make these ideas more accessible and less bewildering, even though the risk of misunderstandings or oversimplifications is always present (cf. Edelman 1971, 65–66). To use football concepts and vocabularies in political debates requires not only that one is a connoisseur of football but also an ability to imagine politics in

terms of football, which means to grasp the affinities and differences between the two activities in order to form plausible and engaging arguments. The next section turns the focus to the questions regarding “translations” from politics into football language and back.

2.3 Translating politics into football language and back

Lo smarcamento è un aspetto importante della fase (offensiva) di possesso, da cui in parte dipende anche la velocità del gioco. Con lo smarcamento ci si sottrae al controllo dell'avversario per proporsi al compagno che ha la palla e partecipare alla fase di possesso con lo scopo di avanzare verso la porta avversaria. – Carlo Ancelotti

The epigraph is an extract from football manager Carlo Ancelotti’s book, *Il mio Albero di Natale*, in which he gives a detailed account of various tactical schemes his teams have adopted over the years (Ancelotti 2016, 73). While the passage might sound baffling to many, perhaps even for Italians who are not familiar with concepts such as *smarcamento* (shaking off the marker) or *fase di possesso* (the phase of play when a team has the ball in possession), for those familiar with these terms, it is rather easy to make out what Ancelotti is talking about, namely, the importance of shaking off the adversary who marks you on the pitch.

The above extract from Ancelotti is meant to exemplify what Keith Tribe (2012, 221) has elsewhere pointed out: whenever we hope to render something accessible for someone else, we are operating with *translations*. A translation of Ancelotti’s words might be necessary even for native Italians, who are not familiar with football and its language. Following this line of thought, whenever a politician tries to make his case by rhetorically relying on football, we may argue that he is translating politics into football language (even when he uses the same natural language, such as Italian).

Translation, thus, is a central methodological idea of this work. My approach is inspired by the ideas discussed in the volume *Why concepts matter? Translating Political and Social Thought* (Burke and Richter 2012). The volume brings together two rather distinct disciplines: translation studies and conceptual history. Although the forthcoming analysis does not focus on any specific concept or a cluster of concepts, the central methodological idea adopted from the volume is that translating political thought is something more than mere searching and finding equivalents of words in different languages. Rather, translating encompasses a wide range of activities such as contextualization and interpretation. For example, to make sense of Renzi’s arguments uttered in football language, literal translations would soon appear rather clumsy (let us imagine, for example, that *catenaccio* would be translated as “bolt” throughout the study). The work engages with translation at several levels. First, it discusses how Renzi translates politics into football language. Second, my own interpretative approach could be understood as translating Renzi’s statements into the language of political science. Finally, the analysis operates also with translations from Italian to English, neither of which is my native language.

When we speak about politics in terms of football, something is inevitably “lost in translation”, as the saying goes. However, the reverse and politically interesting side of this entails that applying novel ways of using any language in politics, or applying languages that have originated in different contexts, may open space for new ways of thinking and for political action, also when these rhetorical innovations are unintended or when they pass unnoticed by contemporaries or even by the speaker.

To translate politics into football language requires not only knowledge of football, but also political and rhetorical imagination so that the connections between football and politics result in both plausible and persuasive for the audience. Addressing different groups requires adaptation, as it can be observed from Renzi’s rhetoric: references to Fiorentina might work better in local than in national politics, and concepts such as *melina*, an obstructive measure in football, may carry more meanings for those who can remember different time-wasting practices before the mid-1990s when several modifications to the rules were introduced to impede their use. Renzi’s insistence on a “beautiful game”, which echoes the Argentinian coach César Luis Menotti’s understanding of aesthetic “left-wing football” might be expected to be persuasive in the context of centre-left politics. Sometimes the sheer delight of hearing an unexpected football analogy may turn out to be persuasive, and provocative statements that draw from football might force one’s opponents to react.

Also, some football expressions have become “dormant” metaphors in politics (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969, 405–410), so commonplace that one hardly recognizes them as metaphors. Nonetheless, even the most basic or cliché-like talk of the government as a “team” (*squadra*) and the emphasis on the importance of “team play” (*gioco di squadra*) can be used innovatively in different political contexts. A clever rhetorician might devalue the importance of teamwork and celebrate the value of individual brilliancy, like one of Renzi’s collaborators, Graziano Delrio, did (perhaps unconsciously) when he endorsed Renzi in the PD leadership contest (see section 7.4). Reaching back in history, football was initially regarded as a *dribbling* game that favoured skilled individuals rather than a *passing* game that required cooperation with other players. Thus, the emphasis on teamwork over individual brilliancy was not as self-evident as it appears to be in modern-day football.

Akin to any rhetoric, football language does not always work in the desired manner. The message that the politician wants to convey can remain unclear if the idea that connects politics and football is too far-fetched or it can be interpreted in a way that the speaker did not expect it to be interpreted. The audience may also reject any analysis made in football language because they simply scorn football (see Eco 1986, 167) or because they find it repugnant that politics is discussed in terms of a game. Ultimately, the persuasiveness of football as a “political language” and the success of translations depends on how the audience understands the associations that the speaker draws between football and politics, and whether they accept or reject them. However, even when the persuasive power of certain football expressions is debatable, they still might

reveal something interesting about the speaker's habit to conceive and make sense of politics.

An interesting question concerns the extent to which Renzi's football language is improvised or planned. Given that Renzi has on several occasions criticized the centre-left for an obscure language and demanded that they give a more central role to communication (see Renzi 2012), it can be argued that he understood well the importance of rhetoric in legitimating political actions and likely devoted time and effort to hone his own rhetoric. Renzi also sometimes repeats certain football expressions on different occasions, which suggests that they are at least partly planned beforehand. However, it is known that Renzi is a football enthusiast and follows football keenly, and considering his verbal facility, he is certainly also able to improvise, as demonstrated by many impromptu references to topical football events and discussions.

Finally, a few words are needed to make explicit my interpretation and reading strategies in this study. The difficulty and delight of pursuing a work like this is that there is no ready-made "methodology" on how to interpret football terms and concepts. Due to the almost complete lack of similar studies on other politicians' football language means that there are few points of references. Therefore, an experimental attitude and even speculation is needed in interpreting Renzi's statements. To illustrate this with an example: when employed for political purposes, even single football concepts, let us continue with the example of *catenaccio*, offer various chains of reasoning. The term can be used, for example, to illustrate and debate the relationship between collective and individual dimensions of politics or – due to the notoriety of the style – simply to denounce the politics of one's opponents.

Given that football language is often used in a singular manner by different political agents, the most fruitful way to proceed with the interpretation is to consider the utterances that rely on football as "moves in an argument" (Skinner 2002, 115), which gain their meaning when interpreted in the historical and political context and by reviewing their influence on and reception among contemporaries. Renzi's statements are analysed as interventions in political controversies, and the reading sheds light on the origins and institutional settings of these controversies, as well as on the participants and their objectives. The analysis of the possibilities and alternative courses of action, and how Renzi himself interpreted these opportunities, emphasizes the conflicts and contingencies inherent in these political struggles. To interpret Renzi's statements as "moves in an argument" also means that the search for "correct" translations is not the point of the interpretation. In a nutshell, the analysis follows the idea of Quentin Skinner (2002) in trying to uncover what Renzi "was doing" when he resorted to football language in political struggles. As such, the reading also follows the methodological approach suggested by James L. Newell (2004) regarding the study of Italian politics. Newell (2004, 254) invites a "sympathetic understanding" towards the agents that the researcher tries to understand. This entails a sensitivity to how the agents themselves describe their

situations and explain their actions. This, however, does not mean their claims should not be scrutinized critically.

This approach inspired by Skinner has the advantage of understanding rhetoric, as James Martin puts it, as “a situated practice of argumentation” (Martin 2014, 9). It shares the same interest in speech and interpretative methods as, for instance, discourse theorists, but its main advantage lies in the level of detail that the analysis strives for. Unlike discourse theorists, who are mainly concerned about “understanding and explaining the emergence and logic of discourses” (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000, 7), the approach chosen in this study allows us to examine arguments in concrete situations, locations, spaces, and times. This choice reflects the division into *parole* and *langue* as mentioned in section 1.2, and the decision to focus on the rhetorical uses of language rather than on abstract language systems as such. In this study, to pinpoint the existence of certain political languages or discourses marks the beginning from which to continue to look at how these languages are put into practice, to use the Skinnerian term, as “moves” in specific situations. It pays particular attention to the actual formulations and choices of words and arguments by the speaker, rather than to the large and fairly abstract discourses or theoretical constructions that discourse theorists are usually interested in.

The approach is also indebted to ancient rhetorical tradition in several ways. For example, it emphasizes the explicit and conscious character of rhetorical activity, as opposed to theories that emphasize how we use and understand language or rhetoric more or less automatically or unconsciously (cf. Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Burke 1969). By focusing on Renzi’s interventions, it also comes close to the ancient tradition in which rhetoric is understood as a very practical art that has a direct connection to political life. The interest in ancient rhetorical tradition has inspired political theorists to restore the value of rhetoric for political studies, and contributed to the birth of the so-called “rhetoric revival” school within the discipline (see Garsten 2011). While these are valuable theoretical contributions to the fields of politics and rhetoric, this study differs from this school by its more empirically oriented approach, and the principal aim of this study is not to provide my own theorization of rhetoric.

The rhetorical analysis I have conducted in this study can also be understood as a kind of translation, partly analogous to those discussed above in relation to Renzi, but which also considerably differ in some other respects. The dissertation is written for a rather restricted academic audience and the “language of interpretation” (Pocock 1987, 27) is that of political science rather than that of football. Furthermore, I had the opportunity to assess and analyse the political rhetoric and struggles examined in this study in a detailed way at a distance (see Vaarakallio and Haapala 2013) both in space, time, and linguistically, which grants more room for hypothesizing with possibilities and alternative formulations that the politicians themselves have probably not considered. This kind of distance is indeed impossible for most politicians, who must be able to improvise in changing situations but who do not engage in analysing their actions or words afterwards.

The narrative of the empirical chapters proceeds by introducing quotations from Renzi (presented mainly in Italian), situating them in the political and historical context and then analysing them. This mode of proceeding highlights the actual formulations and uses of words of Renzi. The underlying assumption is that football language is not something obvious and easily accessible to everybody. This is why the study engages in discussing football and the footballing context from which certain concepts originate at some length, and then connects these discussions to political controversies and problematics. The narrative follows Renzi's career in a loosely chronological order, although the quotations are not necessarily presented in the order they appear in the original texts.

For non-Italian readers, English translations of the quotations from Renzi are included in the footnotes. Since some specific Italian football concepts are hard to translate and a straightforward translation would often result in a clumsy rendering, I have preferred to preserve those Italian terms in the translation. However, the quoted speech acts will be explicated and commented on in the body text. All translations from Italian are mine unless otherwise stated. The appendix at the very end of the study contains a summary in chronological order of Renzi's utterances that I have analysed in the study. It provides the reader the occasion to get a better understanding of the intensity of his football language, to assess its inventiveness, and to observe how it evolved as time went by.

2.4 Re-thinking the critique of football language in politics

In Italy, critics contend that the excessive "footballization" of politics has a degenerative impact on public life both because it encourages exaggerated political polarization (Ferrarotti and Beha 1983; Beha 1987) and because it reduces public debate to the level of a *bar sport*, an unending but ultimately insignificant chatter (Triani 1994). I shall focus on these criticisms in this section. My intention is not to prove them wrong or to defend the habit of speaking about politics in terms of football or other games. Adhering to football language or any other political language can be limiting for our understanding and thinking of politics. However, it is interesting that despite heavy criticisms and even ridicule, politicians repeatedly and regularly seem to get inspired by football and use its language in political discussions. In other words, they do not seem to consider its defects to be as harmful or dangerous as the critics often do.

One could claim that the critique targeted at this kind of parlance merely reflects the antipathy towards rhetoric in the tradition of Western political thought in general (see Martin 2014, 15-16). As Martin (2014, 5) suggests, rhetoric allows us to put into question even the most durable "truths" or "certainties", which is why rhetoric has been fiercely attacked by writers who long for some durable basis upon which to build politics. In other words, all rhetoric hides inside a deeply playful element, as Huizinga (1998, 147) has pointed out, and its political relevance lies in making things open to play and contestation. Perhaps

more apparently than any other political language, football language is the clearest marker of this contingency. As Giorgio Triani puts it:

Nulla è più mutevole, effimero, transitorio delle verità sportive. Perché ad ogni vittoria o sconfitta segue sempre puntuale la rivincita, la rimessa in discussione di valori e gerarchie che sembravano acquisiti.²⁵ (Triani 1994, 32)

The disrepute of football language is also due to the antipathy felt towards politicians who use it. Triani's tract *Bar Sport Italia: Quando la politica va nel pallone* (1994) can be considered as a reaction to Berlusconi's ascent to prime minister, his rhetorical style and more generally the over-all shift of football-style confrontation to political sphere, which Berlusconi embodied. Triani argued that politicians increasingly abuse the terminology of the game, to the extent that it has become difficult to discern parliamentary rhetoric from that used in San Siro stadium (Triani 1994, 66), which was an unflattering assessment of the state of parliamentary eloquence in Italy. According to him, football language was consciously employed for manipulative and demagoguery purposes and its effectiveness was based on exaggerated simplification.

One can legitimately arrive to a conclusion that football language has a degenerative impact on public life especially if it is excessively used to simplify complex political phenomena. However, it would be misleading to analyse it in terms of manipulation, simplification, and demagoguery alone, as not all the attempts to simplify certain aspects of politics are necessarily harmful. Sometimes, it is precisely the simplicity of football compared to politics that help to highlight certain aspects of politics and political activity that would otherwise remain inaccessible or unintelligible to a wider audience. Obviously, this does not remove the risk of oversimplifying matters. Paradoxically, the language of football might also be criticised for being difficult to understand because it contains a lot of specialist vocabulary and concepts.

One strand of critique builds on the idea that politics is something serious while football is something trivial and light. Therefore, exploiting football language can be interpreted as an expression of populism, which reduces all politics to a mere "game" and "playing" and even threatens the entire legitimacy of politics, political actors, and political institutions. Or keeping in mind incidents where football has turned literally into a deadly serious matter, such as the tragedy at Heysel stadium in 1985, where 39 people were killed in a chaotic incident in the stands, we may think that football language may endorse excessive competitiveness and conflict and encourages the separation of political agents into "friends" and "enemies", to use the Schmittian formulation (Schmitt [1932] 2007). At the heart of Beha's (1987) pessimistic analysis of the excesses of the footballization of Italy was indeed that it produced degenerative tribalism

²⁵ "Nothing is more volatile, short-lived and fleeting than sporting truths. Every victory or defeat is always followed by a rematch and by the questioning of values and hierarchies that seemed indisputable."

familiar from football stadiums. “*Siamo un paese che di calcio, senza saperlo, in fondo sta morendo*”²⁶ was his woeful conclusion (Beha 1987, 41).

However, play should not be too straightforwardly contrasted with seriousness and there are good grounds to argue that playfulness is an invaluable and necessary feature of politics. Huizinga, for example, argued that the playful character of politics, which essentially includes the idea of fair play and respect towards opponents, ensures a democratic and peaceful form of life (Huizinga 1998). According to him, taking politics too seriously and discarding its playful features threatened to give rise to authoritarian leaders and thus imperil the legitimacy of democratic politics. Huizinga lamented that he knows “of no sadder or deeper fall from human reason than Schmitt’s barbarous and pathetic delusion about the friend-foe principle” (Huizinga 1998, 209). Apart from fierce animosities, football can also be used to generate mutual acceptance and respect between political opponents.

Perhaps the weightiest critique against football language is that it is a predominantly “male” language. It is mostly used by male politicians and even the terminology of the game indicates an imbalance regarding sexes in Italy and beyond, let us think about the famous *Cruyff turn*, *autogol alla Niccolai*, *zona Cesarini* or *Fergie time* as examples of football terms that have originated from the context of men’s football.²⁷ Moreover, male politicians hardly ever refer to women’s football in Italy.

Few leading female politicians have allied themselves with football. Outside the Italian context, Angela Merkel represents perhaps the leading figure in this regard, and she is known for following the game closely. Margaret Thatcher’s aversion to football, in contrast, was a well-known fact. In Italy, there are female politicians who are football enthusiasts, but they do not systematically use football terminology in politics. Maria Elena Boschi, former Minister for Constitutional Reforms and Relations with the Parliament in the government of Renzi, gave an interview to *Corriere Fiorentino*, where she spoke about her passion for football and her favourite club AC Milan. Boschi, however, did not seem to look at politics through the lens of football. For her, politics parallels water polo, because—despite the civilized impression to the outside—it includes fierce battles behind the scenes.²⁸ Another exception is Emma Bonino, who has sometimes replied to Berlusconi by employing football terms in her speeches.

This absence of women using football language might be explained by the fact that football has—until recently—been considered a male activity in Italy. Although the origins of women football in Italy are traceable to the 1930s, the

²⁶ “We are a country that, without realizing it, is virtually dying of football.”

²⁷ The *Cruyff turn* is a football feint named after the Dutch footballer Johan Cruyff (1947–2016). *Autogol alla Niccolai* (own goal in the style of Niccolai) originates from the habit of the Cagliari defender Comunardo Niccolai to score peculiar own goals in critical matches. *Zona Cesarini* (the Cesarini zone) is a temporal concept to describe something achieved at the last minute, coined thanks to Renato Cesarini, who scored crucial goals at the very last minutes of matches. *Fergie time* refers to the alleged generous added time conceded to Sir Alex Ferguson’s team, Manchester United, when they were losing a match.

²⁸ “Boschi, la partita del cuore vista con nonno Ivano”, *Corriere Fiorentino*, September 11, 2019.

establishment of the *Associazione Italiana Calcio Femminile* (Italian Association of Women's Football) and the first national championship in 1968 is usually considered the beginning of women's football in Italy (Matteucci 2012). The administrative structure of women's football saw splits and mergers, until it entered the structures of the FIGC in 1986 under the guidelines for amateur athletes (Matteucci 2012). Before the FIFA Women's World Cup was inaugurated in 1991, the most important tournament for women's national teams was *Mundialito*, organized five times in the 1980s. Italy hosted the competition four times and won it three times. During the 1990s, the team twice finished second in the Women's Euro. The fortunes of the Italian women's national team started to decline in early 2000, when it failed to qualify for the World Cup four successive times.

However, thanks to the resources aimed at developing women's football, the female national team's successes at the 2019 World Cup and the efforts of some vocal players in making the game more equal, female football has gained momentum in Italy again. The affiliation of women football clubs with those of men has boosted the development of female football in Italy in recent years. The impetus was given by Fiorentina women, which in 2015 became the first female football team to be affiliated with a men's team, followed by the women's teams of Juventus (2017), and AC Milan (2018). The women's Serie A will be fully professionalized starting from the 2022–2023 season.²⁹ This much-awaited reform signals a development in equality, and it is also expected to boost the quality of the game, as the teams will be able to pay the players higher salaries and thus to attract more talents. The captain of the Italian national team and Juventus, Sara Gama, has been especially active in voicing demands to make the game more equal. At the same time, the emergence of women on Italian football scene, has provoked a "rhetoric of reaction" (Hirschman 1991) in a milieu where the game's authoritative voices, from commentators to pundits and authors of books on football, are chiefly the voices of men.

Women are sometimes considered to have a distinctive playing style, which is characterized by a greater sensitivity for fair play and stylistic finesses. If this is true, women's football may entail new innovations in the game, although these days complete paradigm changes are rather unusual and changes tend to concern the details. However, since football allows many ways to imagine and envision the game, innovations occur from time to time. The novelties of the women's game can be expected to enrich football language and to offer further and unexplored rhetorical resources also for politicians to employ in their political rhetoric.

²⁹ "Futuro del Calcio Femminile: nuove norme e via al professionismo nel 2022. Scudetto alla Juventus, Serie B a 14", The website of FIGC, <https://figc.it/it/federazione/news/futuro-del-calcio-femminile-nuove-norme-e-via-al-professionismo-nel-2022/>. Accessed April 6, 2022.

3 THE CENTRE-LEFT IN AN ITALIAN AND A EUROPEAN CONTEXT

The founding of the *Partito Democratico* (PD) in 2007 and its evolution in the subsequent years forms an important political context of the forthcoming analysis, against which the analysis of Renzi's rhetoric will be made. This chapter provides historical depth to that analysis by presenting some of the most important events and actors that will appear in the following empirical chapters.³⁰

In recent decades, the field of Italian political parties has experienced major changes, and the evolution of the PD must be situated in this trajectory. To gain an understanding of where the PD stands today, in section 3.1 I shall provide a general overview of the Italian party system and its functioning in the post-war context until the late 1980s. Due to the fragmented nature of the Italian party field, the focus of the section will lie on the two principal protagonists of the period, the *Partito Comunista Italiano* (PCI) and the *Democrazia Cristiana* (DC), which are also the two main political cultures behind the PD. In addition to this, I will also touch on the *Partito Socialista Italiano* (PSI), which exerted a strong influence in Italian politics in the 1980s under the leadership of Bettino Craxi.

The focus of section 3.2 is on the tumultuous years of the late 1980s and early 1990s, during which some parties declined, some underwent several mutations, and some new parties emerged. Here, the emphasis lies on the transformation of the PCI first into *Partito democratico della sinistra* (PDS) in 1991 and then into *Democratici di sinistra* (DS) in 1998. I will also treat the centre-lefts' main opponent, the centre-right party *Forza Italia* (FI) led by Silvio Berlusconi. After that, in section 3.3 I will examine more in detail the birth of the PD. Finally, in section 3.4 I shall look at Renzi's political trajectory within the party context from the early 1990s onwards and discuss his profile and political ideas in relation to the themes discussed in earlier sections.

³⁰ A list of the governments of the Republican period can be consulted on the website of the Italian Government, "I Governi nelle Legislature", <https://www.governo.it/it/i-governi-dal-1943-ad-oggi/i-governi-nelle-legislature/192>.

Overall, the discussion in this chapter cannot cover all the important changes that Italian politics has gone through during the past decades. Perhaps the scale of the transformations becomes evident from the fact that none of the parties who participated in drafting the Republican constitution exists anymore. Since the 1990s, the party system has been in constant movement, as some parties have vanished and others have been born. Since the early 1990s, and the decline of the ideologies that had dominated post-war Italy, personalities and leaders have gained an increasingly important role in Italian politics at the cost of party organizations, cultures, and ideologies. This trend was evident when Renzi started his rise in the PD, and even though he did not contribute to creating it, he grasped and exploited it.

Another characteristic of Italian politics, which however cannot be treated here with the appropriate level of detail, is the low legitimation of political institutions and especially political actors, which are often dubbed pejoratively as “the caste” (*la casta*). The study does not discuss whether this is the case, and whether a radical renewal of the political class would be an appropriate cure for the problems of Italian politics.

What is relevant, however, is that the discontent towards politicians and politics in general is a powerful rhetorical topos in Italy, regularly picked up by political actors, who want to underline their difference to the despised political elite. This anti-political sentiment has been used successfully, for example, by the M5S, who gained popularity by fuelling anti-establishment attitudes and who boasted about their “clean” candidates, as opposed to traditional political class and their ways of conducting politics. In addition, Renzi’s initial popularity was based on the challenge he presented to the “old” political class (see section 3.4). With his demands for renewal and change, he exploited this widespread discontent towards politics that helped his ascent in politics, but also fuelled excessive hopes and expectations that turned out to be difficult to fulfil, as this study will demonstrate.

3.1 A general overview of the Italian party system after the Second World War

The *Partito Comunista Italiano* (PCI) formed the largest communist organization in Western Europe throughout most of the post-war period and embodied the left in Italy. It enjoyed remarkable success especially in the 1970s, gaining 34.4% of the vote in the 1976 general elections (Ignazi 2018, 145). In the 1980s, it still had over one million members despite the fear of degeneration that affected all communist parties in the Western world (Hellman 1996, 72). However, despite enjoying a large electoral support and exercising significant influence locally and on other sectors of Italian society, the PCI never became a credible alternative as a governing force.

The fates of the PCI were always deeply intertwined with international developments (Mammarella 2000, 542–546). In the post-war context, the competition between the Western and Soviet blocs shifted from the international to the national level in Italy. The *Democrazia Cristiana* (DC) and the PCI embodied these two poles at the international level and became the main forces of the Italian party system. After the Liberation of Italy in 1945, writing of a new constitution began. The communists participated in the drafting of the new constitution and in restating the democratic regime after the years of fascism, but the PCI never acquired credibility and legitimation as a party of government due to the fear of the spread of communism in Italy. Despite that during Palmiro Togliatti's leadership the PCI managed to gain some independence from Moscow (Hellman 1996, 75), the party still retained close links to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the PCI was regularly excluded from power from 1945 until the early 1990s.³¹

During the so-called First Republic, the government was always built around the Christian Democrats, whose ideological purpose in the political system was to protect Italy from either communists or neo-fascists entering the government. In this task to ensure Italy's belonging to the Western system, the DC was backed both by the Catholic Church and the Allies and the United States in particular (Furlong 1996, 60). Every prime minister between December 1945 and June 1981, and numerous ones after that, came from the ranks of the DC (Furlong 1996, 59), which is indicative of the party's influence in the Italian party system.

The DC was born after the Second World War. Alcide De Gasperi became the leader of the party as well as the first prime minister of the Republic. De Gasperi wanted the DC to become an inter-class party, which would maintain at least relative autonomy from the church and would guarantee the position of Italy in the Western world (Ignazi 2018, 67–68). During the First Republic, the DC developed into a "catch-all party" (Kirchheimer 1966) and throughout this period the party retained its dominant position in the government by forming alliances with minor centrist parties.

The competition between the DC and the PCI strengthened both parties, but since only one of them was legitimate to govern, it made the alternation of power impossible. This made Italy an anomaly compared to other major countries in Western Europe, such as Britain, Germany, or France, where different parties alternated in power (Koff and Koff 2000, 84). The consequences of the lack of rotation in power had detrimental effects for Italian politics. Here it suffices to say that it led to systematic political clientelism and corruption, an exchange of goods or services (clientelism) or money (corruption), which, following the exposure of a skein of scandals dubbed as *Tangentopoli* in the early 1990s, contributed to the collapse of the DC and its disintegration into various small parties.

³¹ This exclusion from the government (*conventio ad excludendum*) concerned also the neo-fascist party *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (MSI).

In 1973, the secretary of the PCI, Enrico Berlinguer, proposed a strategy to the DC that planned to bring the PCI to government. This manoeuvre was to be known as “the historic compromise” (*compromesso storico*). The Chilean coup led by General Augusto Pinochet in 1973 had convinced Berlinguer that only a collaboration between the two major ideological families, the PCI and the DC, would eventually legitimize the PCI as a governing force in Italy and guarantee political stability (Ignazi 2018, 144). Berlinguer was also a pivotal figure in developing a brand of communism that would legitimate the party as a governing force. Along with some other Western European communists especially in France and Spain, Berlinguer started to promote a new doctrine of Eurocommunism in the 1970s and early 1980s (Boggs and Plotke 1980). The stimulus to develop a new doctrine was again tightly connected to global political developments, especially to Soviet’s crushing of the Prague Spring in 1968, which was condemned by the PCI unlike the Hungarian uprising in 1956. At the heart of this new doctrine was to take distance from the Soviet Union, whose approaches had become increasingly outmoded, and develop a form of communism that would be more convincing in Western Europe. The period of historic compromise ended with the kidnapping and murdering of Aldo Moro (DC) by the Red Brigades (*Brigate rosse*) in 1978. Moro served as Italy’s prime minister from 1963 until 1968 and from 1974 until 1976 and was the main interlocutor of Berlinguer in the attempt to bring the communists into the government.

Finally, a few words are needed to discuss the *Partito Socialista Italiano* (PSI), which exerted a strong influence in Italian politics in the 1980s under the leadership of Bettino Craxi, who also served as prime minister from 1983 until 1987. The PSI represented the socialist and social-democratic tradition in Italy, but it never succeeded in establishing itself as in the rest of Europe and its demise due to the anti-corruption investigations in the early 1990s was dramatic. The devastation of the PSI and the fell into disgrace of its leader Craxi was one of the motives for Silvio Berlusconi to enter politics since Craxi had offered political protection for Berlusconi’s business activities (McCarthy 1996, 131).

Uneasy with its subordinate position compared to the more powerful PCI, the PSI cut its ties to communists in 1956 following the suppression of the Hungarian uprising, which the PSI condemned (Ignazi 2018, 49). The rupture with its former ally led to a rapprochement with the DC, which allowed the PSI to enter the government with it. Although the PSI’s electoral support never exceeded 15%, the party exerted strong influence in Italian politics as a swing party, whose participation was vital to form a majority government (Gundle 1996, 85). Under the influential leadership of Craxi, the PSI was meant to transform into a major force of the left following the example of François Mitterrand in France (Ignazi 2018, 53). After becoming prime minister in 1983, Craxi sought to destabilize both the DC’s and the PCI’s position in the party field. However, after it was exposed that the PSI had an integral part in the system of political corruption and bribery, Craxi showed both a lack of leadership and political savvy to handle the crisis, which precipitated the demise of the party that over

the years had become essentially dependent on Craxi's personality and charisma (Gundle 1996).

3.2 The years of upheaval and re-organization of the party system

La democrazia cristiana è stata il più grande tentativo di trasformare il Catenaccio in un sistema di potere. Traeva la sua forza elettorale dal difensivismo anticomunista della maggioranza degli elettori. ... Oggi, il catenacciaro per antonomasia è Berlusconi ... È entrato in politica perché intravede gli spazi lasciati liberi dalla fine giudiziaria dei partiti moderati.³² – Massimo Gramellini

The demise of the Berlin wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union signalled a change in the international status quo and the decline of the legitimacy of communist ideology. The period of upheaval prompted the leader of the PCI, Achille Occhetto, to precipitate the renewal of the party at the end of the 1980s after the sudden death of Berlinguer in 1984. In 1989, Occhetto, within days from the fall of the Berlin wall, announced the failure of communism. However, according to Tobias Abse, the PCI had started gradually to move towards European social democracy already in the 1980s (Abse 2001).

Within a few years, the PCI underwent a "Copernican Revolution": it changed its name to *Partito democratico della sinistra* (PDS), adopted a new symbol, abandoned Marxist references, and embraced the values of individual freedom and liberties (Ignazi 2018, 149-150). For the first time in the history, it abandoned the principle of democratic centralism, which forced the members to toe the line of the leader after internal discussion, and formed procedures to allow internal dissent (Ignazi 2018, 150). However, this transition has been considered a disappointment on many fronts. Abse (2001, 65-66) has argued that the whole process led by Occhetto was marked by lack of vision of what the new party should stand for. Martin J. Bull has instead recognized that Occhetto was navigating and partly improvising in a completely new and constantly changing situation, but his analysis of the PDS was still that of a "political failure" (Bull 1996, 159).

In the early 1990s, the scale of transformations was so tremendous that it has become commonplace to talk about a transition from the First to the Second Republic (Koff and Koff 2000). This parlance is somewhat misleading, because despite significant changes, no change of regime or suppression of the constitution took place (see Valbruzzi 2013, 621). Although the most immediate impact of the downfall of communism concerned the PDS, the DC was also navigating new territory. The transformation of the PDS had removed the main obstacle to the alternation in power and the ideological motive of the DC to work

³² "Christian Democracy has been the most significant attempt to turn *catenaccio* into a system of power. Its electoral power was drawn from the anti-communist defensivism of the majority. These days, the *catenacciaro* par excellence is Berlusconi ... He entered politics because he saw the spaces left free by the judicial end of moderate parties." In Massimo Gramellini "Catenaccio. L'autobiografia di una nazione", *La Stampa*, June 3, 2002.

as a barrier against communism was gone. In addition to this, judicial investigations, named *Mani pulite* (Clean hands), in the early 1990s into political corruption revealed the extensive and systematic practices of corruption and bribery (*Tangentopoli*). This severely damaged the governing parties, especially the DC and the PSI, who had a pivotal role in establishing and consolidating this clientelist system during the so-called First Republic. The exposure of the extent of political corruption and the removal of its ideological purpose to govern led to a rapid decline of the DC, which split into various small parties. *Partito Popolare Italiano* (PPI), born in January 1994, was the main heir of the old DC (for a more detailed presentation of post-DC parties, see Diamanti and Ceccarini 2007). The demise of the PSI was even more dramatic, and its leader Craxi went into exile in Tunisia before being convicted for corruption (Gundle 1996). In addition to these earth-shattering events, the introduction of a new electoral law in 1993, in which three-quarters of the candidates would be elected on a majority basis and one-quarter on the basis of the old proportional system, changed the political context in which the parties had to operate (Katz 2001). The new electoral system, whose main proponent was Mario Segni (DC), was meant to facilitate the forming of stable governing majorities and it encouraged creating alliances before the elections.

To sum up, the period of turmoil that Italy went through in the early 1990s included political, judicial, and economic factors that are comprehensively discussed elsewhere (e.g. Ginsborg 1996) so it is not necessary to repeat them here in detail. Hence, I wish to stress the overall context which, after 40 years of stability, had become essentially contingent. The fall of the Berlin wall and the de-legitimation of the old governing parties created a whole new context and a new opening for all the parties as they had to re-orientate themselves in a situation where, for the first time in the history of the Republic, nobody could anticipate the outcome. To simplify, it could be argued that a whole new playground was created: new rules of the game were established in the form of the new electoral law and new players, either completely new or radically transformed parties, entered the game with competing tactics.

The 1994 parliamentary elections represented a culmination of the political turbulence of the past years in Italian politics. The main parties around which the coalitions were formed prior to election were the PDS and FI led by Berlusconi. Next, I shall provide a brief overview of the strategies and tactics employed by both protagonists in the electoral campaign, starting from the PDS and proceeding then to FI. It will turn out that Berlusconi was the most dexterous in “dealing with the contingent event” (Pocock 1975, 156) and the PDS, despite many efforts to unite the party, was too much in disarray to be able to defeat Berlusconi.

The downfall of communism, which had removed the principal obstacle to the PDS to enter the government, and the de-legitimation of the main governing parties in the corruption scandals, offered the PDS a chance that it was eventually unable to take advantage of (Bull 1996, 160). There were internal disagreements regarding the renewal of the party announced by Occhetto and those from the

old PCI who were not willing to cut ties to communism formed their own party, *Partito della rifondazione comunista* (PRC) (Ignazi 2018, 150). In addition, no new leading figure emerged who would have not come from the old communist tradition, which left the renewal of the party uncompleted (Ignazi 2018, 150).

Bull's (1996) account of the PDS's early years also documents a rhetorical dilemma the party was unable to resolve. Namely, on one hand it had to convince the electorate and other parties that it has become a mainstream party, which no longer posed a threat to democracy. On the other hand, it also had to argue that it was still a different party than those parties that had been tarnished in corruption investigations. Bull concludes that the PDS was unable to satisfactorily answer either criticism. Furthermore, the threat of communism was still a powerful rhetorical weapon, which over the years had become familiar to many voters. In the 1980s, Craxi had adopted a polemical strategy against the PCI and denied that any social democratization had actually taken place (Abse 2001, 64). This strategy was later successfully grasped by Craxi's protégé Berlusconi who claimed in the electoral campaign in 1994 that the PDS had only changed its façade but not its ideology. Despite Occhetto's attempts to label his alliance (*Progressisti*) as a "joyous war machine", the PDS was overly fragmented and ran a lacklustre campaign compared to Berlusconi (Bull 1996, 168-171). Another fatal blow to the centre-left alliance was that the PPI, instead of joining the alliance, decided to run alone.

The victory of Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* in the parliamentary elections in March 1994 was astounding considering that his party had been launched only a couple of months before the elections. Berlusconi was the actor who best exploited the changes brought about in the early 1990s: the weakening of traditional cleavages and points of reference and a new electoral system. As Gianfranco Pasquino put it:

Berlusconi's *virtù* lay not only in his ready grasp on the constraints and incentives built into the new rules of the game, but also in his facility at playing the game in a manner at once gentle and ruthless. Patiently and deftly he mollified his reluctant partners; ruthlessly he exploited anticommunism and the power that his television resources gave him. (Pasquino 1994, 110)

Much has been written about the causes and consequences of Berlusconi's "taking the field". In a nutshell, Berlusconi proved himself to be creative in navigating the new context. He was adept at forming alliances as encouraged by the new electoral system, he was a skilful rhetorician, and he had extensive media resources at his disposal to communicate his message to the electorate. He represented the most novel option on the political scene and spared no effort to harness the anti-communist sentiment in the electorate. In his famous television speech where he announced that he would run for election, Berlusconi attacked his opponents with the following lines:

Le nostre sinistre pretendono di essere cambiate. Dicono di essere diventate liberaldemocratiche. Ma non è vero. I loro uomini sono sempre gli stessi, la loro

mentalità, la loro cultura, i loro più profondi convincimenti, i loro comportamenti sono rimasti gli stessi.³³ (Berlusconi 2013, Discorso della “discesa in campo” 26.1.1994)

At a moment when ideologies seemed discredited, Berlusconi decided to build his political movement on football symbolism. To emphasise the novelty he represented, he adopted football language to persuade the electorate to vote for him. Not only was the name of the party adopted from a football chant, but Berlusconi’s party activists were even named *azzurri* (the nickname of the Italian national team). In May 1994, Berlusconi won a crucial vote of confidence in the Italian senate, the same night AC Milan defeated FC Barcelona 4–0 in the UEFA Champions League final in Athens.

Occhetto’s resignation after the 1994 European elections paved the way for a leadership struggle within the PDS. The competition was fought between Massimo D’Alema, who aimed at the social democratization of the party and Walter Veltroni, who envisioned a party analogous to US Democrats. Veltroni was more willing to broaden the margins of the potential electorate than D’Alema, who wanted to preserve the ties to traditional class identities and the trade union movement (Ignazi 2018, 152). D’Alema’s victory was a move away from the line and policies of Occhetto, who had endorsed Veltroni in the competition for party leadership.

In 1996 parliamentary elections, the centre-left coalition *l’Ulivo* (Olive tree), led by Professor Romano Prodi, managed to secure electoral victory. However, Abse (2001, 69–70) points out that the victory of the centre-left coalition in the elections in Italy cannot be compared to those of French socialists, German social democrats, or Britain’s Labour Party in 1997, since the PDS lacked a similar hegemony as the deserving party within its alliance. In 1998, the PDS went through another transformation into *Democratici di sinistra* (DS), and the overall performance of its time in government was characterized by instability and struggles over the course and identity of the party. In the section that follows, it will be shown that even the birth of the *Partito Democratico* (PD) in 2007 did not manage to resolve these questions and uncertainties.

3.3 The PD

The PD was founded in 2007 as a result of a merger between the *Democratici di sinistra* (mainly former communists) and *La Margherita*³⁴ (mainly former Christian Democrats) and some other minor parties. The birth of the PD was supposed to indicate a new beginning for the centre-left parties in Italy. Born out of the need to consolidate internally fragmented centre-left parties and to bring

³³ “Our left-wing parties claim that they have changed. They say they have become liberal democrats. But it is not true. Their men are always the same, their mindset, their culture, their deepest convictions, their behaviour has remained the same.”

³⁴ PPI, *Rinnovamento Italiano* and *I Democratici* fused in 2002 and formed *La Margherita* (The Daisy Party), a left-leaning centrist political party.

them under one big umbrella, the fusion of two political cultures (post-communism and post-Catholicism) has resulted in troubles.

In addition to the uncertainties due to the merger of two rather distinct party families, which will be discussed below, some of the challenges the PD had to come to terms with were common to many parties in European parliamentary democracies. These challenges include, as Peter Mair (2013) has argued, decline in party memberships, high electoral volatility, and the rise of populist and anti-system parties. In addition to these, one may add the “presidentialization” of political leadership, the increasing importance of leaders over party organizations and ideologies (Poguntke and Webb 2005), which has gained relevance in Italy since the political changes of the 1990s and especially due to Berlusconi’s leadership style (Calise 2005).

Since its birth, the PD has been in constant transformation. It has struggled to find a shared ideology, political platform, and organizational model (Pasquino 2009). At the ideological level, the PD cannot comfortably be situated in the social democratic tradition, as many of its militants and leaders, either those with a communist or Christian Democratic background, have never recognized social democracy as their political ideology. Published in 2007, the manifesto of the PD was a delicate compromise between different ideological currents (Lazar 2007). Socialist, liberal, and Catholic democratic are among the traditions that informed the party, and attention was paid to issues such as feminism, ecology, individual freedom, social justice, and welfare (Lazar 2007). This confusion was also seen in the collocation of the PD in the European Parliament, as especially the Catholic component of the PD had doubts about joining the group of socialists, and thus sat in the ALDE group. In 2014, Renzi resolved the issue by bringing the PD to the Party of European Socialists and Democrats.

The statutes of the newly established PD were a significant break from the organizational tradition of the left, which had always relied on mass party model (Ignazi 2018, 233). The statutes, in fact, defined the PD as the party of members *and* voters, in other words, it put the supporters on the same line with members in terms of rights and responsibilities (Pasquino and Valbruzzi 2017). This organizational model has never been fully legitimized, since there have been regular internal disputes between those who favour a more traditional party model based exclusively on membership and those who advocate a more open party, which would also include the “sympathizers” who did not want to become “full” members of the party (Pasquino and Valbruzzi 2017).

Recalling the US model, the PD also adopted new procedures regarding the election of the candidates for public offices (i.e. the office of prime minister, mayors and presidents of regions). Primaries (*primarie*) were adopted as a selection mechanism for the position of party leader, although it is not a public office. However, the selection of the party leader has been counted as belonging to the same tradition that consists of bringing elements of participatory democracy to the party procedures (Corbetta and Vignati 2013).

However, the idea of primaries has never been fully embraced by the party. Primaries emphasise the idea of personalised leadership, and the reluctance to

accept it can be traced back much further than to Berlusconi's entrance to politics in the early 1990s. The Italian Constitution, which was drafted after the war and came into effect in 1948, reflected the traumatic experience of fascism. It was characterized by a firmly antiauthoritarian spirit that would prevent the centralisation of power in the hands of one person or party (Calise 2013). Also, the political cultures of both the Christian Democrats and communists have prevented explicitly personalised leaderships. Both Christian Democrats and communists have produced important and powerful leaders, but as Pasquino (2013, 264) argues, "the personalisation of politics had to be 'ideologically' hidden, denied and tamed." For the communists, this was because the collective had to be prioritized before individuals, whereas the Christian Democrats' internal struggle with several party factions prevented the emergence of strong leaders (Pasquino 2013, 264).

According to Pasquino (2011), although the use of primaries for selecting candidates for public offices was written in the statutes of the PD, there has been no profound theorizing within the centre-left of the functions and purposes that the primaries should serve, which led to a situation that the primaries were often used not as a democratic instrument, but as an instrument to settle otherwise irresolvable internal disagreements. Organizing primaries brings a whole bunch of issues to be decided, for example, who can be a candidate, who is entitled to cast a vote and what are the exact procedures and regulations of voting. In part, the controversies reflect the political nature of these choices. How the rules are interpreted affects the candidates in the race by penalizing or favouring their chances to win. As discussed later in this study, the meaning of the primaries and the procedures to conduct them have indeed caused several bitter disputes within the PD concerning some essential issues, such as who is entitled to cast a vote.

In addition to the structural transformations, the leaders of the PD have each in turn played a key role in shaping the direction of the party. In a situation in which the party was still not well rooted in terms of ideology and organization, the evolution of the PD has been strongly shaped by the preferences and choices of its current leader, which were often in marked contrast with the lines and policies put forward by the previous leadership.

Walter Veltroni's (born in 1955) election as the first secretary of the PD was greeted with enthusiasm and curiosity. Veltroni had enjoyed a noteworthy reputation as the mayor of Rome and his election represented an opportunity to the new party to establish itself as something more than a mere fusion of two political cultures that had dominated the post-war Italy (Ignazi 2018, 233).

Veltroni presented his ideas of what the new party should look like in his booklet *La nuova stagione. Contro tutti i conservatorismi* (Veltroni 2007). Responding to the demand of novelty, Veltroni (2007, 39) stated that the PD's *raison d'être* was to "make a new Italy" (*fare un'Italia nuova*). His main point of reference for the new party was the US Democrats and a bi-partisan type of competition. He promoted a "light" party, which would be non-ideological, non-identitarian and open to the society and where different ideas and values would co-exist: "*Il Partito democratico*

sarà un partito aperto, plurale, non ideologico e non identitario" (Veltroni 2007, 30). Veltroni, as a former journalist and author of several books, was also considered a skilled orator, a quality that was previously not attributed to the centre-left leaders, but which was considered an essential requirement for the centre-left leader who wanted to challenge Berlusconi.

Veltroni's leadership was complicated from the beginning as it was clear that despite his efforts, significant differences between the two dominant political cultures still prevailed. At the ideological level, there were those who promoted a Blairite Third Way politics as a model for the PD and those who favoured a more traditional social-democratic model (Ignazi 2018, 233). As neither vision succeeded in prevailing over another, the party remained quarrelsome and divided also over ideological issues. The centre-right coalition led by Berlusconi won the general elections in 2008, which led to Veltroni's resignation in February 2009 and to the partial abandonment of the vision that he had promoted for the PD.

Veltroni's successor, Pier Luigi Bersani (born in 1951), returned to more traditional positions in terms of party model and ideology. Coming from the ranks of the old PCI, Bersani's leadership emphasised the importance of the collective. Instead of favouring a personalised leadership, Bersani put the party organisation and the bureaucratic apparatus of the party back at the centre (Bordignon 2014, 4). Bersani did not completely abandon the idea of the light party as envisaged by Veltroni, but he favoured a traditional membership-based party model and expressed his suspicions about a highly personalised "one-man party" (*un uomo solo al comando*) (Bersani 2011). In terms of electoral strategy, Bersani opted for wide-reaching coalitions, which conflicted with the idea of Veltroni that the party should run alone in the elections.

Also, Bersani's communicative and rhetorical style was characterized by matter-of-factness. Unlike Veltroni, who was known for his eloquence, or Renzi, who was an adept communicator, Bersani was suspicious towards rhetoric and emphasised substance over style, as crystallized by his motto: *rem tene, verba sequentur* (grasp the subject, and the words will follow) (see Bersani 2011, Prologo). His rhetoric was marked by rational reasoning, an appeal to *logos*, although he conceded that metaphor is a "democratic rhetorical figure" because it facilitates the understanding of otherwise complex concepts (Bersani 2011, Prologo). What comes to leadership, Bersani, following the theorizing of Max Weber, considered charisma as an inherently fragile and volatile source of leadership (Bersani 2011, Prologo), which put him in marked contrast to his centre-right opponent Berlusconi and later to Renzi.

Bersani's leadership failed in uniting competing factions within the PD and received a final blow in the aftermath of the 2013 parliamentary elections. The most significant challenge to his leadership within the party was represented by Matteo Renzi, who had become the mayor of Florence in 2009 and who started to gain popularity among the public by presenting rather bold and controversial ideas on generational turnover in politics.

3.4 Matteo Renzi and *rottamazione*

Sono un ragazzo fortunato ... perché la sorte, il destino, la vocazione mi hanno portato – almeno per il momento – a svolgere un mestiere bellissimo e affascinante: il politico.³⁵ – Matteo Renzi

Matteo Renzi was appointed Prime Minister of Italy on February 22, 2014 after withdrawing his support from his party colleague Enrico Letta. He became the youngest prime minister in the history of Italy. Before assuming office, Renzi had served as president of the province of Florence (2004–2009) and as mayor of Florence (2009–2014). In 2018, Renzi was elected to the Italian senate.

Renzi's interest in politics was sparked in his formative years through discussions with his family about apartheid in South Africa and Robert Kennedy's struggles for civil rights (Renzi 2011, 61–62). After attending a classical lyceum, Renzi received his law degree from the University of Florence in 1999. He wrote his master's thesis about the former Christian Democrat mayor of Florence, Giorgio La Pira³⁶. As to pay homage for his service, Renzi's first visit as the mayor of Florence was made to La Pira's grave. Another inspiring politician for Renzi was Tony Blair, whom he regards as a point of reference for a "winning and convincing left" (Renzi 2011, 175). Barack Obama's success in the Democratic Party presidential primaries against Hillary Clinton in 2008 gave the impetus and inspiration to Renzi to run in the centre-left primaries for the mayor of Florence (Renzi 2017, 119–120). Renzi seldom refers to political theorists in his rhetoric, with the sole exception of Niccolò Machiavelli, whom he greatly admires. To be called "Machiavellian" is a compliment for Renzi.

According to Renzi's own words, he was regarded as a true *homo politicus* at school (Renzi 2011, 83). In the aftermath of the 1992 elections and the DC's poor result, Renzi, at the age of 17, wrote a piece to a school newspaper in which he declared that it is necessary to "send home" some prominent DC politicians,³⁷ which could be interpreted as a sort of *rottamazione* ante litteram. When graduating from university, the oral examination of his master's thesis led to a quarrel with one of the most eminent professors of the faculty, as Renzi refused to accept the professor's notions regarding the historical period Renzi was referring to in his thesis (Renzi 2011, 96). These kinds of anecdotes, in which Renzi plays the part of the "leader against" (Bordignon 2014, 16), whether it be against the professors at the university, Italian bureaucracy or even his own family members, are a common feature of Renzi's rhetoric.

³⁵ "I am a lucky guy ... because fortune, destiny, and vocation have led me – at least for the moment – to carry out an interesting and fascinating profession: the politician." (Renzi 2008, VII)

³⁶ Giorgio La Pira (1904–1977) was a Christian Democratic politician who served twice as the mayor of Florence, from 1951 until 1957 and from 1961 until 1965. He contributed to the drafting of Italian Constitution after the Second World War and was an advocate for peace, social justice, and human rights.

³⁷ "Quando sul giornale del liceo voleva mandare a casa Forlani", *Corriere della Sera*, February 16, 2014.

During the studies, Renzi worked at a marketing company, which belonged to his family and was an active member of the Catholic Boy Scouts. His general guideline in politics – to leave this world a little better than you found it – is a motto adopted from Robert Baden-Powell, the founder of the Scouting movement (Renzi 2011, 72). Scouting and football refereeing, Renzi's two pastimes in youth, have formed an essential playground for him for acquiring the skills and knowledge that he regards as useful in politics (see Renzi 2008, 8–9; 2011, 70–82, 107–117).

Renzi's rapid rise from a local politician to prime minister forms an interesting case in the context and tradition of the Italian centre-left, in which a gradual progress in the party hierarchy has been the norm. His ascent to national prominence is generally narrated by concentrating on a few important landmarks in his career. The first important milestone was his election to the mayor of Florence in 2009. Secondly, his decision to challenge Pier Luigi Bersani in the coalition leader primaries in 2012. Then, following the PD's disappointing performance in the 2013 parliamentary elections and Bersani's resignation, the landslide victory in the primaries for the party's leadership in the late 2013 and finally the conquering of premiership in 2014. All these events were characterized by a highly polemical tone that Renzi adopted when criticizing the establishment of the PD (Salvati 2016).

Eventually, this daring style gave him a status as an “outsider” in the party. The profile of an outsider was above all a tactical move aimed at presenting Renzi as an alternative to the party leadership, rather than an accurate description of Renzi's political profile (Campus 2016, 116). As a matter of fact, Renzi's political trajectory is rather ordinary. In 1996, he formed a committee to support Romano Prodi as a candidate for premiership in the general elections. In the mid-1990s, he also served as a parliamentary assistant for Lapo Pistelli, with whom he wrote the book *Le giubbe rosse non uccisero Aldo Moro* (1999), which discusses the relationship between young people and politics.

In 1996 Renzi joined the *Partito Popolare Italiano* (PPI), whose provincial secretary he became in 1999, at the age of 24. When talking as a candidate for the office, Renzi confessed, to the surprise of his audience, which was composed of many former DC activists and supporters, that he had never been a Christian Democrat, but only because of a generational factor – the DC had dissolved before he reached the voting age (Renzi 2006, 94).

In 2001, Renzi became a local coordinator of *La Margherita*. It formed an electoral alliance with the DS in the 2001 elections and was established as a party in 2002, consisting of the PPI and other left-leaning centrist parties. After the establishment of the *Margherita* as a party, Renzi became its provincial secretary and inaugurated a polemical strategy regarding the excessive power of the DS in controlling the distribution of offices in local politics and demanded more weight and visibility for his party (Corica 2017, 125). Rather than trying to mediate with the DS, Renzi provoked open conflicts. For example, in 2002 he withdrew the representatives of the *Margherita* from the city's executive board to force the mayor of Florence, Leonardo Domenici (DS), to accommodate his demands.

In 2007, Renzi joined the newly established PD. In the phase of founding the PD, Renzi openly supported Veltroni and endorsed the “light” party model envisaged by him (Renzi 2011, 197), both what comes to ideology and party organization.

In general, Renzi’s political ascent coincided with a delicate phase of restructuring and redefining the party and its organisation. This phase provided an opening for change. Renzi could, at least with some credibility, present himself as an outsider in relation to two important dividing lines (ideology and religion) that have characterized the party, as he had never been a member of either the Communist Party or the Christian Democratic Party although he was clearly politically more closely associated with the latter.

The demand for generational change, which was dubbed *rottamazione* (“scrapping”), has turned out to be the most recognizable political slogan of Renzi both nationally and internationally. In late August 2010, Renzi launched an open challenge to his party and gave an interview to the daily newspaper *La Repubblica*, in which he insisted that the old political class is to be “scrapped”. His political biography provided strength and credibility to his demands, as he became the president of the province at the age of 29 and the mayor of Florence at the age of 34. In the interview he argued as follows:

Se vogliamo sbarazzarci di nonno Silvio ... dobbiamo liberarci di un’intera generazione di dirigenti del mio partito. Non faccio distinzioni tra D’Alema, Veltroni, Bersani... Basta. È il momento della rottamazione. Senza incentivi.³⁸

The concept of “scrapping” was not received well by the party leadership. The harsh tones that Renzi used in the interview caused a conflict with the party, led by Bersani at the time, because those to be replaced were not only the adversaries of the centre-right but also Renzi’s own party colleagues, including some distinguished party figures, such as Massimo D’Alema, Walter Veltroni along with Bersani. Bersani (2011, chapter XII) reproached Renzi for using such a provocative and divisive rhetoric in promoting his ideas. Renzi’s insistence on the generational renewal was indeed so uncompromising that it risked turning down experienced centre-left politicians even when they shared the same political convictions with Renzi.

Renzi (2011, 195) instead tried to defend the provocative tone, explaining that *rottamazione* was meant to be an innovating initiative in the name of change. In other words, it was a rhetorical tool to serve a specific political goal—to challenge the establishment of the party. Politically, the expression worked as planned; it helped to increase his visibility at the national level and forced the topic of generational turnover onto the political agenda of the PD. Renzi himself became the main interpreter of this change and he got the nickname *il rottamatore*

³⁸ “If we want to get rid of grandfather Silvio ... we have to get rid of a whole generation of leaders of my party. I do not make distinctions between D’Alema, Veltroni, Bersani... Enough. It is the time for scrapping. Without incentives.” In “Il Nuovo Ulivo fa sbadigliare è ora di rottamare i nostri dirigenti”, *La Repubblica*, August 29, 2010. Available at http://www.repubblica.it/politica/2010/08/29/news/nuovo_ulivo-6587119/. Accessed April 6, 2022.

("the scrapper"). In 2010, *rottamazione* turned into a movement as Renzi, along with other young reformists in the party and centre-left administrators, set up a political rally at *Leopolda*, a former railway station in Florence, to present their demands and political proposals (Ventura 2018, 187). Since its inception, the *Leopolda* convention has been organised yearly and it has become an important basis for Renzi's leadership (Ventura 2018, 187).

Coining slogans such as *rottamazione* implies that language played a crucial role in Renzi's project of reinvigorating Italian political life. Renzi (2011, 188) was by no means remorseful when he acknowledged that *rottamazione* – despite some negative connotations attached to the concept – became a widely used topos among other politicians, citizens, and journalists alike, and doubted that a more civilized formulation, such as "generational change", would have hardly raised any debate. In *Stil novo*, Renzi encouraged his fellow party members to seek inspiration from Dante, whose use of vernacular instead of Latin made his language accessible to everybody instead of classifying them into citizens of "Serie A and Serie B" (Renzi 2012, 38). This kind of creative use of language, distant from the traditional ways of speaking of the left, was meant to emphasize the change that Renzi wanted to promote within party (see also Ventura 2019, 245).

Although Renzi was deemed a skilled rhetorician, this ability also became a target of criticism, as he was accused of having style but no substance. Moreover, Renzi's enthusiastic interest in communication and rhetoric, and his use of football language were quickly associated with Berlusconi. He was even labelled a "leftist Berlusconi" by his own party members, who have often shown contempt for Berlusconi and his political style (Bordignon 2014). These accusations were fuelled by an evident reciprocal respect between Renzi and Berlusconi. Renzi's background in marketing, combined with his young age, prompted Berlusconi, with both admiration and irony, to ponder why Renzi had decided to ally himself "with the communists" (Renzi 2011, 144). Renzi in turn has on several occasions praised Berlusconi for his achievements in football and television. He has also given recognition to Berlusconi's rhetorical capacities in setting the agenda of Italian politics though his political objectives, especially regarding institutional reforms, have remained unfulfilled.

The comparison between Berlusconi and Renzi is somewhat apt when considering their rhetorical abilities. They are both competent performers in the media and skilled in coining slogans and catchphrases that grant them visibility. In 1994, the year that Berlusconi won his first general elections, Renzi became a champion on the television game show *La Ruota della Fortuna* (Wheel of Fortune), which was broadcast on Berlusconi's television channels and the main idea of which consisted of solving word puzzles. Renzi has later explained his participation in the show by his love for wordplay, which indicates a keen eye for rhetoric.

Some scholars have connected Renzi to the populist and anti-political tradition, which has been present in Italy since the birth of the Republic (Tarchi 2018). Although Renzi has exploited some of populist and anti-political rhetorical

conventions, especially at the beginning of his career (see Bordignon 2014), it has passed largely unnoticed that he has also repeatedly praised politics as a noble profession and rejected popular accusations that politicians are intrinsically self-serving and sneaky (see Renzi 2011, 55, 63–64). This marks a clear difference to Berlusconi, who identified himself first and foremost as a successful businessman who lent his entrepreneurial skills to “save” Italy from professional politicians, whom he disparagingly described as “professionals of chatter.” There is also a net difference to the populist, anti-political and anti-parliamentary rhetoric represented by M5S, who remain essentially suspicious of professional politicians and parliamentary procedures. Compared to these examples that represent a deep-rooted negative assessment of politics and politicians in Italy, Renzi’s claims that politics is a dignified profession and politicians are persons worthy of esteem and respect can be considered rather bold rhetorical moves that swim against the tide of anti-political opinion.

4 RENZI'S FOOTBALL PROFILES

The previous chapter dealt with the developments of the centre-left in an Italian and a European context since the end of the Second World War and traced its evolution up to the foundation of the PD in 2007. The chapter also discussed Renzi's political trajectory within this context. Before turning to explore how Renzi deployed the language of football in political struggles, this chapter will pause to discuss Renzi as a football-using politician.

The chapter has an introductory function to Renzi's football profile; it discusses Renzi's relationship to football and examines where his language draws from. Based on my reading of Renzi, I have identified three distinctive perspectives that inform his football language. These are related to Renzi's football fandom, to his experience as a football referee at amateur levels, and to the tactical-technical football vocabulary that he employs in his rhetoric. I shall discuss these perspectives separately for analytical purposes, yet in many quoted passages these categories overlap.

Politicians tend to make their football loyalties well-known in Italy, and Renzi is no exception. He is a supporter, or *tifoso* as Italians would put it, of his hometown club Fiorentina. Being *tifoso* is a simple way to find common ground with people, in Kenneth Burke's (1969) terms to "identify" with an audience, whatever team the politician supports. This devotion can be used politically and rhetorically. The most striking example of this kind of political use of football fandom is Berlusconi, who used AC Milan to boost his political career and demanded that Italy follow the winning mentality his team exemplified. Although most politicians are not as directly involved in football business as Berlusconi was for most of his political career, politicians are eager to make their football loyalties known. However, even when they are confessed supporters, politicians are hardly ever part of the *ultrà*, that is, football fan groups characterized by extreme forms of support and even violence (see Marchesini and Pivato 2022, 151). The next section will discuss Renzi's football fandom and to what extent his profile is similar or differs from other politicians who make political use of their passion for football.

Section 4.2 takes up Renzi's experience as a referee at amateur levels in Tuscany, an experience that he has on several occasions emphasised as politically relevant and educational. As far as I am aware, there are no other prominent Italian politicians who have served as referees (even if at the dilettante level), let alone tried to present it as something politically relevant. Renzi tends to highlight that his thinking concerning political authority, leadership, and decision-making are informed by his experience as a referee. Apart from these considerations, referees are first and foremost interpreters of the rules of the game and guardians of fair play. During his political career, Renzi has often successfully appealed to the "rules of the game" and bestowed on himself the role of legitimate interpreter of the procedures of different political contests. Although he does not always explicitly refer to his experience as a referee on these occasions, the sensitivity towards the possibilities and limitations of the "rules of the game" might owe to this background.

Finally, Renzi's rhetoric abounds with football terminology that is related to tactical aspects of the game, and they are applied to discuss policies, political moves as well as political strategies and tactics. To apply these football concepts and terms in political debates requires rather detailed understanding of the game's different aspects, and rhetorical ability to make these translations credible for different audiences. The section 4.3 will discuss the origin and context of some of the most salient terms in Renzi's rhetoric in relation to the tactical development of Italian football.

4.1 *Tifoso viola*

The football allegiance of any politician who is interested in football is well-known in Italy. For example, Giulio Andreotti never hesitated to declare his loyalty to AS Roma: "*Per me la squadra di calcio era ed è la Roma*"³⁹ (Andreotti 1982, 29). The first secretary of the PD, Walter Veltroni, is a staunch supporter of Juventus: "*Per la Juve molto ho gioito, ma molto ho sofferto*"⁴⁰ (Veltroni 1982, 17). In other words, Italian politicians are often *tifosi*, enthusiastic supporters of their football teams. The word *tifoso* derives from the word *tifo*, an untranslatable term which established itself in Italian sports vocabulary during the 1920s and is today immediately associated with being a football enthusiast (Marchesini and Pivato 2022, 32–33). Over the years, the term has become common in politics, where it is used to refer to the support given to candidates or parties (see sections 6.4 and 7.2).

Despite the persistence of historical divisions into right- and left-leaning clubs in Italy, at least in the popular imagination of the people, these days sharp divisions have lost much of their relevance as the identities of the clubs have transformed over time. For example, before Berlusconi bought the club in 1986,

³⁹ "For me, *the* football club was and still is Roma." (Italics original)

⁴⁰ "I have both rejoiced and suffered a lot with Juve."

Milan was considered a working-class club while its rival Inter had a bourgeois identity. Also, politicians' choices to support certain clubs are contingent and usually not conditioned by political loyalties.⁴¹ From a historical perspective, many authoritative figures in the Communist Party, such as Palmiro Togliatti, and the first woman president of the Italian Chamber of Deputies, Leonilde "Nilde" Iotti, are known to be supporters of Juventus, despite the club's reputation as the epitome of Italian capitalism (Longhi 2018, 58–59). The politician, trade unionist and *juventino* Luciano Lama did not see anything curious in this, as he believed that football and politics should be kept apart:

Politica e sport non vengono a confondersi, non ritengo sia giusto ... Posso dividere con il capo della Fiat una sensazione di felicità e poi logicamente, su altri terreni, tener in vita tutto intero lo scontro esistente. Non mi imbarazzo di certo sul piano politico per via di comunanze sportive. La lotta di classe regge ugualmente.⁴² (Lama 1982, 74)

Renzi is no exception among football-following politicians: he is *tifoso viola*, a passionate supporter of Fiorentina.⁴³ In an interview⁴⁴ for *La Gazzetta dello Sport*, Renzi has revealed that the all-time greatest Fiorentina for him was the one from the season 1981–82. The undisputed team leader and, quoting Renzi, "the light in the middle of the pitch", was Giancarlo Antognoni, who is commonly known as one of the most talented and skilful attacking midfielders of his generation.⁴⁵ Renzi often attends the matches of Fiorentina at their home stadium and has revealed that one of his greatest aspirations is to have a chance to play – if only for a few minutes – for Fiorentina (Renzi 2008, 228). On his social media accounts, Renzi devotes time for updates and short commentaries regarding the issues of the footballing world, which is by no means exceptional among Italian politicians.

In Italy, but also internationally, each football club can be understood as constituting a distinct culture, including a certain repertoire of symbolic and rhetorical conventions that live in the daily conversations of the people. This consists of a canon of events that any fan must be familiar with, including historical triumphs and defeats and the players involved in these matches, goals, commentaries, and notorious incidents. When Renzi refers to Gabriel Batistuta

⁴¹ For example, the support for AC Milan transcends partisan lines in the Italian parliament and in 2013 the club's supporter group in the parliament was led by Enrico Letta (PD). See "Come tifa la politica", *La Gazzetta dello Sport*, September 28, 2013.

⁴² "Politics and sport should not be mixed; I don't think it's right ... I can share a sense of joy with the boss of Fiat, and logically, keep the struggle alive on other fields. Sharing the passion for the same football club is not something to be ashamed of politically. The class struggle persists regardless."

⁴³ Fiorentina was founded in 1926 by a merger of two Florentine teams: CS Firenze and PG Libertas. Fiorentina has won two Italian Championships (*Scudetti*), the first one in the 1955–1956 season and the second in 1968–1969. Fiorentina is also called *La Viola* (The Purple team) because of the distinctive color of their playing kit.

⁴⁴ Interview with Matteo Renzi by Luca Calamai, originally published in *La Gazzetta dello Sport*, December 1, 2018. Available at <https://www.matteorenzi.it/gazzetta-sport-intervista-fiorentina-viola-campionato-pjaca-chiesa/#>. Accessed April 6, 2022.

⁴⁵ Antognoni is often referred to as a footballer who was "looking at the stars" while he was playing due to his elegant habit to keep his head up when having the ball in possession. The goalkeeper of Fiorentina from 1981–82, Giovanni Galli, ran for the mayor of Florence as a centre-right candidate against Renzi in 2009.

and claims that “*Le sue mitragliate erano un’esplosione di gioia*”,⁴⁶ every football connoisseur can visualize the memorable gun-shooting goal exultations of the Argentinian striker. Provocations against Fiorentina’s rivals, especially Juventus, are also common for Renzi. “*La Juve che perde al 93’ su un rigore discutibile non ha prezzo*”⁴⁷ (Renzi 2008, 303) is an example of mockery that every football connoisseur easily recognizes, as Juventus is often accused of benefitting from favouritism.

Being a renowned supporter of any team provides varying opportunities for politicking for the simple reason that the teams vary in character. The best example of the attempt to benefit politically from a winning team is Berlusconi who, combining the roles of prime minister and president of AC Milan, created a narrative where the successes of the team reflected the glorious future where Berlusconi would lead Italy. As Triani put it:

Forza Italia ... è un incitamento e una promessa. Ben più che un programma politico. Un miracolo. Come ad ogni inizio di campionato promettono invariabilmente ai tifosi presidenti di club e allenatori.⁴⁸ (Triani 1994, 86)

In the 1960s, Franco Evangelisti, the right hand of Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti, used a football-inspired slogan “*Romanisti, votate Evangelisti*” (Fans of AS Roma, vote for Evangelisti), while Vittore Catella from *Partito Liberale Italiano*, who also served as the president of Juventus from 1962 until 1971, formulated his own catchphrase as follows: “*Per una Juve più bella, vota Catella*” (For a more beautiful Juve, vote for Catella) (Longhi 2018, 51, 83). However, the benefits to be associated with a certain team are always relative. Depending on the perspective, *lo stile Juve* (the Juve style) might be used to commend certain ideals of professionalism and elegance on the pitch, or quite on the contrary, to criticize the allegedly corrupt nature of Italian football.

What makes Renzi’s style particularly interesting compared to other politicians is that he is a vocal supporter of a provincial club. Being a fan of Fiorentina provides Renzi with an original repertoire from where to draw in the Italian political context. Since the 1990s, Florentine economist Lamberto Dini has been the only prime minister with an out-spoken support for Fiorentina before Renzi, although he is not known for wielding football terms in his speeches. Therefore, Renzi could not resort to some tailor-made scripts or imitate someone before him.

The devotion and love to one’s own city is called *campanilismo* in Italian and the idea of it can be more easily grasped in Florence than in big cities like in Milan or Rome, where the support is often split between two clubs that represent the same city.⁴⁹ The support for Fiorentina is almost exclusively anchored in the city

⁴⁶ “Bati, bici, maratone. Il sindaco ‘viola’ va sempre di corsa”, *La Gazzetta dello Sport*, February 18, 2014.

⁴⁷ “It is priceless to see Juve losing because of a questionable penalty kick awarded against them in the 93rd minute.”

⁴⁸ “Forza Italia ... is an incitement and a promise. Much more than a political programme. A miracle. Like the club presidents and managers always promise to the supporters before the start of the season.”

⁴⁹ AC Milan and Inter in Milan, and AS Roma and Lazio in Rome.

of Florence and the fans of Fiorentina maintain a strong sense of belonging to the city and to its cultural identity, in evident contrast to its more globalist and successful adversaries, such as Juventus, Milan or Inter. Obviously, no club can nowadays claim to maintain exclusively provincial loyalties, since most of the Serie A teams have supporter clubs all around the world. Yet, the biggest and most successful clubs in Italy have undoubtedly a broader fan base compared to their provincial rivals. The support between different clubs is also reflected in the Italian parliament, where Juventus has the largest fan group, consisting of parliamentarians over party barriers. When elected to the Italian Senate in 2018, Renzi was one of the driving forces behind the project that set up the group for supporters of Fiorentina in the parliament.⁵⁰

Being a fan of a less successful club poses a (rhetorical) challenge for a politician, who cannot rely on the victories or promises of victory alone. Any plea to make Italy like Fiorentina would easily be ridiculed by Renzi's adversaries as Fiorentina's last Serie A championship dates to 1969 and their last major trophy dates to 2001, when they won Coppa Italia. Fiorentina has also faced some major crises, such as a bankruptcy at the beginning of the 2000s and a subsequent relegation to Serie C2. Italian journalist, writer and a passionate fan of Fiorentina, Stefano Cecchi, has amusingly noted that the lesson that one can learn by being a fan of Fiorentina is that life brings more defeats than triumphs (Cecchi 2013, 20). In other words, Fiorentina is not "a mighty metaphor of success" (Porro and Russo 2000, 354) like Berlusconi's AC Milan in the 1990s, and its support is characterized by a strong sense of belonging to the city rather than the number of trophies won.

Although Renzi cannot rely on Fiorentina's sporting successes alone, this has not prevented him from making repeated references to the team. Because Fiorentina is most often seen as a challenger of the big clubs of Northern Italy, it has worked as a fitting metaphor for Renzi, who built his narrative upon the status of challenger within the party. Renzi even turns Fiorentina's defeats into a resource for his politics and rhetoric (see section 6.1), which distinguishes him from Berlusconi, who always wanted to be associated only with AC Milan's victories and for whom the team's poor performances were explained by the lack of his personal involvement in the club's affairs. Obviously, being a mere fan of Fiorentina provides Renzi with the necessary detachment from the club to use this kind of rhetorical strategy, which would not have been possible for Berlusconi as the president of AC Milan. For Berlusconi, the defeats of *rossoneri* were at the same time defeats both on the football field and politically, and vice versa football successes (or timely transfers of top-class footballers to Milan) were expected to boost Berlusconi politically.

⁵⁰ "Strapotere Juve nel nuovo parlamento. E Galliani fonda un Milan club col 'nemico' Monti", *Corriere della Sera*, April 18, 2018. Available at: https://www.corriere.it/politica/18_aprile_18/strapotere-juve-nuovo-parlamento-galliani-fonda-milan-club-col-nemico-monti-elezioni-2018-milan-juve-juventus-fiorentina-roma-inter-real-salvini-lega-m5s-c120d788-42cd-11e8-99f8-d9a2facd26f3.shtml. Accessed April 6, 2022.

Passionate support for any club may also be an important way of expressing values such as loyalty, commitment, and integrity. To remain faithful to *la squadra del cuore*, to one's favourite team, is a way to express that a politician possesses a solid and reliable character.⁵¹ Football fan clubs still require unwavering partisanship in a way that is no longer the case with party politics. These days, voters can swiftly move from one party to another, but they hardly change the team they root for.

Looking at the other side of the coin, the fact that football allegiances require partisan involvement means that they easily become matters of contestation. Wavering support for a football club might be interpreted more generally as a sign of a politician's inauthenticity. Former British Prime Minister David Cameron was heavily mocked when he once seemed to "forget" that he is an Aston Villa fan and urged his audience to cheer for West Ham.⁵² In Italy, Berlusconi has been attacked politically by allegations that he was a boyhood Inter fan, which he has always denied. During the electoral campaign for the mayorship of Florence, Renzi faced a similar attempt to denigrate his political credibility by allegations that he is a fan of Juventus:

In una [lettera], addirittura, si scriveva "E poi Renzi è anche gobbo", che a Firenze significa tifoso juventino. Tifoso gigliato, con l'infanzia irrimediabilmente compromessa dalle lacrime di uno scudetto strappato dalla Juventus in modo discutibile all'ultima giornata (1981-1982), rinunciai alla querela di diffamazione verso ignoti solo per rispetto verso l'elettorato bianconero in città.⁵³ (Renzi 2011, 166)

Although anonymous allegations like this are certainly not regarded as the most serious political attacks that one could face during an electoral campaign, the presence of these kinds of amusing anecdotes must be understood as a part of Renzi's politics. First, references to well-known football incidents like this certainly strike a chord with Renzi's core constituency in Florence, and thus they had a particular significance in local politics. Secondly, it proves that Renzi

⁵¹ This is interestingly illustrated in an interview with Giulio Andreotti (DC) in 1983, when he was asked whether he was worried that his open support for AS Roma would estrange potential voters who support other teams. Andreotti answered that football faith is not something to be traded upon. He was acclaimed by Luca Pavolini, Editor-in-Chief of *l'Unità* and a member of the PCI, who saw Andreotti's rigorous position as a sign of credibility and trustworthiness (see Pavolini 1982).

⁵² "Is it West Ham? Or is it Villa? Cameron mocked on Twitter as he forgets which team he backs", *The Guardian*, April 25, 2015. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/apr/25/david-cameron-mocked-for-aston-villa-gaffe>. Accessed April 6, 2022.

⁵³ "One [letter] bluntly stated: 'Renzi is indeed a gobbo', which in Florence translates into a supporter of Juventus. As a fan of Fiorentina, whose childhood was irreparably affected by the tears of a championship questionably ripped off by Juventus in the last round (1981-1982), I gave up the complaint of defamation towards the anonymous [sender] only out of respect for the electorate loyal to the *bianconero* team in the city." (Italics mine) To add some context to this comment, the relationship between Fiorentina and Juventus (the nickname *bianconeri* is a reference to the white and black colours of their playing kit) is characterized by an intense rivalry that persists still today. The most notorious incident that deepened the rivalry, and to which Renzi refers here, dates to the 1981-82 season, when Juventus, under controversial circumstances in the last round, won the championship with a margin of only one point to Fiorentina.

knows the football world so well that he can refer to its incidents and protagonists appropriately, which may enhance his political appeal among the public and especially among those who follow the game, whatever team they support.

4.2 Referee

A me piacerebbe essere Antognoni: il ragazzo che giocava guardando le stelle. Ma visti i piedi che mi ritrovo ho fatto l'arbitro.⁵⁴

Se non sai giocare a calcio fai l'arbitro, se non sai fare l'arbitro fai politica.⁵⁵

Arbitrare è una metafora della vita, fa crescere umanamente e nel carattere: prendere una decisione in un secondo contro il parere di tutti mi aiuta nelle riunioni più ostiche.⁵⁶

– Matteo Renzi

Renzi often notes self-mockingly that he became a football referee because of his lacking skills as a player and goes on to suggest that his political career was a corollary of an unfulfilled career as a referee. These statements are in line with Gianni Brera's rather unfavourable characterization of football referees: *"Generalmente è uno che ha giocato senza riuscire, oppure si è fatto abbastanza male ed è tanto invecchiato da poter corricchiare soltanto dietro i giocatori, non più dietro al ball"* (Brera 1975, 46). For Brera, referees are "failed" or "badly injured" players, and usually so old that they can no longer run after the ball, but only after the others. Renzi entered the referee course in Florence at the age of 16 and was involved with the game for four years (1991–1995)⁵⁷ (see also Renzi 2021, 178–179). Some of Renzi's contemporaries from Florence's referee section became top-class referees, such as Gianluca Rocchi, who officiated both Serie A and international games before retiring in 2020.

At first glance, Renzi's refereeing at amateur levels might not seem a matter of great political significance. Although Berlusconi in 1994 successfully used his reputation as a businessman and president of a football club to legitimate his entrance into politics (Porro and Russo 2000), refereeing is obviously a much less

⁵⁴ "I would like to be like [Giancarlo] Antognoni: the boy who looked at the stars while he was playing. But considering my scarce skills as a footballer, I became a referee." In "Renzi: 'Valente è come Bruscolotti'. Lei: 'Mi piace, perché non cadeva mai'", *Corriere del Mezzogiorno*, June 3, 2016.

⁵⁵ "If you don't know how to play football, you become a referee and if you don't know how to referee, you end up in politics." In "Il calcio viva!", *Corriere dello Sport*, April 27, 2020.

⁵⁶ "Refereeing is a metaphor for life, it makes you grow as a human and in character: being able to take an instant decision against the opinion of everybody else helps me in the toughest meetings." In "Renzi: 'Io Viola gioco coi bianconeri'", *La Gazzetta dello Sport*, May 27, 2013.

⁵⁷ "Il calcio viva!", *Corriere dello Sport*, April 27, 2020.

glamorous duty than chairing a successful football team. However, this seemingly trivial detail regarding Renzi's past as a referee becomes politically relevant because Renzi has frequently underlined that his experience as a referee was fundamental for him to become a competent politician. As claimed by Renzi himself, refereeing has taught him first and foremost to take responsibility for his own actions, and the preparedness to take decisions that are unpopular or contrast the opinions of others (see Renzi 2008, 8-9; 2011, 107-117). Both abilities can be interpreted as important political qualities too. As Weber already pointed out, politicians must try to combine the ethic of conviction with the ethic of responsibility (Weber 2007), which sometimes can lead them to fight for causes that have little chance to succeed or go against the popular opinion.

Renzi's references to his past as a referee, especially at the beginning of his career, can also be understood against the background that in many contests that are under scrutiny in this work, Renzi had to compete against his more senior colleagues, many of whom had previous parliamentary records to present to the voters. Renzi instead had no such experience as he had only served as the president of the province, a position where he arrived through a process of political co-optation (see Renzi 2011, 23). Because Renzi could not rely on the authority that derives from holding a prestigious public office, he had to prove that he had gained at least some previous experience that make him competent to pursue higher offices. As political scientist Murray Edelman (1988) has argued, the leadership qualities are "constructed", which implies that the background of a politician might be used to legitimate and assess political competence, although it is hard to evaluate in advance what kind of experience might be regarded as politically relevant.

Renzi's experience as a referee and its possible implications for his political action intrigued Italian media after he was appointed prime minister in February 2014. According to the records of Italian referee association AIA (*Associazione Italiana Arbitri*), Renzi had impressive mental stamina and the ability to win the respect of the players, although athletically he was lacking the change of pace.⁵⁸ Renzi was considered a gifted referee and his performance on the pitch was observed by an official of AIA, according to whom Renzi's overall performance was good; he was reported as having correctly awarded two obvious penalty kicks and despite missing two interventions of playing in a dangerous manner, he was considered ready to be promoted. Such a detailed analysis of Renzi's refereeing performances seems rather curious, but even *Corriere della Sera* ran a story about it, which suggests that Renzi's previous performances as a referee were considered more generally as an omen for his political style. According to *La Gazzetta dello Sport*, Renzi knew the laws of the game by heart and applied them with such a rigour that he once sent off four players simply because they protested his decision⁵⁹. Renzi's performances as referee were again interpreted as potential signs of political qualities:

⁵⁸ "Quando Matteo faceva l'arbitro: era lento ma inflessibile", *Corriere della Sera*, June 1, 2014.

⁵⁹ "Bati, bici, maratone. Il sindaco 'viola' va sempre di corsa", *La Gazzetta dello Sport*, February 18, 2014.

Considerato attuale ruolo di Renzi, e per puro amor di patria, auguriamoci che i giudizi positivi ricevuti da arbitro si possano trasferire in politica. Se l'Italia ha un premier 'pratico', 'intelligente', 'tecnicamente preparato' e 'affidabile', probabilmente il nostro Paese ha completato la più importante delle riforme: quella dell'autorevolezza.⁶⁰

It is perhaps no coincidence that the introductory chapter of John Foot's (2007) seminal work on the history of Italian football, *Calcio*, is followed by a chapter on referees. The referee is a contested figure in many football cultures, as Galeano (2013, 10) writes, "[h]e gets only catcalls, never applause", but this sentiment of aversion to referees is perhaps even more felt in Italy, where suspicions regarding their work are incessant. Brera, for example, has offered curious psychological explanations for why someone would like to become a referee in Italy, suggesting that they are either frustrated persons or bullies, who like to exercise power (Brera 1975, 46). Even though Italy has produced world-class referees, such as Pierluigi Collina, they have rarely been held in high esteem. Since the early years, Italian football has been coloured by unending arguments about refereeing performances as well as the legitimacy and impartiality of referees (Foot 2007, chapter 2). Many television programmes have been dedicated to post-match analyses, where the performances of referees are scrutinized by using slow-motion playbacks, *moviola* in Italian, to determine whether the decisions have been right or wrong. In the words of historian Paul Ginsborg, the *moviola* has become "the ultimate but in the last analysis deeply useless authority" (Ginsborg 2001, 118).

Furthermore, Ginsborg (2001, 113) sees that the distrust towards referees reflects wider scepticism towards the state and authorities in Italy. Referees can be counted as public figures of authority, whose performances are carefully followed and assessed although their significance cannot, of course, be straightforwardly compared with democratic institutions. However, the criticisms and derision that the referees receive in Italy have something in common with the mistrust towards professional politicians in representative democracies (cf. Riddell 2011). Despite all the criticisms these figures receive, it is difficult or even impossible to imagine politics or football without them. It indeed seems that his experience as a referee has taught Renzi to handle polemics, controversies, and criticisms that are inevitably part of politics and the profession of politicians: "[Q]uando mi insultano i Cinque Stelle non hanno idea di cosa significa andare su un campo di periferia in seconda categoria a fare l'arbitro".⁶¹

Finally, an aspect that has gone unnoticed – probably even from Renzi himself – is that being a referee indicates that one has a keen eye for rhetoric.

⁶⁰ "Considering Renzi's present role, and for a simple sense of patriotism, let's hope that the positive feedback on his performances as a referee could translate into political success. If Italy does have a prime minister who is 'pragmatic,' 'intelligent,' 'technically prepared' and 'reliable,' maybe our country has completed the most important of all reforms: that concerning authoritativeness." In Andrea Schianchi "Com'era l'arbitro Renzi? 'Lento, ma con carattere. Uno che si fa rispettare'", *La Gazzetta dello Sport*, June 1, 2014.

⁶¹ "When the representatives of the M5S insult me, they have no clue what it takes to go to referee an amateur level match in some remote place." In "Il talento di Mr Renzi", *Il Foglio Quotidiano*, September 6, 2021.

Refereeing is not only about exercising power or expressing authoritativeness on the field, aspects that Renzi himself and the media tend to highlight, but it is most importantly about *interpreting* the laws of the game. As Ginsborg (2001, 113) suggests regarding football: “What constitutes a foul, what justifies a penalty, whether or not a player is offside, is often difficult to discern. In other words, the rules exist, but they are not easy to interpret.” This interpretation requires above all rhetorical competence, which includes an understanding of the nuances of the game’s constitutive rules as well as careful judgement regarding the form and timing of different sanctions. A rhetorical style of thinking, that is, an ability to assess the situation from different perspectives, is an essential competence for referees, because the situations on the pitch are seldom so unequivocal that they would not leave room for diverging interpretations and arguments. This holds true even after the introduction of video assistant referees (VAR).

Refereeing gives the preparedness not only to play *by* the rules but also play *with* the rules, that is, to discern occasions when adhering to the rules is necessary and when stretching them becomes an option. As the following chapters will discuss, Renzi is very quick to recognize situations in which the party procedure leaves room for contesting moves against the interpretations adopted by the party leadership. Appeals to the “rules of the game” are intrinsic to Renzi’s political rhetoric. The *raison d’être* of his government was to re-write “the rules of the game”, that is, to carry out some major constitutional reforms that would increase the effectiveness and stability of Italian institutions. Renzi’s rapid rise within the party was also characterized by contests, which were defined by struggles regarding the procedures of vote. When Renzi takes a stand on matters that concern the rules of political contests, he does not justify his interpretations by referring to his past as a referee. Yet, he has been able to legitimate his political manoeuvres by appealing to the rules of the game and by re-interpreting them in political contests to promote his own cause. This suggests that the ability to see when the rules allow room for political moves is something that he has learnt from refereeing, although he never elaborates this point of view, perhaps because he has not considered it or because he thinks it is obvious.

4.3 Connoisseur

Renzi could be considered a true football connoisseur as evidenced by his versatile football language, which abounds with terms and concepts that refer to football rules, tactics, players and player types, managers as well as clubs and other footballing events such as World Cup tournaments and matches (see the appendix), which he effortlessly deploys in his political rhetoric. Renzi often cites rather recent football examples and references to pre-1982 history are almost entirely absent. Renzi’s football language is distinguished by the extent of terms that refer to tactical innovations in football, such as *catenaccio* or *calcio totale*. As the analysis will show, these innovations are used rhetorically in political debates to invent new arguments and alternative perspectives on the issues at hand. This

section discusses some of these concepts as developed in the football context. The aim is to shed light on some of the most important concepts that will inform Renzi's football language, not to offer an exhaustive presentation of the tactical evolution of Italian football,⁶² as it has been discussed thoroughly elsewhere. I will also examine the discussions about football Renzi was exposed to, which echoes can be found in Renzi's football language. A particular interest will be paid on the term *catenaccio*, which frequently appears in Renzi's speeches and writings. It performs a descriptive and evaluative function (see Skinner 1996, 145) in his rhetoric, as it is usually employed to criticize or condemn certain actions.

The temporal focus of the section lies in the 1980s and early 1990s, a period which saw an increasing interest in football in Italy and an introduction of some important rule changes. It was also a period which saw the challenging of the defence-oriented *catenaccio*, which had become the paradigm of Italian football, by more aesthetic and attractive tactics. As it will be discussed below, these changes caused a lively debate that sometimes escaped the football context. Although I do not want to exaggerate the extent of Renzi's acquaintance with the nuances of these discussions, he nevertheless witnessed this period, and as a football enthusiast, probably followed these debates attentively.

One way to understand the history of football is to look at the changes of dominant tactics (Wilson 2018). Sometimes, these tactics are coupled with political ideas. Journalist David Winner (2010) has drawn parallels between the Dutch total football and the political and cultural changes of the 1960s. César Luis Menotti, the coach of Argentina's national team from 1974 until 1982, coined the idea of joyous and imaginative "left-wing football" as opposed to cynical and result-oriented "right-wing football." At times Renzi's political analysis echoes Menotti's beliefs in the sense that he often argues that the PD should "play attackingly" and "discard *catenaccio*". However, despite the attempts to find political counterparts for football tactics, stylistic fashions on football pitches have tended to occur contingently and independently from changes in regimes or governments (see De Waele et al. 2018).

On pitch, Italy is particularly renowned for its tactical preparedness, flexibility, and cunning. The ability to outwit mightier adversaries with resourcefulness and astuteness is considered one of the virtues of Italian football, as duly recognized by Italian goalkeeper Gianluigi "Gigi" Buffon:

Fra le doti del popolo italiano c'è l'ingegno, che tiriamo fuori soprattutto quando siamo in difficoltà o affrontiamo un avversario temibile. Furbizia e ingegno vanno a braccetto...⁶³

⁶² The most extensive overview to football's tactical evolution is written by Wilson (2018). A perspective on Italian developments can be found, for example, in Ghirelli (1972) and Sconcerti (2014).

⁶³ "Among the virtues of the Italian people is creativity, which we bring out especially when we are in difficulty or face a formidable opponent. Cunning and intelligence go together..." In "Il c.t. 'Lo spread tra noi e loro... si vede alla fine'", *La Gazzetta dello Sport*, November 15, 2013.

Internationally, Italian football is generally regarded as synonymous with *catenaccio*. It has been remarkably difficult to pinpoint the exact time when this term appeared as a concept referring to football, but according to John Foot (2007, 140) it was commonly used in 1950s. Although the term refers to a distinctive football tactic, the defining trait of which is a *libero*, a player free from man-marking duties behind the defensive line, it has separated from the strictly tactical context and become a label for defence-minded, dull, and negative football. Despite these negative connotations, the concept has more nuances in Italy. Gianni Brera, who was a great advocate and theorist of *catenaccio*, always spoke in favour of the defensive style and saw it as a legitimate tactic for underdog teams. According to his peculiar idea, Italians had no other option than to resort to the “cult of defensivism” that this playing style represented, because they were physically weak and could succeed only by overcoming their opponents with intelligence and cunning (Brera 1975; 2018). Sconcerti (2014), who wanted to get rid of the overtly negative connotations attached to the concept, speaks appreciatively about “the game in the Italian style” (*il gioco all’italiana*) instead of *catenaccio*. For him, it represents one of the major “ideas” of 20th century Italy, which lost ground only after the tactical innovation brought about by Arrigo Sacchi at the turn of the 1990s.

However, too much emphasis on this extremely defensive playing system as a “characteristically” Italian style overshadows the fact that from the very beginning, Italian football was greatly shaped by international influences that foreign coaches and players imported to Italy. The game was brought to Italy by English at the end of the 19th century, and after the First World War there were still several English coaches in Italy: William Garbutt in Milan, Robert Spottishwood in Inter and Herbert Burgess in Padova (Papa and Panico 2002, 148). Furthermore, the influence of the Central European football tradition was considerable in Italy. In the first part of the 1920s, there were several dozen Danubian players in Italian teams and approximately half of the Italian teams had either Hungarian or Austrian coaches (Papa and Panico 2002, 149). The Danubians brought Italy into contact with football which was based on intelligence and technical prowess rather than physical force, which the English “kick and rush” style was based upon.

Carta di Viareggio introduced football professionalism in Italy in 1926 (see section 1.1). The statute also stated that from the 1927–28 season, the teams had to be entirely Italian and hence no foreign players could be fielded. However, the ban on foreign players left open the question of who can be regarded as an Italian. This led to a *paradiastolic* move (Skinner 2007), which extended Italian nationality to those who had at least one Italian grandparent. Therefore, Italian clubs started to look for *oriundi*, that is, players who were of Italian ancestry. These players usually came from South America. Some of the most famous *oriundi* players were Argentine-born Raimundo Orsi and Renato Cesarini. Cesarini’s habit of scoring decisive goals in the final minutes of the match led to a new term, *zona Cesarini*, which is still in use.

From the early days of *calcio* until the 1950s, the major influences on Italian football came from English, Danubian, and South American football cultures. The defence-oriented style which came to be known as *catenaccio* started to develop in Italy only after the 1950s and established itself during the 1960s. *Verrou*, a tactic developed by Austrian football coach Karl Rappan, was its early model, but its pioneers in Italy were small teams: Gipo Viani's Salernitana, Nereo Rocco's Triestina, and to some extent Fulvio Bernardini's Fiorentina (Sconcerti 2014). Because this defensive system was not seen as a legitimate tactic for strong teams, some teams were "*catenacciari sì, ma zitti*" (Brera 1975, 258), that is, they adopted it without explicitly admitting that they were doing so. Alfredo Foni's Inter won the championship twice in the 1950s, but was reviled for the defensive tactic the team resorted to. In other words, the stature of the club was expected to dictate the style of play and prestigious clubs were expected to play dazzling football, whereas for small teams, *catenaccio* was always an option.

Catenaccio was established in the 1960s by the two Milanese teams, Milan led by Nereo Rocco and Inter by Helenio Herrera, who won European Cups in 1960s by resorting to it. Herrera's Inter is usually considered the epitome of this playing style, yet it seems that Herrera's innovativeness had more to do with iron discipline than with tactics (see Sconcerti 2014, 118–124). He was not discouraged by those who deemed defensiveness as unworthy of a club like Inter and implemented his ideas with ferreous determination. According to Brera (2018, 413), it is from the 1960s that Italian *catenaccio* constituted a recognizable and distinctive football tradition. The establishment of this tactic was also due to the foundation of Coverciano's "football university" in 1958, which aimed at creating a synthesis of the eclecticism of football traditions that had left their mark on Italian football (Papa and Panico 2002, 397). This, in Sconcerti's (2014, 130–132) view, contributed to developing the *catenaccio* to extremes, but condemned Italy to solitude, during which the dominion and foundations of the tactic were hardly debated or challenged.

Catenaccio was also a contested term that had its defenders and critics. Brera maintained that only a few people were able to grasp what this playing system was all about. In his writings, Brera polemicized with those who used the word "tacticians" (*tatticisti*) in a depreciative way, making a mistake in his view (Brera 1975). He also criticized that those who demand a "beautiful game" (*bel gioco*) were never able to formulate what this meant in practice, leaving it just a vague idea (Brera 2018, 418). According to Ghirelli (1972, 186), discussions about tactics reached levels of "religious fanaticism", and they were coloured not only by editorial competition but also by personal jealousies and political differences between the debaters.

The 1980s saw the gradual abandonment of the ultra-defensive *catenaccio* and its replacement with more flamboyant tactics. This change is usually attributed to Arrigo Sacchi's influence. He introduced a new playing style, which was in marked contrast with the defence-minded *catenaccio*. Although Sacchi was not the first one to introduce a new way of playing – Nils Liedholm in Roma and Zdeněk Zeman in Foggia had introduced their own tactics based on

attacking football—his appointment as manager of AC Milan by Silvio Berlusconi in 1987 gave him an exceptional stage to put his idea of football into practice.

Sacchi was inspired by the Dutch total football, developed during the 1970s in the Netherlands and best exemplified by the Dutch club Ajax and the national team of the Netherlands. The tactic is based on fluid organisation, where versatile and technically prepared players easily switch roles with each other according to the developments on the pitch. Because Sacchi had never been a professional football player, he was not bound to the schemes that had become hegemonic in Italian football. Even the language he used to analyse football was very distant from the traditional ways of speaking of football managers. His language abounded with concepts like *spettacolo* (spectacle), *la coscienza della collettività* (the awareness of the collective), and *intelligenza* (intelligence).

Sacchi rejected the idea of *catenaccio* as a characteristically Italian style and tried to rehabilitate what he considered as neglected aspects of football. He had developed his idea of the game by acquainting himself with the works of Huizinga and his notions of football and play, and by studying football tactics developed outside Italy (see Sacchi 2015, 35–41). He arrived at a conclusion that football should aim at “entertaining, convincing, and winning”, and that his team should dominate both the ball and the space (Sacchi 2015, 117–119). Sacchi thought that his idea of football, which prioritized the collective, was deeply counterintuitive in a country like Italy, which he believed was inclined to conservatism and showed distrust to all traditional collectives, such as the state or the nation (Sacchi 2015, 37). The most significant disagreement between Sacchi and Berlusconi concerned the relationship between the collective and the individual: Sacchi always emphasized the first, while Berlusconi believed that football is first and foremost about individual skill and brilliance.

Sacchi became a paradigmatic example of this style change in football, and he even coined new terms, such as *ripartenza*, to create distinctions with previous tactics. The innovations he introduced were fiercely criticized at the time and they continue to be a source of polemics from time to time. Brera was convinced that Sacchi’s offensive approach mistakenly overlooked defending and concluded straightforwardly, after Sacchi’s Milan had lost its first match, that “Sacchi cannot go against history.”⁶⁴ Russo (2005) depicts how the discussions about tactics separated from the football context, where the gist of the struggle concerned the question about how to best defend, and the tactics got coloured by normative and evaluative judgments, in which some tactics were considered “positive” and “progressive” and some others were labelled as “negative”, “conservative”, or “cynical”. Politicians might resort—sometimes deliberately and sometimes unrecognizably—to these descriptions to advocate for their own views or to contrast others.

⁶⁴ Gianni Brera “Ma Sacchi non può andare contro la storia”, *La Repubblica*, September 22, 1987. Available at <https://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/1987/09/22/ma-sacchi-non-puo-andare-contro-la.html>. Accessed April 6, 2022.

In addition to football's tactical progress, the laws of the game are also a source for changes in the vocabulary of the game. Offside (*fuorigioco*) is so commonly evoked by politicians that it is hardly recognized as a football metaphor, while references to "away-goals" could be considered more innovative albeit also enigmatic for those who are less engaged with the game. Another important metaphor originating from the rules of the game is the penalty kick (*calcio di rigore*), which regularly appears in Renzi's rhetoric. Rule changes have also contributed to the decline of certain measures related to time wasting. In the 1990s, rule changes were introduced to impede obstructive tactics and to encourage more attractive football, which was usually associated with attacking football. The so-called back-pass rule, introduced in 1992 to reduce time wasting, determined that the goalkeeper is not allowed to retrieve the ball with the hands when it was intentionally passed by a teammate. This contributed to the decline of *melina*, which consisted of keeping the possession of the ball – often by passing it sideways between the defenders and the goalkeeper – until the time ran out. *Melina* has become a frequent metaphor for obstructive means in politics, also deployed by Renzi.

The development of the game has also seen innovations when it comes to player roles and positions, while some of them have vanished as anachronistic. False nine, *mezzala*, *fantasista*, or *mediano* are examples of the vocabulary related to player types that Renzi cites, sometimes exemplified by naming famous interpreters of these roles. These terms will be explained in more detail in the following chapters that analyse Renzi's rhetoric. Acclaimed managers are also a source of inspiration for Renzi, such as Pep Guardiola or Arrigo Sacchi. Despite Renzi's fascination with attacking football, he also cites managers known for defensive qualities, like José Mourinho or Nereo Rocco. References to particular on-field incidents (such as Roberto Baggio's return to Florence as a player of Juventus) are also a regular feature of Renzi's football language, and they often draw from the cultural context of Florence, but also beyond. The way Renzi exploits all these dimensions of the game in his rhetoric proves his familiarity both with the history of the game as well as its vocabulary.

5 FOOTBALL LANGUAGE AS A PART OF “SCRAP-PING”

The previous chapter paused to study Renzi’s football profile in order to understand where his language draws from. This chapter turns to research into how Renzi deployed the game vocabulary in political controversies and in his political analyses. The chapter examines Renzi’s early political trajectory in Florence’s local politics first as the president of the province of Florence and then as the mayor of Florence. Here, we can detect Renzi’s first attempts to analyse political developments and to formulate political demands relying on football language. The background for the events, the birth of the PD in 2007, has been discussed in its main points in Chapter 3.

Section 5.1 discusses Renzi’s time as the president of the province of Florence. During that period, Renzi started to formulate the idea of generational turnover, although it was not yet dubbed as *rottamazione*. He enthusiastically supported the newly established PD and stressed the importance of reaching beyond traditional political cleavages and of granting responsibility to aspiring politicians. He also encouraged the party to abandon its ideological baggage so that it would be more appealing and convincing in a constantly changing world.

Section 5.2 offers an account of the events that led Renzi to pursue the candidacy of the centre-left for the position of mayor of Florence. It was a challenge thrown at the party establishment that turned out to be a success, as Renzi was elected the mayor of Florence in 2009. The section examines and analyses how Renzi interpreted the context by relying on football.

Finally, section 5.3 is more thematically oriented, as it sheds light on Renzi’s early self-understandings regarding the profession of politician. It concentrates on Renzi’s own statements regarding what he considers to be the qualities of a competent politician and the analogies he draws between politics and football.

5.1 “L’Internazionale evoca il nerazzurro del calcio”

Quando tocca a me, parlo delle tre parole che dovrebbero per me segnare il Partito Democratico: sogno, speranza, fantasia. E dico che nel mio pantheon ci metterei volentieri la capacità di stupire e di cambiare passo di Cristiano Ronaldo più che tanti slogan del passato.⁶⁵ (Renzi 2008, 124)

In spring 2007, the DS and the Margherita held almost simultaneous congresses that aimed at dissolving the respective parties and merging them under one big umbrella, the PD (Lazar 2007). From the podium of the Margherita convention, Renzi, then the president of the province of Florence, delivered an enthusiastic speech in favour of the merger and outlined that the new party should be able “to surprise and to change tack à la Cristiano Ronaldo”, rather than wage ideological battles from which especially young generations have grown away. This statement was in line with Renzi’s earlier accounts. In 2006, he claimed that among young generations, the word *Internazionale* would be associated with the Milanese football team Inter rather than with the 20th century political ideologies: “L’Internazionale evoca il nerazzurro del calcio e non un futuro socialista o rivoluzionaria”⁶⁶ (Renzi 2006, 9).

As discussed in the previous chapters, the birth of the PD was conceived as an opportunity for a new beginning and a united centre-left. Yet during the phase of merger and after it, several different ideologies, convictions, and persuasions continued to live in the new party, and certain unsettled questions regularly emerged and were disputed among the party members. Renzi embraced the idea of a “non-ideological” and “non-identitarian” party envisioned by Veltroni. He was convinced that the PD should abandon the ideological baggage of its forerunners since the ideologies that had once offered a solid basis upon which to build politics had become outmoded or did not offer clear guidance to the parties for how to respond to the challenges of the 21st century. The decrease of the importance of class cleavages, globalization, new issues on the political agenda, and individualization and fragmentation of world views forced the centre-left parties to search for new ways of understanding and approaching politics.

These wide-ranging changes as well as the rejection of ideological convictions posed not only a political but also linguistic challenge for Renzi. In other words, to interpret these changes, Renzi could not rely on the vocabularies of the past that he had denounced, but to find a language that would help to verbalize these transformations in a meaningful way. To do this, Renzi relied on football language, which resulted in creative but also clumsy and partly implausible analogies.

⁶⁵ “When it is my turn, I talk about the three words that should characterize the Democratic Party: dream, hope, fantasy. Instead of all the slogans of the past, I would be pleased to place in my pantheon the ability to amaze and to change tack like Cristiano Ronaldo.”

⁶⁶ “[The word] *Internazionale* evokes an idea of *nerazzurro* in football, instead of an idea of a socialist and revolutionary future.” N.B. *Nerazzurro* is the nickname of Inter, referring to the black and blue colours of the club.

Renzi firmly believed that the fresh start that he advocated could not be obtained by relying on the same leading figures that had long guided the centre-left parties. Instead, he demanded that more young aspiring politicians should be given responsibility in politics, echoing the core tenets that came to inform the more forceful idea of “scrapping” the political elites (*rottamazione*). Renzi’s book *Tra De Gasperi e gli U2* (2006) opens with a series of observations how the country is lacking youth and vitality in different areas of life. Perhaps prompted by the upcoming World Cup (2006), Renzi illustrates the situation with two examples from football:

Nel 1982 l’Italia calcistica *mondial* in Spagna vinse la finale facendo giocare titolare anche Beppe Bergomi, che tutti chiamavano “lo zio” perché aveva i baffi. Ma era un ragazzo di diciotto anni. Oggi il più giovane convocato dell’Italia ai mondiali tedeschi è un centrocampista di ventitré anni. Il Paese invecchia anche nel calcio?⁶⁷ (Renzi 2006, 5)

However, the most manifest example of this dynamic, according to Renzi, is politics. While new political leaders had emerged in other countries, the 2006 general elections in Italy were run with the same principal protagonists as in 1996, the centre-left coalition led by Prodi and centre-right coalition by Berlusconi. He also used football to illustrate the importance of renewal for any democratic culture by suggesting that political parties should – like good football clubs – be able to accommodate and promote young talents. However, the slow regeneration of political elites proved parties of being either unable or unwilling to do so:

Le squadre di calcio che funzionano sono quelle che fanno crescere un bel settore giovanile. Lo chiamano vivaio. E i movimenti politici giovanili dovrebbero essere un vivaio. Solo che, spesso, sono solo un mortorio. Quei pochi, volenterosi, ragazzi che frequentano le stanze dei partiti nascondono con cura e dedizione ogni traccia di dinamismo e fantasia dietro le maschere del conformismo.⁶⁸ (Renzi 2006, 12)

Renzi’s overall analysis is at least partly justified. The renewal of those who wield political power, can be considered a necessary part of healthy democracy that promotes talent and prevents stagnation. Yet in Renzi’s view, the mobility is made too slow and cumbersome. Rather than seeing a progressive advancement within the party as a valuable part of learning politics, Renzi saw it as something that tends to contribute to young politicians’ “conformity”, as nobody is ready to endanger their career paths by challenging the party leadership or platform. In Renzi’s view, the homogenization of young politicians hinders the emergence of new types of politicians, which is one of the reasons for Italy’s political stagnation.

⁶⁷ “In 1982, the Italian national team won the final in Spain by putting in the starting eleven Beppe Bergomi, whom everybody called ‘the uncle’ because of his moustache. But he was an 18-year-old boy. Today, the youngest player called up by Italy for the World Cup in Germany is a 23-year-old midfielder. Is the country ageing also in football?”

⁶⁸ “Successful football teams are those that are able to grow a good youth sector. They call it *vivaio*. And political youth organizations should work as *vivaio*. Yet, they often resemble morgues. Those few eager young people that frequent party organizations carefully hide every trace of dynamism and imagination behind the masks of conformity.” (Italics mine)

To invite an alternative model for this, Renzi argues that parties' youth organizations should be used similarly to any successful football club's youth sector *vivaio*, that is, as a source of renewal and fresh ideas.

Renzi's analysis regarding the decreasing importance of ideologies and the significance of renewal of the political class might have sounded compelling and accurate for those who joined the PD without any previous political experience and who thus had much to gain in a situation that grants more space for newcomers. Yet it also tended to idealize youth in a way that is unconvincing, at least for the old guard. After all, most of the party members had their roots either in the Christian Democratic or the Communist parties that had gone through several changes since the early 1990s.

Renzi also practiced what he preached. By 2008, Renzi had served as the president of the province of Florence and his first term was about to come to an end, yet it was taken for granted that he would continue in his second term. At the same time, the mayor of Florence, Leonardo Domenici (DS), was finishing his second mandate and was thus forced to step down. Domenici's mayorship was generally assessed rather critically in Florence and the evaluation of his term among the public was controversial (Corica 2017, 121–122). In many ways, Domenici's career represented the traditions and political culture of the Italian left (especially in the PCI-PDS-DS), where a gradual progression within the party ranks was the norm. Domenici had started his career in the ranks of the old PCI and was hand-picked by the party leadership for the candidacy for mayor of Florence, which he accepted out of loyalty for the party (Corica 2017, 121).

In 2008, Renzi took part in the speculations concerning the candidatures for the offices. His reflections were rather cautious, which can be understood against the backdrop that the PD had just been established and the competition of offices might become a source of division at such a delicate phase. Therefore, Renzi maintained that politics is "team play", and dodged the question of his own role in these speculations by stating that his role is comparable to that of Fiorentina player Martin Jørgensen, who became known as a player capable of playing multiple roles and of re-inventing himself in the face of the team's needs.

Ma chi sta dentro un gioco di squadra è pronto a fare quello che il Mister, la squadra, i tifosi chiedono.⁶⁹ (Renzi 2008, 229)

Io mi sento come Martin Jorgensen [sic]: dove lo mettono, lui gioca. L'importante è giocare bene (cosa che Jorgensen fa e che io spero di fare).⁷⁰ (Renzi 2008, 229)

The conceptualization of politics as team play (*gioco di squadra*) is so common in political language that it has almost become a "dormant metaphor" (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969, 405–410). While this kind of rhetoric may have some persuasive power in a party where the majority had its roots in the post-communist tradition that prioritized the cohesion and unity of the party, it could be argued that the idea of party politics as "team play" is not completely

⁶⁹ "Team players are ready to do what the Mister, the team and the supporters ask for."

⁷⁰ "I feel like Martin Jørgensen: he is ready to play wherever they put him. The important thing is to play well (what Jørgensen obviously does and what I hope to do as well)."

plausible or accurate in this context. This analysis downplays the fact that the birth of the PD had substantially changed the political context in which the aspiring candidates for elective offices now operated, opening new chances of contingency for those who were ready to exploit them. Most clearly, the procedure of the newly established party and especially the introduction of the primaries provided several opportunities for individual initiative and competition between the party members. As it was discussed in section 3.3, the statutes of the PD ordered that the selection of candidates for monocratic positions (such as mayors) should happen through primaries, which means that the procedures of the party provide candidates with opportunities to bypass the will of the party leadership. Renzi's accentuation of the role of supporters (*tifosi*) can be understood here as his keen awareness of the possibilities that the primaries offered for candidates who wanted to challenge the party hierarchies by appealing directly to the electorate (see also Renzi 2008, 143-144).

Renzi also stresses that it is important to "play well", which can be understood as call for "fair play" in the primaries in general. According to this reasoning, procedures that grant open and fair competition between the candidates and their ideas might enhance the party's standing among public (a point to which Renzi has returned on several occasions) and hence contribute positively to the democratic process.

Florence lies at the heart of the so-called "red belt" of Italy, referring to regions where there is a long-standing left-wing orientation in politics. Therefore, it was almost certain that the centre-left candidate would win the election for the mayor of Florence and the most intense battle would be fought between the aspiring centre-left candidates for the office. In September 2008, Renzi announced his candidacy in the primaries without having the support of the PD. Since Renzi could not rely on the support of the party for his candidacy, he knew that only a campaign based on a clear rupture with the out-going administration could stand a chance in the race. His slogan "*Facce nuove a Palazzo Vecchio*" (New faces at the Town Hall) was bold enough to differ from other candidates in the race, who offered more moderate messages based upon a fresh start. For example, the party-backed candidate Lapo Pistelli chose as a slogan "*Lapo punto a capo*" (roughly translated as Lapo - a new beginning) and Michele Ventura, who had started his career in the ranks of the PCI, opted for "*Firenze merita di più*" (Florence deserves more).

If the out-going city administration was accused of having a tenuous relationship with the city and its inhabitants, Renzi's announcement to run as a candidate was planned to strike a chord among the Florentines and to create a shared pathos with them. He announced his candidacy by resorting to a well-known incident that all football enthusiasts, and especially the supporters of Fiorentina, were likely to appreciate:

Se avessi deciso di non correre, di non provarci, sarebbe stato un atto di finto amore per Firenze, come quello di Roberto Baggio che nel 1991 si rifiutò, lui appena passato alla Juventus, di tirare un rigore contro la Fiorentina. Quella fu solo vigliaccheria. Ho

giurato a me stesso che, nella vita e in campo, avrei sempre avuto il coraggio di tirare quel rigore. Annuncio così che mi candido a sindaco di Firenze.⁷¹

Renzi justifies his decision to run as conditioned by a sense of duty towards the city of Florence, a rhetorical move that many politicians have used before him, including Berlusconi in his famous *Discesa in campo* speech in 1994. Refusing to take part in the contest, Renzi explains, would represent an act of timidity and insincerity towards the city, analogously to Roberto Baggio's refusal to take the penalty against his old club Fiorentina in 1991,⁷² an incident that is likely to resonate within the football-following public in Florence. Akin to the quote where Renzi compared his role to Fiorentina's player, the persuasive power of this statement is reinforced by the distinctive Florentine overtone it carries.

Furthermore, as this study demonstrates, the "penalty kick" is a metaphor that appears frequently in Renzi's rhetoric. Precisely like here, it is usually applied in the context of electoral contests to indicate either the beginning or end of political momentum. Also, the "courage to take the penalty" is a statement of political character willing to take risks, which Renzi considers an important political quality. The decision to run meant that Renzi had to stand up against the establishment of his own party, whose preferred candidate for the office was a long-time parliamentarian, Lapo Pistelli. In this way, he openly opposed not only the outgoing town administration led by Domenici, but also local and national leaders of the PD (see Bordignon 2014, 6), although he had no guarantee that his manoeuvre would be successful.

⁷¹ "Had I decided not to run, not to give a try, it would have been an act of insincerity towards Florence, analogously to that of Roberto Baggio who, in 1991, having just transferred to Juventus, refused to take the penalty against Fiorentina. That was simply an act of cowardice. I swore to myself that in life and on the pitch, I would always have the courage to take the penalty. With these words, I announce my candidacy for the mayor of Florence." In "Renzi: Mi candido perché c'è bisogno di coraggio", *La Nazione*, September 30, 2008. Available at https://www.lanazione.it/firenze/2008/09/30/121795-renzi_candido_perche_bisogno_coraggio.shtml. Accessed April 6, 2022.

⁷² To make sense of this statement, a brief recount of the event from which the analogy originates is appropriate. Renzi refers to Fiorentina's former star player Roberto Baggio's actions on April 6, 1991, in a match between Fiorentina and Juventus. In May 1990, Baggio was sold from Fiorentina to its rival Juventus. The decision to sell Baggio, one of the star players of the team, sparked a riot in Florence. When Baggio then returned to Florence next April, for the first time as a player of Juventus, he – despite being a specialist in penalties – refused to take the penalty that he won against his old club. When Baggio was later substituted, while leaving the pitch, he embraced a scarf of Fiorentina thrown at him from the stands, a gesture that carried a strong emotional charge and has inevitably remained in the collective memory of the city and its inhabitants. Although a controversial gesture from the viewpoint of Juventus fans, for Fiorentina fans it was, as Stefano Cecchi (2013, 86) has eloquently put it, "one of the most lyrical pages that football history has ever written," and precisely because of this likely to stir the hearers' imagination.

5.2 “Catenaccio contro calcio champagne”: The 2009 mayoral election in Florence

The primaries for the centre-left’s mayoral candidate in Florence provided an opportunity for Renzi to test the waters and an occasion to see how his idea of *rottamazione* resonated among the public. Renzi’s candidacy represented a challenge to the party establishment which, like Italy’s ruling elites in general in his view, change as if in “slow-motion” (*con i tempi della moviola*) (Renzi 2011, 201), *moviola* being a famous buzzword from Italian post-match football commentaries.

Renzi’s race was complicated by the fact that he lacked the support of the party establishment, who tried to dissuade him from running by suggesting that it would hamper his prospects in the PD. Renzi, instead, elaborated an electoral strategy that emphasised his distance from the old guard of the PD, a script that proved to be so successful that it was used also in the coalition primaries later in 2012. The rules of the primary contest became a topic of acrimonious debate, which opened space for alternative interpretations regarding the procedure, which Renzi cleverly used to his own advantage.

In *Fuori*, the chapter that reiterates the starting setup for the mayoral contest in Florence opens with a curious quote from Portuguese football manager José Mourinho: “*Ciò che per loro è un’ossessione, per noi è semplicemente un sogno*”⁷³ (Renzi 2011, 32). To provide some context, this turn of phrase that Renzi quotes was originally used by Mourinho to anticipate the second leg of the Champions League semi-final between FC Barcelona and Inter in 2010. Mourinho’s point was that Inter’s chances to reach the final were increased because Barcelona, by virtue of their previous successes, was under much more pressure.⁷⁴

This an interesting detail worth dwelling upon, because it shows how Renzi actively seeks parallels in world football, through which he thinks about politics. Renzi never returns to explain why this quote was chosen, but its sheer presence suggests that it has significance in understanding his (ex post) analysis of the contest, and thus provokes the reader to uncover its precise point. Mourinho has become known for his tactical prowess, and his ability to “defy the odds” and come out on top against more powerful rivals, probably inspired Renzi to draw parallels to his own trajectory, as he embarked on the mayoral contest as an underdog and without the support of the party establishment.

It is no wonder that Renzi interpreted the contest through the lens of football. Football is characterized by greater contingency than other ball games, which makes it more open to the element of surprise: a weaker team can always invent several ways to prevail over a stronger team. This kind of inventiveness is also required from a candidate who wishes to turn the tables and overcome stronger opponents in an electoral contest. First, Renzi turned his underdog

⁷³ “What is an obsession for them, is a dream for us.” See “Sogno per noi, ossessione per loro”, *La Gazzetta dello Sport*, April 28, 2010. The epigraph in question is anachronistic, as the quote is more recent than the events recounted in the chapter.

⁷⁴ This can also be interpreted as a rhetorical move, the point of which lies in trying to influence the opponents, as Inter held a 3–1 lead after the first leg of the semi-final.

status into an opportunity to devise new campaign styles. Florentine theatres were chosen as campaign venues, a choice meant to symbolize creativity and fantasy, and Renzi's on-stage performance was prepared in advance down to the smallest detail (see Renzi 2011, 45-47). Renzi was also dexterous in improvising during the campaign. For example, when the rules of contest were introduced and seemed to result in a disadvantage for Renzi, he politicized the interpretation of the rules, a move which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Having been involved in politics since his youth, and to credibly claim that he would represent something fresh and new on the political scene, Renzi launched a pledge that in case he was defeated in the primaries, he would return to work in the private sector. The appeal of this promise proved more effective than Renzi perhaps had expected. In fact, it proved so compelling that an elderly lady although agreeing almost completely with Renzi's platform, wished that Renzi would lose the primaries so that he could exemplify an ethic of political responsibility for other politicians. Renzi found this reasoning amusing: "*Mi sentivo scartato e buttato a terra come un difensore ubriacato da un dribbling del miglior Messi*"⁷⁵ (Renzi 2011, 31) but it also revealed how persuasive his pledge was considered among the public. To tie his political fate to the result seemed rather improvisational in the primaries for the mayor of Florence. However, since it proved effective, it was re-used in the coalition primaries of 2012 against Pier Luigi Bersani and in the 2016 constitutional referendum campaign, in which Renzi infamously promised to leave politics in case of defeat (see section 7.4).

Renzi was aware that his brusque way to enter the mayoral contest included a risk of getting side-tracked in the party, in which a gradual progression within the party ranks, rather than open defiance, was the norm: "*Calcisticamente parlando: catenaccio contro calcio champagne. Solo che nella storia del calcio hanno vinto quasi sempre i catenacciari*"⁷⁶ (Renzi 2011, 27-28).

The formulation "*catenaccio contro calcio champagne*" suggests different paths of reasoning here. In temporal terms, *catenaccio* can be considered a tactic which attempts to freeze time and make cunning use of counterattack when the opportune moment arises. It suggests a parallel to the practice where young politicians are expected to patiently gain experience before being gradually promoted in the party hierarchy. In stylistic terms, *catenaccio* discourages individual breakaways (except for counterattacks), which Renzi's candidature certainly represented. Admitting that *catenacciari* have often proven successful in football, Renzi insinuates that those willing to adapt to the timings dictated by the party and to cultivate more prudent approaches in political conduct could rely on slow but steady rise in the party hierarchy.

The context and legitimation for Renzi to enter the contest was provided by the birth of the PD and the adoption of primaries as a leader selection mechanism in the party statutes (see section 3.3). This gave Renzi an opportunity to challenge the existing "oligarchy" of the party (Michels 1959) because it allowed candidates

⁷⁵ "I felt knocked down like a defender hypnotized by the dribbling of Messi."

⁷⁶ "Speaking in football language: *catenaccio* against champagne football. Yet in the history of football those who have resorted to *catenaccio* have almost always emerged victorious."

to bypass the will and guidelines of the party leadership and party structures and appeal directly to the voters. There was also the precedent of centre-left primaries, in which the underdog candidate had rather surprisingly won the nomination. Namely, as the DS was unable to select the candidate for the presidency of the Apulia region in 2005, they decided to call primaries, in which Nichi Vendola, although not backed by the party establishment, prevailed over the party-preferred candidate Francesco Boccia (De Luca and Rombi 2016).

When it comes to centre-left primaries for the mayor of Florence, despite how the principle which stated that the PD should choose the candidates for monocratic positions through open primaries was written in the statutes of the party, it did not prevent controversies regarding how this principle should exactly be applied and what should be the exact procedures of the contest. Thus, the party decided to introduce a model where a second ballot is organized between the first two candidates in case no candidate were to obtain 40% of the vote on the first ballot. This choice was strongly opposed by Renzi, whose campaign was based on the anti-establishment challenge. It meant that in case of second ballot, all other candidates would probably turn against him.

Although Renzi does not explicitly refer to his experience as a referee when he raised the controversy regarding the fairness of the rules of the primaries, the sheer insight that the internal procedure of the party offers possibilities for its tactical uses—for instance for contesting moves that could be used to challenge the interpretations of the party establishment—may very well be due to his experience as a referee. Hence, he rejected theorizations of what he calls “confirmatory” primaries (Renzi 2011, 32–33). By this he referred to primaries, in which there is a designated candidate, and the primaries are organized only to provide legitimation to his leadership. Primaries like this were organized around Prodi in 2005 prior to parliamentary elections. Renzi also defined proper primaries as those in which the outcome of the contest is not known in advance and in which there is free competition between ideas.

Ma quali sono le ‘primarie fatte bene’?, potrebbe domandarsi qualcuno. Semplice: quelle in cui non si sa già prima chi vince, in partenza.⁷⁷ (Renzi 2011, 32)

[L]e primarie esigono e richiedono libertà. Non si prende più la linea dal segretario del partito, come accadeva in passato. ... Quando le primarie sono vere, infatti, non importano i padrini altolocati o le indicazioni dei dirigenti. Si gioca liberi, in campo aperto.⁷⁸ (Renzi 2011, 33)

This simple insight that the procedure of the primaries should guarantee a level playing field for all the candidates and ensure the contingency of results usually goes without saying, but because this has not always been the case, Renzi found it an important point to emphasize. Renzi believed that primaries where the results were not determined in advance and for which the rules are fair would

⁷⁷ “But what are ‘proper primaries?’, someone could ask. Simple: those where the winner is not known in advance.”

⁷⁸ “Primaries require freedom. You no longer toe the line of the leader of the party like in the past. ... Indeed, when the primaries are real, high-ranked godfathers or the instructions of the leaders do not matter anymore. You feel free to play on an open field.”

serve as an antidote for the dreariness of the centre-left, and that they would strengthen the party by fostering participation (see Renzi 2011, 36).

However, the campaign was coloured by continuous disagreements regarding the rules of the primaries. The introduction of the double ballot was the most debated aspect of the procedure. In Renzi's view, it was adopted to curtail his chances in the race and warned about the threat of stagnation if the rules were interpreted in a manner that would prevent new actors from emerging (Renzi 2011, 38).

The voting procedure prompted Renzi to consider how he should face its consequences. He concluded that it would be better to play according to the rules that he considered "unfair" than to withdraw altogether from the contest:

[N]on si scappa, anche se le regole te le hanno cambiate in modo incredibile. Non si scappa perché, se si deve perdere, e nella vita si può perdere, si perde sul campo, mai a tavolino.⁷⁹ (Renzi 2011, 38)

With the benefit of hindsight, the controversy regarding the rules of vote may have ended up benefitting Renzi. Contesting them marked a move that further strengthened his profile as an audacious challenger, although he was not able to change the controversial parts. Also, the internal disarray within the PD played in Renzi's favour in the race as the nomination of several candidates ensured that the votes were spread in the first ballot.

The primaries for the centre-left's candidate for the mayor of Florence were held in February 2009. Obtaining quite surprisingly 40.5% of the vote, Renzi barely avoided the second ballot and was declared the winner (Bordignon 2014, 7). Renzi interpreted his victory as a sign of renewal of the centre-left, which was no longer bound to the schemes of the past:

La vittoria sorprese anche i media nazionali incuriositi dal fatto che in una delle storiche capitali del centrosinistra il vincitore fosse un outsider che si era tirato fuori dal derby ormai pluridecennale tra dalemiani e veltroniani.⁸⁰ (Renzi 2011, 52)

Moreover, Renzi fostered the image of himself as an "outsider" who had managed to challenge both dominant fractions struggling for power since the mid-1990s, represented by the supporters of Massimo D'Alema (*dalemiani*) and the supporters of Walter Veltroni (*veltroniani*). Although Renzi's political positions have always been quite close to Veltroni's, he was not officially endorsed by him.

The mayoral election was held in June 2009. Since a race framed as a choice between the candidates on the left-right axis was likely to fail in a region where the centre-left traditionally holds the majority, the centre-right's answer to Renzi's candidacy was to put forward Giovanni Galli, who was a former

⁷⁹ "You don't withdraw, even if the rules have been changed in an absurd way to penalize you. You don't withdraw because, even if you have to lose – and in life that might happen – it is better to lose by playing, and never by giving up."

⁸⁰ "The victory also surprised the national media, intrigued by the fact that in one of the historic capitals of the centre-left, the winner was an outsider who had pulled himself out from the decades-long derby between the supporters of D'Alema and Veltroni."

Fiorentina and AC Milan goalkeeper and 1982 World Champion. Renzi bet Galli on the second ballot with 59.5% of the vote and was elected mayor of Florence.

5.3 The politician as *mezzala*

One feature of Renzi's football language is his habit of reflecting on the role of politician through roles and figures known from football. As previously noted, this was characteristic for other politicians too, from Andreotti, who did not want to fade into political irrelevance by sitting "on the bench", to Berlusconi, whose role as a goal-hungry "centre-forward" was unduly complicated by his own teammates who, in Berlusconi's view, obstructed his attempts to govern Italy. However, Renzi's comparisons stick out as clearly original and even enigmatic, which require some interpretation to recover their political argument.

These kinds of statements are interesting because they offer insights into how politicians themselves understand their profession, duties, their relation to other political agents, or more in general the qualities and characteristics that the pursuit of politics requires in their view. Different player types and figures from the world football—their duties, qualities, and characteristics—serve here as ideal types to illustrate and accentuate certain political qualities and skills that are essential in politics, and to verbalize them in a manner that are familiar at least to football enthusiasts. These exemplary types can also be invoked by naming some high-profile interpreters of these types. For example, an inventive politician could be compared with a creative playmaker à la Diego Maradona. It is indeed common that politicians define other politicians by paralleling them to footballers, although less flattering characterizations easily become matters of dispute.

This section will focus on Renzi's definitions of the role of a politician in terms of football and discuss what these reflections reveal about Renzi's understanding on the role of a politician at the early stages of his career. As previously noted, the referee is an essential figure which Renzi relies on in his political rhetoric. However, he also makes references to player roles that are familiar from the pitch. What is evident is that he does not commit himself permanently to any role, but alters it according to the changing political circumstances, as will be shown as the analysis proceeds.

To offer some context to the discussion that follows, the most basic division of football roles is the one based on differentiation between goalkeeper, defenders, midfielders, and attackers on the pitch, whereby players who interpret these positions must possess certain skills and perform certain duties on the pitch, although these days the trend in football seems to be towards more all-round players. The basic division to defenders, midfielders and attackers is obviously more nuanced in reality. For example, midfielders can be classified to those who are lying deep and those with more attacking flair. Instead, the innovativeness of "false nine" lies precisely in the idea that this player type is not a pure attacker or midfielder but is instead an "intermediary" type that moves

between midfielders and attackers. In addition to these player types, there are also other prominent figures, such as referees and managers, that can also be invoked by politicians.

One of Renzi's earliest descriptions of the politician's role as *mezzala* is among the most interesting ones that he has presented:

Per me il vero costo della politica - l'ho detto più volte - è quando il politico non fa il proprio mestiere. Che è quello di decidere. Fare. Realizzare. Costruire. Sognare e far sognare ma sempre con il pragmatismo di chi gioca a metà campo e mette in mezzo palle-gol per gli altri. Il politico è una mezzala: non il mediano delle canzoni di Ligabue, non il centravanti che pensa solo a fare gol. Il politico è uno che in campo sarebbe sceso col numero 8 (prima che la foga del *marketing* ci strappasse per sempre il gusto di vedere scendere in campo gente con la maglia dall'1 all'11 e senza nomi sopra).⁸¹ (Renzi 2008, 135, italics original)

Renzi presents here an idea of what player type would most aptly serve as a model for a politician and defines him in football terms as a *mezzala* (literally "half-winger"), the player who would enter the field wearing the shirt with the number 8. These days, the numbers that the players choose to wear have become fluid, but when the numbers were first introduced, they were also indicative of the player's position and duties on the field (for example, the number 1 was reserved for the goalkeeper).

Renzi's paradigm for a politician, a *mezzala*, is a midfielder playing wide on either side of the pitch.⁸² The point of choosing this player type might lie in the broad repertoire he must master on the pitch. A *mezzala* is a player who must be able to perform both defensive and offensive duties on the pitch,⁸³ someone who can both anticipate how the game unfolds and make moves that surprise the adversaries. The importance of transcending definite specializations becomes evident from the way Renzi contrasts the *mezzala* to a centre-forward, whose duty is traditionally that of merely scoring goals, or to a *mediano*,⁸⁴ who as a defensive

⁸¹ "As I have stated many times before, it costs us money to have politicians who are incapable of carrying their professional duties properly. Which means to take decisions, to realize and construct something. To dream and make people dream, but with a pragmatic mindset analogously to those who play in midfield and create goalscoring opportunities for others. A politician is a *mezzala*: he is neither the *mediano* known from the songs of Ligabue nor a centre-forward, whose only task is to score goals. A politician is someone who would have entered the field with the number 8 on the back of the shirt (before the enthusiasm for marketing would bear off the delight in seeing the players enter the field with numbers from 1 to 11, and without surnames)." (Italics mine)

⁸² Renzi seems to refer to what could be considered a modern interpretation of the role of *mezzala*, that is, the widest player either on the left or right of a midfield with three players. However, in the formations applied in the early decades of 20th century, the concept of *mezzala* was at times used to refer to the players next to the centre-forward who, as time went by, became withdrawn to slightly deeper positions (see Sconcerti 2014, 404–406 and Ghirelli 1972, 81–82).

⁸³ A famous exponent of this role could be the Spanish footballer Andrés Iniesta in FC Barcelona or Paul Pogba in Juventus.

⁸⁴ Renzi's statement refers to Italian singer and songwriter Luciano Ligabue's famous track *Una vita da mediano* (1999), in which he interprets *mediano* as someone with clearly assigned duties on the field (*con dei compiti precisi*), someone who is not particularly creative and rarely decisive (*segna sempre poco*) yet has a crucial role in the team despite receiving little praise for what he does. The song was inspired by Inter player Gabriele Orriali who also gets mentioned in the track. Dietschy and Pivato (2019, 204) have tellingly described Orriali

midfielder exploits the weaknesses of the adversaries but is not necessarily the most creative player on the pitch. In other words, it is the versatility the *mezzala* represents that seems to be the key for why Renzi sees it best resembles a politician.

Referee is another crucial figure through which Renzi reflects politics. According to his own words, he refereed amateur football matches from 1991 until 1995, describing it as an “enormous experience” when comes to character.⁸⁵ The lessons learned from the experience as a referee regularly crop up in Renzi’s rhetoric, even though he admits that this might sound bizarre to many who regard the affinities between politics and refereeing as far-fetched:

Immagino di suscitare un sorriso ironico, ma confesso volentieri che per me è stata fondamentale l’esperienza come arbitro di calcio per quattro anni, giovanissimo, nelle categorie dilettantistiche.⁸⁶ (Renzi 2011, 107)

Being a referee has been not only a way to be involved in football without being a player, but also, and more importantly, a playground where to learn skills and values that transcend the football pitch:

Per me fare l’arbitro di calcio a 16 anni ha significato, prima ancora che un gesto d’amore verso questo sport ed un modo per mettersi in gioco, essenzialmente essere capace di imparare a studiare, ad approfondire, a prendere delle decisioni, ad avere rispetto.⁸⁷ (Renzi 2008, 9)

Però vi devo dire che se c’è una cosa che mi ha insegnato a decidere e assumermi le mie responsabilità (oltre allo scoutismo), questa è stata proprio l’arbitraggio. ... [Q]uasi quasi a chi vuol fare politica imporrei l’arbitraggio di almeno cinque partite di seconda categoria in Garfagnana...⁸⁸ (Renzi 2008, 303)

Most importantly, the referee seems to offer Renzi the model for decision-making in politics. In *Fuori!* there is a whole chapter titled *Decidere* (To decide), where Renzi discusses decision-making in politics by resorting to football but never to any legal or political theories. This is rather curious considering that Renzi has a degree in law and that questions regarding how and when to take decisions are fundamental questions in political theory.

For Renzi, the figure of a referee serves as a model for politician because of his commitment to take decisions. In a rather populist and anti-parliamentary vein, Renzi depicts the referee’s capacity to take instant decisions that remain

as “*operaio del pallone*” (worker of football) because of his sacrificing playing style. Romano Prodi was also inspired by this song, using it as the soundtrack of the 2004 *L’Ulivo* convention.

⁸⁵ “Il calcio viva!”, *Corriere dello Sport*, April 27, 2020.

⁸⁶ “I expect an ironic reception, but I happily confess that four years as a referee in the amateur league, at a tender age, has been a transformative experience.”

⁸⁷ “For me, working as a football referee at the age of 16 has meant not only an expression of love for this sport and a way to challenge myself, but also essentially a way of learning how to study in depth, take decisions and have respect.”

⁸⁸ “I must say that if there is something that has taught me to take decisions and to take responsibility (in addition to scouting), that is indeed refereeing. ... I would almost require from any aspirant politician that they referee at least five matches at amateur levels in Garfagnana...”

final as the opposite of political decision-making that is too often marked by indecision, hesitance, and interminable debates (see Renzi 2011, 107–108). He parodies the sluggishness of political decision-making by comparing it with a situation in which a referee, instead of assuming the responsibility of his decision whatever it may be, would form a committee to discuss potential offsides or penalties:

[Q]uando ti ritrovi ad arbitrare a diciotto anni un derby di seconda categoria in Maremma, poi non hai paura di affrontare le ire di qualsiasi comitato. Quando sei solo e devi in un attimo di secondo prendere una decisione, impari a farlo anche se vorresti indugiare. Perché se non fischia è comunque una decisione. Non è che puoi fermare il gioco e formare una commissione che rifletta attentamente se sia il caso di assegnare il calcio di rigore o discutere pacatamente ma anche serenamente se quello era o non era fuorigioco.⁸⁹ (Renzi 2011, 107–108)

In other words, it seems that refereeing has taught Renzi to face the contingencies of his choices and to stand by his decisions even when confronted with strong criticisms. He laments that politics seems to offer fewer and fewer possibilities for such decisive action:

Durante la partita per un arbitro è sempre una ghiotta occasione quando un giocatore commette un fallo così evidente e clamoroso da meritarsi un cartellino giallo di ammonizione. Sono circostanze in cui nessuno ti può dire nulla, non c'è dubbio interpretativo: hai fatto la cosa giusta e tutti, anche in tribuna, sono costretti a riconoscerlo. Si tratta di piccole occasioni che fanno svoltare una partita perché acquisti autorevolezza in campo e credibilità fuori. Mi domando spesso: esiste nella politica qualche occasione concreta, visibile e ineccepibile su cui la classe dirigente potrebbe recuperare autorevolezza e credibilità?⁹⁰ (Renzi 2011, 115–116)

And when politicians are unable to grasp these opportunities, Renzi continues,

E i cittadini hanno qualche occasione in più per mettere in discussione la nostra autorevolezza, la nostra credibilità, proprio come fanno i tifosi quando un rigore netto viene negato o non viene fischiato un plateale fallo di mani.⁹¹ (Renzi 2011, 117)

⁸⁹ “When you find yourself refereeing an amateur level derby in Maremma, at the age of eighteen, you are no longer afraid to face the furies of any committee. When you are alone and must take a decision in an instant, you learn to do it even if you would like to linger on it. Because the decision not to blow the whistle is also a decision. You cannot suspend the game and form a commission that carefully reflects whether or not to award a penalty kick or to discuss serenely if a particular situation should or should not be called offside.”

⁹⁰ “During the match, it is always a wonderful opportunity for a referee when a player commits such an obvious and blatant foul that he deserves to be booked. These are circumstances in which no one can dispute you, there is no room for interpretation, you have made the right call and everybody, even in the stands, are forced to recognize it. These are small occasions that make a difference in the match, because you gain authority on the pitch and credibility off it. I often wonder: is there a concrete, visible and unquestionable opportunity in politics, in which the ruling class could regain authority and credibility?”

⁹¹ “The citizens get yet another occasion to question our authority and our credibility, precisely like the fans do when a clear penalty kick is not awarded, or an obvious handball gets ignored.”

Renzi's comparisons between political decision-making and refereeing are thought-provoking albeit not necessarily very plausible. Answers to political questions are seldom as unambiguous or self-evident as Renzi implies with these examples, which leads him, in my view erringly, to insist too strongly upon the dimension of decision in political action. Considering that Renzi lacked parliamentary experience at that time, such a sharp distinction between "words" and "deeds" becomes understandable.

It might even be argued that the significance of refereeing for Renzi lies not in the "decisionist" dimension as he sees it, but quite on the contrary in the deliberative dimension. Referees must take decisions, but it does not mean that they can be indifferent to deliberation. Quite the contrary, as previously commented, refereeing teaches that since the laws of the game require interpretation, there are always incidents that might be weighed from many different perspectives. Only a few decisions are so indisputable that they leave no space for further argument. This is explicitly acknowledged in the laws of football which state: "[M]any situations are 'subjective' and ... some decisions will inevitably be wrong or cause debate and discussion" (IFAB Laws of the Game 22/23). This holds true also for political questions, as arguments can almost always be presented from both sides of an issue, but ultimately a politician must exercise his own best judgment in taking the decision.

6 FOOTBALL LANGUAGE IN INTRA-PARTY AND INTER-PARTY GAMES

The previous chapter discussed the early stages of Renzi's career and how he applied football vocabulary to express his political ideas. He used concepts, metaphors and analogues based on football to persuade his audience of the need for change in politics, drawing often on the history and context of Florence. Becoming the mayor of Florence (2009) was the first significant milestone of Renzi's career and his campaign rhetoric was coloured by allusions to football. Renzi also presented rather original ideas regarding the figure of a politician and decision-making relying on football.

This chapter turns the focus on Renzi's football language both within the intra-party and inter-party struggles covering the years from 2011 to 2013. During these years, Renzi gained a reputation as an energetic mayor of Florence. His statements, which sometimes contained weighty criticisms against the PD leadership, started to receive national exposure. From Renzi's point of view, the major events of this period were the 2012 coalition primaries, where Renzi challenged the incumbent leader of the party, Pier Luigi Bersani, and the 2013 parliamentary elections, which resulted in a disappointment for the PD.

Before turning to look at these events more in detail, section 6.1 will discuss Renzi's political ideas and his analysis of the state of the centre-left. Renzi challenged some traditionally left-wing positions and tried to extend the margins of the PD towards the centre-right, which raised distrust among the more left-wing party members. Section 6.2 recounts the prelude to the 2012 coalition primaries and section 6.3 focuses on the primaries and their results. Section 6.4 turns its attention to the 2013 parliamentary elections and their complicated aftermath.

During these years, Renzi's use of football language intensified. It was used both to persuade the centre-right voters and to voice demands in the intra-party struggles of the centre-left. Some distinctively Florentine allusions to football were dropped and some other concepts gained prominence, such as *catenaccio*, which Renzi used to criticize the PD, its policies, and electoral tactics.

6.1 Seeking “away-goals”

The position of mayor of Florence provided Renzi with a notable visibility at the national level. As a mayor he became known for several reforms that he implemented, ranging from investments in culture and education to installing broadband connections throughout the city (Forestiere 2014). He also implemented some controversial reforms, including the elimination of posts for city officials in the name of efficiency. Renzi’s brusque style of implementing reforms also raised criticism that Renzi was, keeping in mind the metaphor of the fox and the lion from Machiavelli, more versed in pushing reforms with force than through careful co-operation. Renzi rebutted this critique by stating that, on the contrary, in terms of the number of implemented reforms, his first year as a mayor was characterized by too modest progress: *“Qualcuno mi dice che abbiamo giocato troppo all’attacco in questo primo anno. Secondo me si è fatto troppo catenaccio. Il secondo anno sarà molto più calcio totale.”*⁹²

As Renzi’s popularity grew, there were increasing criticisms against him within the PD, where many accused him of representing “left-wing Berlusconiism” (Bordignon 2014), that is, the political ideas and methods employed first by Berlusconi and then recycled by Renzi. The reputation of an audacious challenger that Renzi cherished was contrasted with a view that he did not represent the centre-left at all. The break from social democratic policies was most clear in Renzi’s embracement of many neoliberal ideas and policies. He demanded tax cuts, less bureaucracy, and labour market de-regulations. Renzi’s unenthusiastic attitude towards the trade unions, especially the leftist CGIL⁹³ and his close relationship with the CEO of Fiat, Sergio Marchionne, were considered signs of Renzi’s ideological incompatibility with the values of the party.

Renzi was not discouraged by the critique of his party fellows and continued to challenge what he considered to be “taboos” of the centre-left. He saw that the sensibility towards the most vulnerable was at the core of the ideology of leftist parties, yet their economic programmes often failed either to recognize new marginalized groups or to offer them convincing solutions. In other words, the centre-left “played too cautiously”, and left the initiative to their adversaries, who often appeared to offer greater assurance on issues regarding economic concerns:

Non dimentichiamo che se c’è una parte dell’Italia che continua a guardarci con sospetto è anche perché in questo campo giochiamo di rimessa, siamo spesso impauriti, e di conseguenza poco convincenti.⁹⁴ (Renzi 2011, 126)

⁹² “I am told that we have played too offensively during the first year. In my opinion, we have relied too much on catenaccio. The second year will see much more total football.” In L’intervista con Renzi di Paolo Ermini “Guerra alla stazione Foster. ‘Farò di tutto per fermarla’”, *Corriere Fiorentino*, June 16, 2010.

⁹³ *Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro* (Italian General Confederation of Labour)

⁹⁴ “Let us not forget that if there is a part of Italy that continues to look at us with suspicion, it is because on this field we leave the initiative for the opponents, we often appear timid and therefore unconvincing.”

Among the taboos to be confronted Renzi mentioned, for example, taxation. Praising taxes is, in terms of communication, an “evident political own goal” (*un evidente autogol politico*), which, despite undeniably noble objectives of redistributing wealth, results in a disadvantage for the party (Renzi 2011, 134).

Despite his profile as a practising Catholic, Renzi was in favour of civil unions between same-sex couples (Ignazi 2018, 240). However, the Catholic sensibilities within the PD left room for ambiguous approaches regarding issues of faith. In Renzi’s view, the difficulty of the centre-left to offer clear stances regarding these questions is to offer “a formidable assist to the conservative right” (*un terribile assist alla destra conservatrice*) (Renzi 2011, 156). Apart from policy substances, Renzi also criticized the centre-left’s style of doing politics, which he often criticized for being too prudent. He, for example, judged the education sector reform (*Riforma Gelmini*) to be unambitious and stated that as a centre-left politician he would have “played at the attack”, meaning that he would not only have been content with criticizing the reform, but rather sought modifications that would have been more wide-ranging: “*Avrei giocato all’attacco, incalzando il ministro e contestandole le parti in cui le è mancato il coraggio, non sarei restato sulla difensiva*” (Renzi 2011, 99).⁹⁵

In the passages quoted above, Renzi uses concepts familiar from football, such as *autogol* (own goal), *assist* (a pass that creates a goal-scoring opportunity), *giocare di rimessa* (to play in a manner that leaves the initiative to the opponent in the hope of exploiting their mistakes) and *restare sulla difensiva* (to play defensively), to discuss the policies of the PD. These terms are rather conventional, and they also regularly appear in the language of political commentators and in the news. Here, they refer to political miscalculations and mistaken approaches, and in general indicate negative assessment of the policies the centre-left has adopted. As an alternative to PD’s approaches, Renzi uses concepts such as *giocare all’attacco* or *calcio totale* to refer to his own approaches, which usually entailed more extensive or ambitious reforms.

As a part of strategic manoeuvring to gain political ground among those who have previously voted for the centre-right, Renzi was also determined to re-think the approach of the centre-left towards Berlusconi. The centre-left had long focused – legitimately but rather inefficiently – on denouncing Berlusconi’s conflict of interests (the clash between pursuing private and public interests) and his habit of making laws that would benefit him personally. Acknowledging that the rise of Berlusconi was a contingent event and perhaps as such unlikely to happen again, Renzi criticized the centre-left for concentrating too much on attacking and demonizing Berlusconi, rather than presenting a credible alternative to his leadership and his policies. According to him, portraying Berlusconi as an evil to fight has been politically beneficial only to Berlusconi, who succeeds best “in the derby spirit”, that is, in highly polarised political contests:

⁹⁵ “I would have played offensively, contesting and challenging the minister on aspects that were not bold enough, I would not have stayed defensive.”

Non c'è dubbio che Silvio Berlusconi sia un'anomalia nella politica europea. Il suo ingresso in scena, il suo comportamento, le sue vittorie e le sue sconfitte ne fanno un pezzo unico. Per fortuna, aggiungo io. Ma chi lo attacca in modo forsennato non si rende conto di rafforzarlo nella pancia del Paese. Crescono le urla delle due tifoserie in curva, ma il clima da derby è quello nel quale lui riesce meglio.⁹⁶ (Renzi 2011, 138)

According to Renzi, Berlusconi should be judged according to the quality of his political record, which Renzi considers unsuccessful. In his frequently repeated view, despite Berlusconi's remarkable successes in the fields of football, commercial television and real-estate, his political record in office reveals that he has ultimately failed to carry out necessary institutional reforms.

Berlusconi è stato un grandissimo innovatore nel settore televisivo, nel calcio, nell'edilizia, persino nell'organizzazione politica. Ma sotto il profilo istituzionale ha sempre preferito una linea più di compromesso, perdendo una storica opportunità di rivoluzionare davvero l'Italia.⁹⁷ (Renzi 2020, 126)

The change of approach towards Berlusconi was marked by the idea of fair play in the sense that it consisted of challenging Berlusconi at the political level instead of portraying him as an illegitimate adversary. Renzi did not focus on Berlusconi's conflict of interests but his unwillingness to take risks when pursuing the ambitious reforms that he had announced (cf. Newell 2018, 176).

Renzi's critique of the centre-left policies and his stance in relation to Berlusconi are indicative of his intention to reach beyond traditional leftist constituencies and to persuade disappointed voters of the centre-right to vote for the PD. Renzi was by no means dismissive when unexpectedly endorsed by Berlusconi's daughter, Barbara Berlusconi, who said that she would feel politically represented by Renzi, for which he commented: "*Fa piacere, è come quei gol nelle partite europee fatti in trasferta, valgono doppio.*"⁹⁸

The reference to the so-called away-goal rule⁹⁹ includes a political point in regards to the strategic aspects of political and electoral competition. In football,

⁹⁶ "There is no doubt that Silvio Berlusconi is an anomaly in European politics. His entrance on stage, his behaviour, his victories, and defeats make it a unique piece. Fortunately, I would like to add. But those who ferociously attack him do not realize that they are only strengthening him. The two fan sides are getting louder in the stands, but it is exactly the atmosphere of derby in which he succeeds best."

⁹⁷ "Berlusconi has been a great innovator in the television industry, in football, in the building trade, even in party politics. However, from an institutional point of view, he has always preferred a cautious approach, and therefore lost a historic opportunity to revolutionize Italy."

⁹⁸ "I am delighted, it can be compared to those goals scored away from home in the European matches, which count double." In "A Silvio strappo voti in casa", *Corriere della Sera*, December 22, 2010.

⁹⁹ The away goal rule was introduced in 1965–1966 in the European Cup Winners' Cup as a method of determining the result in the event of a tie, which featured both home and away legs, that is, when the teams played two matches against each other and once at each team's home stadium. If the number of goals scored by the two teams was the same on aggregate, the team that had scored more goals as a visiting side ("away") was considered the winner and qualified for the next round in the competition. Therefore, it is at times (inaccurately) said that the away goals "count double". The original intention of the rule was to encourage attacking football especially from the visiting side, yet over time and due to the increasing tactical complexity of the game, it had the opposite effect, as it led the home teams to play defensively. The away goal rule was abolished in UEFA club

the away goal rule granted a decisive weight for goals scored away from home in two-legged fixtures in the event of a tie. The rule increased the tactical complexity of the game as the teams could interpret the rule in different ways to gain the upper hand over their opponents. Here, the concept is extended to refer to the challenge that every politician and party must consider, namely, while it is important to defend traditional constituencies and avoid alienating the “core” voters, it is also important to elaborate policies and strategies that attract larger and more diverse clientele, in Renzi’s terms, “to seek away-goals”. The balancing between base and swing voters is also a question about the degree of risk one is willing to take, as the attempt to reach out to new voters always includes the risk of alienating former base electorate.

One of Renzi’s objectives was to make the PD a convincing alternative, capable of winning elections. To do this, Renzi took a comparative look at what he regarded as the best point of reference for the “winning and convincing left” worldwide, namely Tony Blair’s New Labour (Renzi 2011, 175). Renzi, when he addressed the issue of making the PD a winning alternative again, had in mind the example set by Blair when he took over the Labour Party in the early 1990s and successfully re-invented the party for the 1997 elections by positioning it to the centre (see Hindmoor 2004). Renzi seemed to embrace the Blairite model rather uncritically, considering that by the time Renzi raised the issue, the limits of New Labour had already become evident, and the charisma of its leader Blair had been consumed.

Renzi’s analysis of the PD in 2011 was very similar to that of Blair’s analysis of Labour in the early 1990s. In his memoir *A Journey*, Blair explains that when he became the leader of the Labour Party in 1994, the party was crippled by defeatism due to poor electoral results (Blair 2010). Blair described this state of resignation within the party, resorting to the famous saying from former footballer Gary Lineker: “[I]t was like the old football adage: a game played with a round ball, two teams of eleven players, forty-five minutes in each half and the Germans always win” (Blair 2010, 2). Blair, instead, was convinced that the reasons for the Labour Party’s decay was not that they were cursed to perpetual opposition but that they simply were “out of touch with the modern voter in the modern world” (Blair 2010, 2).

Renzi had expressed similar concerns regarding the state of the centre-left, and especially the PD, in Italy. In the three general elections held during the 2000s, namely in 2001, 2006 and 2008, the centre-left had won only in 2006 with a coalition led by Romano Prodi (for an analysis of the 2006 elections, see Newell 2006). However, the Prodi government lasted for only two years and collapsed due to internal disputes. In both the 2001 and 2008 general elections, a Berlusconi-led centre-right coalition managed to secure a net electoral victory, partly due to the internal confusion and disarray of the centre-left. Thus, when Renzi argued that he wanted to steer the PD back to the path of electoral victories, it must have

competitions in 2021 as anachronistic. (see UEFA, <https://www.uefa.com/returntoplay/news/026a-1298aeb73a7a-5b64cb68d920-1000--abolition-of-away-goals-rule-in-all-uefa-club-competitions/>. Accessed April 6, 2022)

sounded compelling to those who supported the centre-left but were discouraged by its current situation:

Lunghi anni di sfegatato tifo per la Fiorentina, che non mollerò mai, e numerose sconfitte elettorali nazionali, che spero prima o poi di interrompere, non mi hanno ancora vaccinato a quel gigantesco luogo comune per il quale l'importante è partecipare. Idea olimpica, certo, che però sembra anche essere divenuto il vero slogan di una certa sinistra. Con tutto il rispetto per De Coubertin – non molto sincero perché mi è sempre rimasto piuttosto antipatico – io vorrei vincere, non partecipare.¹⁰⁰ (Renzi 2011, 207)

The diagnosis Renzi proposed had much in common with Blair's analysis of the Labour Party before he took it over. Renzi laments that the centre-left, after so many disappointing electoral results, has almost come to believe that it is not capable of winning elections and governing. He claims that the idealist slogan attributed to the father of the modern Olympics, Pierre De Coubertin, namely that it is the participation rather than the victory that counts, seems to have become an unfortunate motto for a part of the centre-left. Like Blair, Renzi also resorts to football in analysing the situation of the PD. He claims that neither the rare successes of Fiorentina over the years nor the numerous electoral defeats have resigned him to defeatism. The reference to Fiorentina's fluctuating fortunes is amusing but it also carries a political point. Namely, even if one can never control all the possible contingencies along the way, a political party always has a chance of winning democratic elections and re-figuring the government and opposition lines if it elaborates its strategies and policies well and relates them to the ones created by their opponents, precisely like underdog football teams can defy the odds and overcome stronger opponents with clever tactics.

The persuasiveness of Renzi's analysis, and what later boosted his rise to the party leadership, resided in his promise to deliver electoral victory. Winning the position of mayor was a sign of his ability to win political contests:

Noi a Firenze vogliamo vincere, altro che partecipare. Ma sappiamo da molto tempo, per esperienza diretta, che è meglio secondi che ladri.¹⁰¹ (Renzi 2011, 181)

The emphasis on the victory did not entail any kind of winning-at-all-costs mentality, where political success would be pursued independently of wider consequences or dismissing the institutional constraints, but to stress the idea that winning elections is a necessary condition to alter the issues. In other words, without electoral success and the possibility to govern, the party has nothing but good intentions. The expression *meglio secondi che ladri*¹⁰² (better to be second than

¹⁰⁰ "Long years of passionate support for Fiorentina, which I will never give up, and several national electoral defeats, which I hope sooner or later to interrupt, have not yet convinced me of the gigantic cliché which states that the important thing is to participate. It is of course the Olympic ideal which, however, also seems to have become the true slogan of a certain left. With all due respect to De Coubertin, not very sincere though because I have always considered him rather unpleasant. I would like to win, not only to participate."

¹⁰¹ "We in Florence want to win, not just participate. But the experience has taught us that it is better to be second than to be thieves."

¹⁰² The adage *meglio secondi che ladri* originates from the 1982 championship battle between Fiorentina and Juventus, which Fiorentina, under controversial circumstances, lost the

to be thieves) is a common football adage in Florence, and although it is often used ironically in a football context to invoke a sense of sporting injustice, Renzi gives it a different meaning. His point is that while trying to win is a necessary and legitimate feature of any political contest, the victory should not be pursued at whatever cost, and accepting defeat is not only an unavoidable part of politics but also a political and democratic virtue. This marks a net difference to Berlusconi, who habitually pursued *ad personam* legislation that undermined Italian institutions and people's trust in politicians and public authorities.

By the end of 2011, Berlusconi's government reached a deadlock primarily due to the eurozone crisis. Furthermore, Berlusconi himself was entangled in several scandals concerning his private life. The worsening of the euro crisis made clear that Berlusconi, who denied that there was any crisis at all, was not able to carry on with the reforms that were expected from Italy. President Napolitano played a decisive role¹⁰³ in forcing Berlusconi to resign. He then appointed former European Commissioner (1995–2004) Mario Monti as the new prime minister. Monti formed a new technocratic government in November 2011 and introduced austerity policies which were a bitter pill for many in the PD.

6.2 The PD in search of “Maradona”

By 2011, according to certain polls, Renzi had become one of the most popular mayors of Italy (although he claimed that he would happily swap this recognition for Fiorentina to be first place in Serie A).¹⁰⁴ The position of mayor of Florence offered Renzi some necessary distance from where he could continue to challenge the establishment of the party. Eventually, his continuous pressure led to the coalition primaries in November 2012 to choose the prime minister candidate for the centre-left coalition.

As a mayor, Renzi praised the work of local administrators because they are in contact with the daily struggles of the people and contrasted them with the “self-referential” parliamentarians based in Rome. Renzi claimed that ignoring the perceived elitist image of the left would be a serious miscalculation, “a glamorous own goal”, and that Italy “squanders penalty kicks” because it is too afraid to make space for the new:

Quando parli con le persone, ti rendi conto che il tema della casta a sinistra è forte, fortissimo. Forse quelli che da tanti anni stanno in parlamento non se ne sono accorti.

championship to Juventus by a margin of one point (see footnote 53). The weekly *Brivido Sportivo* coined the expression, and it has ever since belonged to the discourse of Fiorentina supporters, symbolizing the rivalry between the two teams.

¹⁰³ In Italy, the most relevant powers of the President of the Republic consist of powers to appoint the prime minister (and other ministers on the prime minister's proposal), to dissolve and convoke the parliament and to promulgate laws. However, since the text of the constitution is not very precise, the presidents have enjoyed ample room for manoeuvre especially during political crises or when the governments have been weak or unstable (for the role of President Napolitano during 2010–2014, see Tebaldi 2014).

¹⁰⁴ “Renzi prende la lode. Alemanno si azzera”, *La Gazzetta dello Sport*, January 11, 2011.

Ma l'indignazione profonda verso la classe dirigente monta soprattutto nel nostro campo. Non accorgersene rischia di essere un clamoroso autogol.¹⁰⁵ (Renzi 2011, 65)

Firenze è nel cuore di un'Italia ferma, bloccata, impaurita. Di un'Italia che spreca i calci di rigore per la paura di provarci e che nasconde i tanti talenti dietro la rassegnazione e la monotonia di una politica deprimente.¹⁰⁶ (Renzi 2011, 182)

These criticisms were in line with Renzi's intent to "scrap" the political oligarchy of his own party, but they were also indicative of the struggles within the party, which became manifest in the 2012 primaries. As early as in 2010, Renzi had released the interview to *La Repubblica* where he demanded the "scrapping" of the political elite of the PD and more space for the young, which created discontent in the party. Renzi, who had enthusiastically supported the party model envisaged by Veltroni in 2007, certainly saw the birth of the PD also as means to dismantle the heavy and bureaucratic party apparatus of the DS, against which he had polemicized in the past. However, Renzi believed that Bersani's leadership risked turning back the clock, and the return of the heavily structured party from the 20th century (Renzi 2011, 197).

Instead, Bersani, who had always emphasized the importance of the collective, considered Renzi's criticisms disruptive. After the release of Renzi's polemical interview, Bersani stated that he was not against accommodating young talents and their proposals but added pungently that he sees no "Maradona" around within the party,¹⁰⁷ which was an implicit critique targeted at Renzi. Keeping in mind that Bersani had read his Weber, the reference to Diego Maradona—the Argentinian endowed with exceptional football skills who brought his country the World Cup trophy in 1986—invokes the idea of charismatic authority, which rests on the belief that a person possesses extraordinary talent or personal abilities. As previously noted, Bersani remained highly suspicious of figures that sought legitimation from personal charisma. Renzi's close collaborator at the time, Giuseppe "Pippo" Civati, was unhappy that Bersani's football analogy dismissed the point about generational change within the party, but went on to say that even if the PD happened to find an extraordinary talent like Maradona among them, it would probably just end up obstructing his work.¹⁰⁸ Even some intellectuals took part in the debate, always keeping with football. Philosopher Sergio Givone, for example, stated that it is better to have eleven players like Gennaro Gattuso in the team rather than eleven players like Maradona,¹⁰⁹ which can be interpreted as a cautious support for

¹⁰⁵ "When you talk to people, you realize that the idea of a leftist elite remains very strong. Perhaps those who have spent several years in the parliament have not noticed it. But the deep resentment towards the ruling class is especially tenacious on our side. Ignoring it risks being a glamorous own goal."

¹⁰⁶ "Florence lies at the heart of a stagnant, blocked, scared Italy, an Italy that squanders penalty kicks because of the fear of failure, and that hides many talents behind the resignation and the monotony of depressing politics."

¹⁰⁷ "Pd, Renzi raddoppia. E Bersani fa muro", *Corriere Fiorentino*, August 31, 2010.

¹⁰⁸ "Facce nuove, per questo paese. Non contro Berlusconi", *Corriere Fiorentino*, September 2, 2010.

¹⁰⁹ "Schiavone: no al gelo contro le critiche. Givone: idee, non eroi", *Corriere Fiorentino*, August 31, 2010.

Bersani's line. During his player career, Gattuso became known as a tireless and hard-working defensive midfielder.

Renzi's daredevilish *rottamazione* had proved successful in launching him to the national stage but its limits were evident. Apart from being a repugnant formulation for many, Renzi faced criticisms that his actions were causing instability within the party. In May 2012, Dario Franceschini, former party secretary during a transition period after Veltroni's resignation, saw Renzi's constant criticisms towards the party leadership as the manifestation of a "virus" that weakens the centre-left.¹¹⁰ By this he meant that the centre-left tends to undermine the work of the leaders they have chosen.

The internal struggle within the PD acquired aspects that Michels had portrayed in his seminal work, that is, the struggle between the incumbent leaders and the aspirant leaders often turns into "a struggle between the responsible and irresponsible persons" (Michels 1959, 171-172). For Franceschini, Renzi represented a wildcard that shook the stability of the party at an inopportune moment. Organizing primaries less than a year before the elections was, in his view, an unnecessary risk, which would contain more unpredictable consequences than going forward with Bersani's leadership. This kind of prudent attitude was understandable in the light of the upcoming elections. Although joining the parliamentary coalition led by the technocrat Mario Monti in 2011 was distasteful for many in the PD, the difficulties of the centre-right coalition and its leader Berlusconi seemed to strengthen the position of the PD, and thus to discourage sudden changes.

While Franceschini's analysis suggested that avoiding risks and "playing it safe" would be the best course of action for the party prior to elections, Renzi argued the opposite. Although he did not deny that new leadership always contains an element of risk, he tried to reinterpret in a more positive fashion. For Renzi, the willingness to take risks is the characteristic of a competent politician but risks are also something that makes politics attractive and intriguing (see also Renzi 2011, 27-30; 2013, 45, 56). He illustrated this with an anecdotal football story:

Io ammiro profondamente lo spirito del navigatore, anche oggi. Non ci sono caravelle, non ci sono bussole, non ci sono nuovi mondi. Ma il bisogno di rimettersi in gioco, sempre. Penso, tra i tanti personaggi straordinari che ho avuto la fortuna di incontrare, a uno sportivo. L'allenatore del Barcellona, Pep Guardiola. Uno che ha vinto tutto e ha costruito una squadra impressionante, capace di giocare un calcio tra i migliori della storia. Guardiola viene spesso a Firenze, perché innamorato di questa terra. E una volta, a pranzo, mi disse: "Per il tuo lavoro devi rischiare tutto ogni giorno, ma anche per me è fondamentale. Non voglio contratti pluriennali: dipendesse da me rinnoverei il contratto ogni sei mesi per far capire ai giocatori che il primo che rischia tutto è il loro allenatore". Che spettacolo! In un mondo dove tutti chiedono il rinnovo per anni e anni, dove tutti vivono alla disperata ricerca di garanzie su garanzie, lui che in virtù dei suoi successi potrebbe chiedere qualunque cosa si rimette in gioco. Qualcuno penserà: lui

¹¹⁰ "Renzi? Nel Pd ci sono troppi galli", *Corriere della Sera*, May 12, 2012.

lo può fare perché è Guardiola. Mi piace pensare: è diventato Guardiola perché l'ha sempre pensata così.¹¹¹ (Renzi 2012, 150)

Renzi's account of Guardiola's visit to Florence and his alleged words to Renzi regarding the similarities between the work of football managers and politicians are used here as *chreia*, an anecdotal story from a famous person that is used to instruct. In Renaissance rhetoric testimonies were used to prove an author's case and to bring prestige to the one who cited it (Serjeantson 2007, 192). The moral of the story was to suggest a parallel between the two, and the media¹¹² indeed quickly grasped the similarities between Renzi's and Guardiola's trajectories as "innovators", albeit on different fields. Guardiola is generally regarded as one of the greatest managers of modern football. Under his guidance, FC Barcelona became representative of the "tiki-taka" style of play, which consists of ball possession and short, quick passes to break the opponent's defensive line.

Renzi started to voice louder criticisms of the party leadership to pressure them to organize the primaries. He maintained that Bersani, who was elected secretary in 2009, was not legitimate to represent the party without turning himself into a candidate again.¹¹³ With his continuous pressure, Renzi forced Bersani to take a stance on his challenge and finally Bersani agreed to organize coalition primaries in 2012, although there were political disagreements about this decision as well as procedural obstacles deriving from the statutes of the PD itself (Corbetta and Vignati 2013). Namely, as provided for in the statutes of the PD, if the party intended to compete in coalition primaries that involved the selection of a prime ministerial candidate, the candidacy of the PD belonged automatically to the secretary general, that is, to Pier Luigi Bersani, and to make other candidacies possible, the party had to consent to a temporary suspension to this rule (Vassallo and Passarelli 2016, 18).

Again, disagreements arose regarding the exact voting procedures, and especially who is eligible to cast a vote. The rules stated that the voter must pre-register, sign a document where they declared that they share the values of the centre-left, and the minors were excluded from the right to vote. Also, a second

¹¹¹ "I still deeply admire the mindset of a sailor. Although there are no caravels, no compasses, no new worlds, the desire to take on new challenges remains. I have in mind, among many extraordinary people I have been lucky enough to meet, a sportsman. The coach of Barcelona, Pep Guardiola. Someone who has won it all and built an impressive team, capable of playing some of the best football in history. Guardiola often comes to Florence because he is in love with this region. Once, while having lunch together, he said to me: 'In your job, you must risk it all every day, but it is equally crucial for me. I do not want long-term contracts: if it depended on me, I would renew my contract every six months to make the players realize that the first person to risk everything is their coach.' How impressive! In a world where people are applying for extensions to their contracts year after year, where everyone is desperately seeking guarantees on top of guarantees, the one who, by the virtue of his successes, could ask whatever he wants, takes the risk. Someone may think that he can do it because he is Guardiola. I prefer to think that he became Guardiola because he has always thought that way."

¹¹² "Guardiola porta un bacione a Firenze e incontra Renzi", *La Gazzetta dello Sport*, May 18, 2011.

¹¹³ See "Sfido Bersani alle primarie, dovrà farle. Non è legittimato da quelle 2009", *Corriere della Sera*, May 11, 2012.

ballot was introduced in case no candidate obtained an absolute majority in the first round. Above all, the need for pre-registration was a matter of heated dispute. It was considered a measure to prevent the primaries from being decided by those who are alien to the centre-left tradition, and from Renzi's point of view, a hindrance to him, as he was likely to attract voters beyond traditional leftist constituencies.

Renzi announced officially his candidacy in the primaries for choosing the centre-left candidate for prime minister in Verona in September 2012. The initial set-up for the campaign was again interpreted as an underdog challenging a stronger adversary. Or in Renzi's own terms, "a newly promoted team" challenging a "Champions League team", which denotes the obvious superiority that the party-backed candidate was expected to enjoy compared to the challenger:

È ovvio che da una parte c'è una squadra abituata alla Champions League, e dall'altra una neopromossa. Noi però ci siamo allenati, e se ci va tutto bene, ce la giochiamo.¹¹⁴

Although a similar manoeuvre had been successful in the mayoral election of Florence, Renzi acknowledged that here the stakes were higher, as the winner would become the prime ministerial candidate of the centre-left:

Ma qui c'era in ballo l'Italia, una partita troppo grossa per la nostra tenace allegria e per il nostro giovanile entusiasmo.¹¹⁵ (Renzi 2013, 57)

Renzi held his campaign opening speech in Verona in September. The content of the speech consisted of similar arguments and rhetorical figures that he had presented in the mayoral campaign in Florence. The courage to "take the penalty" is used again to indicate the emergence of political momentum. Facing a failure ("to miss the penalty") is better than indecision ("staying on the bench"):

Nella vita di tutti noi arriva il momento in cui il vero rischio è non tirare il calcio di rigore, non sbagliarlo. Il vero rischio è restare in panchina.¹¹⁶ (Renzi 2012b)

The choice of the venue of the announcement, Verona, a traditional stronghold of right-wing parties, emphasized Renzi's attempt to appeal to the disillusioned voters of the centre-right. To add symbolic weight to the location, Verona was also the place where Dante sought refuge after being exiled from his native Florence. All this was meant to accentuate the initial set-up for the contest. Renzi, who was unlikely to get support from the higher echelons of his own party,

¹¹⁴ "It is obvious that on one side, there is a team that is used to playing in the Champions League and on the other side there is a newly promoted team. However, we have been training, and if everything goes well, we have a chance." In "Renzi: 'Big uniti solo contro di me ma se vinco io vanno tutti a casa'", *La Repubblica*, August 30, 2012. Available at https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2012/08/30/news/intervista_renzi-41693970/. Accessed April 6, 2022.

¹¹⁵ "Here, what was at stake was Italy, a match too big for our determined optimism and youthful enthusiasm."

¹¹⁶ "In the lives of all of us there comes a moment when the real risk is not to miss the penalty, but to refuse to take it altogether. The real risk is to stay on the bench."

had to seek support outside traditional partisan lines. *Corriere della Sera* formulated the same idea in football terms and noted that the only viable option for Renzi was to try to score “away-goals”: “non resta che provare a recuperare in trasferta, dove i gol valgono doppio”.¹¹⁷

Making a direct appeal to the centre-right, using football language, and the speech venue, which lacked any symbols denoting the belonging to the PD, seemed to give legitimation to the suspicions that Renzi was indeed an alien figure in the centre-left. Even his opponents on the centre-right recognized that Renzi shared many of their objectives. Berlusconi, for example, praised Renzi for bringing the ideas of the centre-right under the banner of the PD,¹¹⁸ which was unusual because he usually judged every centre-left politician simply as a “communist.” The secretary of the centre-right party *Popolo della Libertà* (Pdl), Angelino Alfano, instead commented that Renzi shares such a similar political vision with the centre-right that if he happens to lose the primaries, he could vote for them.¹¹⁹ Renzi took some distance to these comments and maintained that if he wins the primaries, Berlusconi would be among the first figures to be “scrapped”.¹²⁰

Bersani’s decision to accept the modification to the party statutes and to organize the primaries was a way of “institutionalizing” the dissent presented by Renzi (Ignazi 2018, 239). As for Renzi, in the case of defeat he promised his full support to the winner, but also systematically refused alternative posts – a script he had used already in Florence’s local politics.

Se si perde, non ci si inventa l’ennesima formancionzina politica di Serie Z, se si perde si da una mano a chi ha vinto perché la sconfitta fa parte del gioco e la vera sconfitta è non provarci. Se noi perdiamo saremo in prima fila a dare una mano a chi ha vinto.¹²¹ (Renzi 2012b)

In the case of defeat, Renzi refused any alternative offices by arguing that awarding prestigious posts to the defeated would be just another unhappy compromise, “a political formation of Serie Z”. Instead of seeing it as means to preserve the party unity, Renzi interpreted it in merely negative terms as means to tame and control internal opposition. Thus, the point of this move was that in the case of defeat, Renzi would still uphold a profile as a clear alternative to the incumbent party leadership, and as such it had significance for his political career beyond the campaign. A potential defeat could thus be considered only a temporary setback, similarly to football where single defeats are likely to occur during a long league season.

¹¹⁷ “All we can do is to try to score away, where the goals are worth double.” In “Renzi: si fa una nuova Italia. E cerca i voti dei delusi pdl”, *Corriere della Sera*, September 14, 2012.

¹¹⁸ “Renzi ha le nostre idee con insegne pd”, *Corriere della Sera*, September 17, 2012.

¹¹⁹ “Renzi: si fa una nuova Italia. E cerca i voti dei delusi pdl”, *Corriere della Sera*, September 14, 2012.

¹²⁰ “Il sindaco duella con Veltroni. E ‘rottama’ il Cavaliere”, *Corriere della Sera*, September 17, 2012.

¹²¹ “If we lose, we do not put up yet another poor political formation of Serie Z. If we lose, we will support the one who wins because the defeat is part of the game, and the true defeat is not to have tried at all. If we lose, we will be the first to support the one who wins.”

Notwithstanding Renzi's commitment to fair play, his decision to enter the contest was criticized with arguments that portrayed Renzi's actions as reckless and even dangerous. Michele Prospero, in a column in *l'Unità*, depicted Renzi negatively as a cunning aspiring politician (*un politicante astuto*), which was certainly not praise for Renzi's political savvy, and blamed the whole idea of *rottamazione* on "fascist ancestry".¹²² Bersani instead built his campaign on the ethos of continuity and trustworthiness. In evident contrast to Renzi's audacious profile as "the scrapper" (*il rottamatore*), Bersani was referred to as "the used safe" (*l'usato sicuro*) during the campaign, a nickname that was meant to appeal to the moderate electorate who would appreciate stability over contingency.

6.3 "The Bersani–Renzi derby": The 2012 coalition primaries

The first ballot of the primaries was organized in November 2012. Bersani failed to obtain an absolute majority of the vote in the first round of the primaries (Bersani 44.9% and Renzi 35.5%), which led to a run-off between him and Renzi on December 2.

The 2012 primaries represent the moment during which the concept of *catenaccio* started to appear in Renzi's rhetoric more regularly. In his campaign opening in Verona, Renzi urged the centre-left to "abandon the logic of *catenaccio*" and to adopt a more offensive playing style:

Quando il centrosinistra rifiuta la logica del *catenaccio*, quando non si chiude nel proprio campo impaurito, e prova a giocare all'attacco, rischia di farcela, e se ce la fa, allora è una grande chance che è quella di imporre il futuro alla politica italiana.¹²³ (Renzi 2012b)

Se noi non ci chiudiamo in difesa, se noi giochiamo all'attacco, il centrosinistra può persino correre il rischio di vincere e di stupire. Può persino correre il rischio di andare a mettere in campo una squadra di amministratori più giovani anche di quella che io rappresento.¹²⁴ (Renzi 2012b)

After the first ballot, he continued to insist that the centre-left must make a choice between Bersani's "catenaccio" and his "total football":

Agli elettori dico che c'è un allenatore che fa il *catenaccio* e l'allenatore che fa il calcio totale. Io non ce la faccio a dire "noi" e mettere Bindi e D'Alema, perché io li metterei in panchina, se non in tribuna. Qualcun altro invece li convoca e li fa giocare titolari. Non sono due squadre diverse. La squadra è la stessa. Ma voglio dire agli elettori di centrosinistra di scegliere l'allenatore. Se sceglierete Bersani, io continuerò a fare il tifo per questa squadra, senza cambiarla. Però fino all'ultimo giorno farò di tutto per

¹²² Michele Prospero "Rottamazione è una parola fascistoide. La sfida è costruire una nuova politica", *l'Unità*, October 16, 2012.

¹²³ "When the centre-left rejects the logic of *catenaccio*, when it does not close on its own side of the field frightened, and tries to play attackingly, it may be successful. Should that happen, it represents a great chance to determine the future of Italian politics."

¹²⁴ "If we do not retreat into defence and if we play on the attack, the centre-left has a chance to win and surprise the people. It may even field a team of administrators younger than what I represent."

cambiare l'allenatore, perché per vincere la partita bisognerà giocare un po' di più sul possesso di palla che sulla difesa.¹²⁵ (Quoted in Galimberti 2015, 53)

The passages above illustrate how football tactics or styles are used as a medium of political analysis. Relying on football, Renzi presents political choices here as clear opposites (a defensive against an attacking style of play and *catenaccio* against *calcio totale*). Renzi does not go on to explain in detail what these opposites would entail politically, but he assumes that the superiority of attacking play or *calcio totale* that he represents is self-evident as opposed to the defensive *catenaccio* of Bersani. The meaning for using such rhetoric seems to be that of simplifying the contest between the two candidates. To take a stand in favour of Bersani or Renzi is easier when the choices are presented in stark contrast. Defence-oriented *catenaccio* is usually depicted as an opposite to more attacking *calcio totale* but Renzi also exploits these concepts in a partisan way to stress the differences between him and Bersani.

In the end, Renzi's appeal remains quite vague and perhaps ineffective, especially when considering that a part of his appeal was based not only upon the promise to bring forth a new style of doing politics, but also on the promise of delivering results. The Netherlands football team who practiced total football never succeeded in lifting the most glamorous and desired trophy even though their playing style was acclaimed throughout the world. A more apt football analogy would have been Sacchi's AC Milan, which managed to combine both style and results, but which would have obviously been too bold in the context of the centre-left primaries, where Renzi was often accused of representing Berlusconi.

As a response to those who thought Renzi's candidacy would threaten the cohesion of the party, Renzi assured them that, were he to lose, he would accept the defeat and continue to support the winner. By affirming that even in the case of defeat he would choose "loyalty" over "exit" (Hirschman 1975), Renzi ensured that the primaries were conducted in the spirit of fair play.

Although Renzi had renounced the concept of "scrapping" as too repulsive, the idea of replacing the old party elite with younger reformists was still at the core of his idea of how to re-invigorate Italian politics, but now it was expressed by resorting to football. Returning to the last quote on the previous page, Renzi explicitly mentions the names of former Prime Minister Massimo D'Alema and former Family Minister Rosy Bindi as examples of politicians that he would like to replace by sending them to the bench (*in panchina*) or even to the stands (*in tribuna*). Renzi also suggests that if Bersani won the primaries, he would give

¹²⁵ "I tell voters that there is a coach who relies on *catenaccio* and a coach who relies on total football. I cannot say 'we' and field Bindi and D'Alema, because I would rather put them on the bench, if not in the stands. Someone else, instead, would field them in the starting line-up. These are not two different teams. The team remains the same. I want to ask centre-left voters to choose the coach. If you choose Bersani, I will continue to support this team, without changing it. However, until the end, I will give my all to replace the coach, because to win the match it is necessary to keep possession of the ball rather than rely on the defence."

them prominent positions within the party, by placing them in the “starting lineup” (*li fa giocare titolari*).

Renzi insisted that the change presupposes a leader that is not bound to the schemes of the past like Bersani: “*Ci divide l’idea di futuro. Bersani è favorito, ma con lui allenatore giocano in campo le vecchie glorie.*”¹²⁶ Although Renzi abandoned the concept of “scrapping”, he was still criticized for using language that seemed to provoke conflicts and divisions in the party. After the first ballot, Bersani criticized Renzi for resorting to distinctions between “us” and “them”, whereas Bersani saw the only meaningful political division not between his and Renzi’s supporters, but between the centre-left and Berlusconi-led centre-right.¹²⁷ As a response to this, Renzi, in an interview with *l’Unità*, defended this kind of either-or argumentation as an inherent part of the contest, which included the choice between two candidates although the contest was taking place within his own party. For those longing for a consensus, Renzi promised that, no matter the result of the second ballot, it would end the intra-party struggles:

Certo che c’è un noi e un loro. Noi pensiamo che debba essere cambiato allenatore, modulo di gioco e squadra. Ma se perdiamo staremo nella squadra di chi ha vinto senza chiedere nessun premio. Siamo leali.¹²⁸

A difference between Bersani and Renzi can be seen in their approach to political struggles which happen inside the party. Bersani, arguing for harmony and consensus, saw that the main players of politics are either parties or wider coalitions who compete against each other in the elections. Renzi instead pushed forward the idea that “playing” should also be possible between individuals within the same party. Extending the idea of playing within his own party can be regarded as a novel example of how football language is applied in Italian politics. Berlusconi, who had for a long time been the undisputed leader of the centre-right, never had to focus on intra-party struggles.

Despite Renzi’s strong campaign, the second ballot saw Bersani prevail over Renzi (Bersani 60.9% and Renzi 39.1%). After the result was clear, Renzi held a concession speech where he congratulated Bersani for his victory, an uncommon practice within the Italian political context. The concession speech was widely regarded as the best speech Renzi has delivered and he admitted that his enthusiasm and optimism had not persuaded the electorate to vote for him. Despite the defeat, the contest marked an important moment in Renzi’s political career. If we continue the conceptualization of Renzi based on football tactics, the campaign he put forward was formidable but not enough to bring the result home, analogously to the Dutch team in 1974 World Cup, which was widely praised for its elegant total football but unable to combine style with result, as

¹²⁶ “What divides us is the idea of the future. Bersani is the favourite, but he fields the old glories.” In “Bersani: politica non solo per ricchi. Renzi: il centrosinistra ha fallito”, *l’Unità*, November 29, 2012.

¹²⁷ “Bersani: basta slogan si vota sul premier”, *l’Unità*, November 27, 2012.

¹²⁸ “Of course, there is ‘us’ and ‘them.’ We think that the coach, the playing system, and the team should be replaced. But if we lose, we will back the team of the winner without asking anything in exchange. We will remain loyal.” In “Mi attaccano ma sarà un boomerang”, *l’Unità*, November 30, 2012.

the team was beaten by West Germany in the final. However, the way Renzi ran the campaign and handled defeat contributed to legitimating him as a promising future figure in the party. Judged in hindsight, his handling of the contest and the events that followed quickly turned the initial defeat into a future advantage. In this sense, it could be compared to the famous Cruyff turn,¹²⁹ not in the sense of doing a U-turn in his approaches but in the sense of granting him more space within the playground of the PD.

6.4 Squandering a penalty kick: The 2013 elections

It was expected that an open competition for the leadership would rally the centre-left electorate before the general election in February 2013. The PD also performed well in the polls prior to elections, raising the expectations that the victory was almost assured (Seddone and Venturino 2015, 477). The electoral result, however, turned out to be a disappointment for the PD, whose margin of victory was much narrower than expected. The Berlusconi-led right-wing coalition succeeded better than expected and a new force, *Movimento 5 Stelle*, led by comedian Beppe Grillo, established itself in Italian politics (D'Alimonte 2013).

For Renzi, the 2013 electoral contest represented “a wasted penalty kick”, that is, a lost opportunity for the PD. The key question of his pamphlet *Oltre la rottamazione*, published soon after the election, was: “[C]ome abbiamo fatto a sprecare un calcio di rigore come quello della campagna elettorale del 2013?”¹³⁰ (Renzi 2013, 50). The pamphlet opens with a reference to football, as Renzi notes that Sir Alex Ferguson’s departure from Manchester United, after having been the team’s coach for 27 years consecutive, indicates that even the most basic “truths” have turned out to be contingent. Except for one, he continues provokingly, the only thing that remains “certain” is that the left squanders an opportunity to win the elections, even when all the signs prior to elections indicated that the victory was at hand:

I primi mesi del 2013 ci hanno tolto molte certezze. ... [P]er chi ama il calcio, è sinceramente complicato non avvertire il vuoto pensando che uno dei più grandi allenatori di sempre, sir Alex Ferguson, lasci dopo ventisette anni la panchina e la guida del Manchester United.

Ci sono tutti gli elementi, dunque, per perdere la bussola. Ma qualche certezza resta intatta. Fortunatamente o sfortunatamente, sia chiaro. Per esempio, la certezza che la

¹²⁹ The Cruyff turn is a football move, performed by the legendary Dutch footballer Johan Cruyff in the 1974 World Cup group stage against Sweden. It was about creating space and changing the direction of the play in a situation that seemed unsurmountable. The Cruyff turn also came to symbolize the total football that the Dutch team performed in that tournament (see Cruyff 2017).

¹³⁰ “How did we manage to squander a penalty kick like that in the 2013 electoral campaign?”

sinistra italiana riesca a perdere le elezioni, anche quando sembrerebbe impossibile di farlo.¹³¹ (Renzi 2013, 7)

In fact, the PD did not, at least in the technical sense, lose the election. It was the largest party in the 2013 election and, in this sense, the winner of the elections. However, the majority in the Chamber of Deputies was obtained partly as a result of the technicalities of the electoral law, which granted the largest party a notable bonus of seats. This secured the PD a majority in the Chamber of Deputies, but not in the Senate, where the proportional system with a majority bonus was applied differently (for a detailed account of this electoral system and its implications in the 2013 elections, see D'Alimonte 2013). Eventually, this result led to institutional gridlock because the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate perform the same duties in the legislative process.

Renzi had an opportune moment to voice his critique because after the 2012 primaries he had not stood for election, which allowed him to distance himself from the post-election events. In addition to the unsuccessful electoral campaign, Renzi lists two more reasons for the defeat. The first one is having established the rules of the 2012 primaries (see section 6.2) only with an eye to the “Bersani–Renzi derby” (Renzi 2013, 58), which for Renzi meant that the rules were decided to prevent his success and thus contributed to damaging the image of the party. Secondly, Renzi claims that the PD poorly handled the negotiations to form a new government and criticized the party for its inability to find a successor to Giorgio Napolitano as the President of the Republic, whose term was coming to an end (see Renzi 2013, 60–63).

Many analysts also believed that the disappointing result was, at least to some extent, due to the uninspiring campaign led by Bersani. The successful mobilization of the primaries served as an ideal start for the electoral campaign, but instead of taking advantage of the momentum, the PD—seemingly content with protecting their front-runner position—“closed itself in catenaccio”, as political scientist Mauro Calise put it:

Le primarie, iniziate come una marcia trionfale, si trasformano in una trappola, l'illusione di avere – sondaggi alla mano – già vinto e di potersi chiudere a catenaccio in difesa, proprio quando sarebbe stato, invece, indispensabile sferrare l'attacco decisivo.¹³² (Calise 2013, chapter 5)

As discussed in the previous section, during the primary campaign Renzi had warned about excessive cautiousness, insisting that the PD must “keep

¹³¹ “The first months of 2013 have wiped out many certainties. For those who love football, it is sincerely hard to ignore the void when seeing that one of the greatest coaches ever, Sir Alex Ferguson, leaves the bench and the guide of Manchester United after twenty-seven years.

There are all the elements, indeed, to be perplexed. But there is one certainty that remains intact. Fortunately, or unfortunately, let me be clear. For instance, the certainty that the Italian left manages to lose the elections, even when it seemed impossible.”

¹³² “The primaries, which started as a triumphant march, turn into a trap, into the illusion of—assured by the polls—having already secured a victory and being able to withdraw to the defensive catenaccio, exactly when it would have been, instead, important to launch the decisive attack.”

the possession of the ball” and not merely withdraw to defensive positions. The disappointing electoral result lent credibility to his and other analysts’ claims that a low-profile campaign, aimed at merely securing the leading position, was a mistake. After the election, the struggles that had dominated the primary campaign surfaced again. Renzi interpreted the result of the election as follows:

[I] centrosinistra ha oggettivamente vinto e arrivo a dire che è andata molto bene. Però dal punto di vista del risultato è una squadra che vince 1-0 giocando con il catenaccio, per dire, e lo ripeto con forza, che conta anche il bel gioco.¹³³

Renzi admits that “objectively”, that is, from the point of view of the numerical results, the PD had won, but questions the significance of the result because it did not allow the PD to form a stable government because they lacked a majority in the Senate. He compares the narrow victory to a catenaccio-like 1-0, which is a negative assessment of the result. Being a tactic that deliberately gives the initiative for the opponents, the point of catenaccio can allude here to the PD’s inability to move the political struggle at the level of agenda-setting. Renzi’s point seems to be that the PD should not only content itself with overcoming its opponents, but also – as the largest centre-left party in Italy – be able to set the terms of the political debate. Instead, the elections showed that the PD had “got exhausted by chasing the ball”, by which Renzi means that the PD had merely responded to the initiatives of other political agents, mainly by Berlusconi and Grillo: “*Ci siamo sfiancati nella rincorsa del pallone, quando invece il pallone avremmo dovuto sempre tenerlo tra i piedi noi*”¹³⁴ (Renzi 2013c, see also Renzi 2013, 8, 31, 60).

As the PD was unable to form a stable majority in the parliament alone, Bersani tried to forge a coalition agreement with M5S. The negotiations ended in gridlock as M5S refused to cooperate with the PD or with any other “old” parties. The inability to find a successor to President Giorgio Napolitano was the final setback that made Bersani tender his resignation from the party leadership. Many parliamentarians of the PD refused to back Bersani’s preferred candidates for the office, Romano Prodi, and Franco Marini, in a secret ballot. This was interpreted as a confirmation that Bersani did not have a firm grip on the party. To resolve the deadlock and avoid political chaos, President Napolitano was re-elected, and he appointed Enrico Letta, the deputy secretary of the PD, to form a broad governing coalition that would also include the Berlusconi-led PdL. In his speech to the parliament after re-election, Napolitano urged the parliament to reform Italian institutions, starting from the electoral law and bi-cameral parliament, a somewhat surprising invitation

¹³³ “The centre-left has objectively won, and I can state that it went very well. But regarding the result, it equates with a team that wins 1-0 by resorting to catenaccio, so to speak, and I strongly repeat, also beautiful game has its value.” In “M5S, ora lavoriamo insieme. Il governo non tiri a campare”, *Il Messaggero*, May 29, 2013.

¹³⁴ “We got exhausted in chasing the ball when instead we would have had to keep the ball between our own feet.”

considering that he had never been an outspoken supporter of constitutional reforms (Pasquino and Valbruzzi 2017b, 148).

The appointment of Letta offered Renzi an unexpected opportunity to make nonsense of allegations that he would be a “leftist heir” to Berlusconi. As Bersani’s attempt to form a government failed, some members of the PD proposed Renzi as a potential figure to form the government. For Renzi, the support from the PD’s own ranks suggested that the power in accepting or rejecting his nomination laid particularly in the hands of the right-wing coalition led by Berlusconi: “*La palla ce l’hanno loro*”¹³⁵ (Renzi 2013, 42). However, President Napolitano’s choice fell eventually on Enrico Letta. According to Renzi, this was an indication that Berlusconi rebuffed him as a potential person to lead the government. This allowed Renzi to prove wrong and make a mockery of the allegations that he would embody Berlusconi on the left, stating that instead of winning the votes from those who had previously supported Berlusconi, he was vetoed by Berlusconi himself (Renzi 2013, 43). Renzi’s interpretation of the alleged veto used by Berlusconi served another purpose, too. Namely, it suggested that Letta was the preferred candidate of Berlusconi, which helped Renzi to position himself in relation to Letta, as they both shared a similar Christian Democratic background and a profile as young moderates.

Letta’s appointment to prime minister brought the political turmoil temporarily to an end. However, he faced a difficult task to lead a government including two opposing political forces. At the same time, he had to consider the European Union’s demands regarding Italy’s economic situation and try to hold together the PD, which was left deeply divided after the elections of February. Letta’s position was also challenged by Renzi, who had stayed at large from the post-election events. The institutional stalemate that the electoral result provoked had accelerated the speculation that Renzi’s leadership would have secured a clear victory for the PD. Renzi quashed the rumours and claimed that he was ready to support Letta for the good of Italy: “*Fare il tifo per l’Italia impone oggi di fare il tifo per Letta*”¹³⁶ (Renzi 2013, 39) and “*E se adesso il governo è nelle mani di Letta, facciamo il tifo per lui e diamogli una mano*”¹³⁷ (Renzi 2013, 39). Renzi’s support, however, included reservations and the longevity of Letta’s government depended first and foremost on its ability to deliver long-awaited reforms.

After the resignation of Bersani, Guglielmo Epifani, a former leader of the CGIL, was nominated as interim secretary of the PD in the General Assembly of the PD in May 2013. His mission consisted of leading the party to the convention in late 2013, where a new party leader would be elected. Letta considered Epifani’s nomination as a good omen for his government and believed that it would calm the political turbulence of the previous months. Renzi, who in his earlier intervention had referred to Manchester United, prompted Letta to show

¹³⁵ “They have the ball.”

¹³⁶ “Supporting Italy means supporting Letta.”

¹³⁷ “Now, the government is in the hands of Letta, and we will support him and try to help him.”

his acquaintance with football and its language. Perhaps aptly for his profile as a mediator and diplomat, Letta suggested Epifani follow the famous slogan “You’ll never walk alone” of Liverpool:

Guglielmo, mi permetto di suggerirti uno slogan che a me piace moltissimo. Visto che Renzi ha citato il Manchester United, io cito i tifosi del Liverpool: You’ll never walk alone, non camminerai mai da solo.¹³⁸

¹³⁸ “Guglielmo, may I suggest to you a slogan that I like a lot. Since Renzi cited Manchester United, I will cite the fans of Liverpool: You’ll never walk alone.” In “Letta: ‘Buona notizia per il governo’. E al Pd: ‘Serve maggiore solidarietà,’” *l’Unità*, May 12, 2013.

7 THE PRIME MINISTER'S (REDUCED) FOOTBALL LANGUAGE

So far, we have discussed Renzi's political trajectory within the context of Florence's local politics, where he gradually earned a reputation as a young modernizer who defied the establishment of his own party. The defeat in the coalition primaries in 2012 and Renzi's rejection to run as a candidate in the 2013 election seemed to contribute to his political star declining, yet the PD's surprisingly narrow electoral victory in the 2013 elections altered the situation substantially, as it was speculated that Renzi's leadership would have been decisive in bringing home the victory. At every important turning point of his career, Renzi has employed football language, exploiting various dimensions of the game related to tactics, player roles, refereeing and rules of the game.

This chapter concentrates on Renzi's experience as the secretary of the PD (2013–2018) and prime minister of Italy (2014–2016). Temporally, the chapter covers the years from 2013 until 2018. Throughout this period, Renzi resorted to football language, though to a lesser degree when he served as prime minister.

Section 7.1 discusses Renzi's political programme for the primaries that were organized in late 2013 and his idea for what the PD should represent in the 21st century. Section 7.2, instead, focuses on the primaries and how Renzi's election was anticipated to affect the work of the government led by Renzi's party colleague Enrico Letta. These events continued to be explained and analysed by frequent references to football.

In late 2013, Renzi was elected as the secretary of the PD, after which he quickly replaced Letta as prime minister. Section 7.3 takes up these events and discusses Renzi's football language in relation to them. During his time as prime minister, Renzi seemed to revert to football language less frequently, although at the same time it must be noted that many commentators and even many prominent party figures had adopted football language in their analyses.

Finally, section 7.4 focuses on the most important issue on the agenda of Renzi government: the constitutional reform. The chapter sheds light on the referendum campaign and its aftermath as well as discusses Renzi's own interpretations of these events. The referendum defeat led to Renzi's resignation

as prime minister although he remained the leader of the PD. After the disappointing result in the 2018 parliamentary elections, Renzi resigned as the secretary of the PD. Ousted from power, Renzi was forced to re-think his political position and how to communicate it, and it was when football language appeared again as a prominent political language to make sense of the changes.

7.1 The party that discards *catenaccio*

The resignation of Bersani opened a new window of opportunity for Renzi, who decided to run again for the leadership in the primaries set for late 2013. Although Renzi dropped the most aggressive tones of the past, arguing that it is time to move “beyond scrapping” (Renzi 2013), he continued to voice the same arguments that he had raised during the past years. These included the need to renew the party establishment, its conception of leadership and, accordingly, some of its political principles, tactics, and style. He also suggested some specific policy areas which should gain more attention. Renzi tried to give new meaning to what “the left” should stand for, calling his own political orientation “reformist”.

As discussed in Chapter 3, the early years of the PD were characterized by frequent changes of leadership and many scholars considered it an Achilles’s heel for the centre-left (see e.g. Calise 2013). Renzi, too, believed that it is indispensable to strengthen the position of the party leader. The disappointing electoral result in 2013, and the resignation of Bersani that followed, had raised the issue of leadership again on the agenda of the PD. Calise (2013), for example, discussed the volatility of the leaders in PD and criticized the tendency of the post-communist left in general to contest the leaders that have emerged among them. According to him, the PD’s hesitancy to embrace some degree of personalisation of leadership is a clear weakness that has not only contributed to weakening the party but also contributed negatively to Italian politics in general. His analysis suggests that if the centre-left does not find its own way of responding to the trend of personalisation, its leader seems to be doomed to a constant position of irrelevance. Calise’s analysis abounds in football metaphors, starting from the title of the book, *Fuorigioco* (Offside). When analysing what went wrong in the 2013 elections, he resorts to football metaphor and explains that the elections represented a great, but eventually lost occasion for the left because they were unable to read the political situation properly. Hesitant to adopt any degree of personalisation, Calise explains pungently, the centre-left opted for “a collective penalty”, which was doomed to fail:

Il pallone non lo ha tirato uno solo. Lo ha calciato la ditta. È stato un rigore collettivo. A porta vuota, a portiere battuto, si sono precipitati tutti insieme - da Pier Luigi Bersani a Enrico Letta, da Rosy Bindi a Dario Franceschini, tenendosi tutti a braccetto, senza prendere neanche la rincorsa, i giovani turchi e i neo-pre-eletti delle parlamentarie, e tutti i militanti arringati nel chiuso di qualche teatro all’insegna di un unico slogan: “Mica tiriamo un rigore personale?!! Se vince, vince la squadra”. È andata proprio così. Incuranti delle regole, di fronte allo stadio sbigottito pronto per

esultare la vittoria, hanno calciato tutti insieme. Fuori. Fuori dalle regole del gioco. E con questo errore impossibile, non hanno solo distrutto un partito. Hanno messo in ginocchio il paese.¹³⁹ (Calise 2013, Introduzione)

Calise goes on to argue that since the main adversary of the PD, the PdL, is disoriented and the M5S is undecided about whether it should stick to or give up protesting the “old” parties, the PD is still capable of changing its course in “extra time”. To succeed in that, Calise claims, the PD should abandon old “game patterns” and introduce new faces that are ready to “take the field” and give a decisive impetus for change:

Per cercare di vincere ai tempi supplementari, non serve ripetere gli stessi schemi di gioco. Occorrono forze fresche, con l’entusiasmo e le energie di chi scende per la prima volta in campo ... Per rientrare in partita, occorre rimettersi in gioco.¹⁴⁰ (Calise 2013, Conclusioni)

Renzi’s candidacy for the secretary seemed, at least to some extent, to answer these problems. As previously noted, the poor result in the 2013 elections and the resignation of Bersani contributed to creating new momentum for Renzi, as it was believed that his leadership would have assured the victory. In his 2013 party conference motion, Renzi argued that it was of utmost importance to have a leader that is authoritative and who does not become delegitimized constantly by his own party colleagues. This was in line with the analysis of some scholars (such as Calise) and marked a shift away from the line of Bersani, who believed in collective leadership and was unconvinced by leaders who rely on charismatic qualities.

Qualcuno tra noi ritiene che la parola leader sia una parolaccia. Ogni squadra ha un capitano. Se gioca bene il capitano, gioca meglio la squadra; se gioca bene la squadra, è più semplice il lavoro del capitano. La foga con cui una parte del nostro mondo cerca di distruggere i propri capitani è incomprensibile e dannosa: non abbiamo perso perché avevamo leader troppo forti, ma perché gli italiani non hanno considerato sufficientemente forti i nostri leader.¹⁴¹ (Renzi 2013b, 7)

¹³⁹ “The ball was not kicked by only one person. It was kicked by the firm. It was a collective penalty kick. With an empty goal, with a beaten goalkeeper, they all rushed together – from Pier Luigi Bersani to Enrico Letta, from Rosy Bindi to Dario Franceschini, arm in arm, without even taking the run, the Young Turks, and the neo-pre-elected parliamentarians, and all the militants gathered together to repeat the slogan: ‘It’s not like we are shooting a personal penalty kick?!! If we win, we will win as a team.’ That is exactly what happened. Careless of the rules, in front of a dismayed stadium ready to rejoice the victory, they all kicked together. Out. Disregarding the rules of the game. And with this impossible mistake, they did not just destroy the party. They brought the country to its knees.”

¹⁴⁰ “To snatch a victory in extra time, there is no sense to repeat the same old game patterns. Fresh forces are needed, with the enthusiasm and energy of those who take the field for the first time ... It is necessary to take up this challenge to get back in the game.”

¹⁴¹ “Some of us believe that the word *leader* is a curse. Each team has a captain. If the captain plays well, the team plays better, and if the team plays well, the job of the captain is easier. The ardour with which a part of our world tries to destroy its captains is incomprehensible and harmful; we did not lose because we had leaders that were too strong, but because the Italians did not consider our leaders strong enough.”

In the passage above, Renzi tries to reconcile the demands for personalization with a party tradition that still cherishes the collective and sees the parties as intermediaries between citizens and institutions. Renzi parallels the position of the party leader to that of team captain. He argues that “every team has a captain”, and that a fruitful co-operation between “the captain” and “the team” mutually reinforce one another. In other words, the leadership is a central and inescapable question in any political party, and that a strong leader is more likely to benefit the party by winning over the trust of the citizens.

While this analysis might be persuasive for those who already found Renzi’s platform convincing, those who adopted a cautious attitude to his notion of leadership would hardly consider it compelling. The metaphor of captain is somewhat unconvincing too. It suggests that the party leader is a kind of *primus inter pares* figure, however, Renzi’s idea of leadership certainly appealed for more room to manoeuvre for the party leader, who should not be bounded by internal dissenters, minorities or factions but instead nurture a more direct relationship with voters. Moreover, it did not provide assurance for those who were afraid that the party would turn into nothing more than a leader’s vehicle to mobilize the voters before elections.

As noted in earlier chapters, Renzi was often accused – from both sides of the political spectrum – that he did not represent “the left”. While it is true that Renzi’s ideas often diverged from the conventional leftist positions, he did not try to completely abandon the word “left”, which continued to have significance for many members and sympathizers of the party. Instead, in a short afterword to Norberto Bobbio’s famous piece *Destra e sinistra*,¹⁴² Renzi argues for an ideological re-orientation of what the left should stand for in the 21st century. He moves quite far away from Bobbio’s original argument (in which the distinction between left and right was based on conceptions of inequality and equality) and as such the piece should be read more as Renzi’s political manifest.

In Renzi’s view, Bobbio’s distinction to left and right is partly outdated because it is informed by an idea of clearly defined “social blocs” or great ideologies that no longer offer an adequate basis for political judgments or choices:

La sinistra cara a Bobbio, quella socialdemocratica e anticomunista, ha insomma vinto la sua partita. Ma oggi ne stiamo giocando un’altra. Quei blocchi sociali che prima rendevano tutto più semplice non ci sono più. Gli stessi confini nazionali che erano il perimetro entro cui si giocava la partita dell’innovazione e del welfare sono ormai messi in discussione. Più che con blocchi sociologicamente definiti entro Stati nazionali storicamente determinati, oggi la nuova partita svolge con attori e campi da gioco inediti. Quei blocchi sono stati sostituiti da dinamiche sociali irrequiete. I confini nazionali non delimitano più gli spazi entro i quali le nuove dinamiche giocano la loro partita.¹⁴³ (Renzi 2014, 166)

¹⁴² Renzi’s afterword appeared in a new edition (2014), published exactly 20 years after Bobbio’s piece came out.

¹⁴³ “The left dear to Bobbio, that is, the social democratic and anti-communist one, has won its game. But today we are playing another one. Those social blocs that once made everything simpler are gone. Those national borders that were the perimeter within which the match of innovation and welfare was played are now being questioned. These days, the

The social democratic and anti-communist left, Renzi writes, has “won its match”. For him, social democracy, and the promise of welfare it promoted appears like an ideology and objective that has been accomplished. Renzi’s analysis is based on the idea that the “social blocs” (*blocchi sociali*) that once made it easy for the parties to recognize the groups they should claim to represent have now been superseded, partly thanks to successfully implemented social democratic policies that have managed to give voice to many marginalized groups. However, this has also caused fragmentation of social cohesion that poses new challenges for the left, as does also the fragmentation of “playgrounds” (*campi da gioco*). (We might also think about how international institutions like the European Union have created new political playgrounds.)

Renzi’s point seems to be that these days politics is much more complicated and fast-paced, making it increasingly unpredictable and difficult to handle. This idea is further emphasized by the game-vocabulary he uses although he relies on quite conventional terms (*giocare la partita, campi di gioco*). The players include not only institutionalized actors (such as parties or trade unions) but a plethora of different groupings who demand to be heard, and the contestations are conducted on several different playgrounds that cannot be confined within the limits of nation states. According to Renzi, the left should embrace this contingency, rather than try to preserve what has been built in the past, writing that the left “must live in the constant movement of present times” and embrace it “as a blessing rather than as an obstacle” (Renzi 2014, 166).

Renzi often labelled himself a “reformist” in his orientation to politics. This definition opposed those in the PD who saw Renzi’s programme as too moderate or conceding too much to the competitors on the right side of the political spectrum. Renzi found these criticisms unfounded and argued that it is mistaken to believe that reformist politics equates with an essentially conservative mindset: “*Il riformismo non è melina*”¹⁴⁴ (Renzi 2013c). *Melina* is a familiar concept from football, where it is used to indicate an obstructive practice to maintain the result,¹⁴⁵ and it has also become a common concept in political analysis and journalism. By resorting to this concept, Renzi rebuts the denigratory connotation of reformism as something that only serves to maintain the political status quo.

Renzi summarized his idea of what the PD should look like in the 21st century as follows:

new game that is being played involves novel players and playgrounds, which no longer consist of sociologically defined blocs within historically determined nation states. Those blocs have been replaced by restless social dynamics. National borders no longer delimit the spaces within which the new dynamics play their game.”

¹⁴⁴ “Reformism is not *melina*.” (Italics mine)

¹⁴⁵ In a nutshell, *melina* involves keeping the possession of the ball (mainly by passing the ball sideways between the defenders) in order to prevent the opponent from scoring. It is a familiar concept especially for those who remember different kinds of time-wasting practices in football before the mid-1990s, when rule changes (e.g. the “back-pass rule”) were introduced to restrain their use.

Mi sembra quattro le caratteristiche fondamentali per il Partito Democratico, oggi. Il Pd deve suscitare una speranza, offrire un'apertura, riuscire a essere leader. E non deve pensare all'avversario ma partire da sé.

Dicevamo della speranza. Il Pd deve uscire dalla paura. Non è possibile assistere al catenaccio di una sinistra rassegnata, impaurita, rannicchiata. La sinistra vera, in tutto il mondo, non ha paura.¹⁴⁶ (Renzi 2013, 67)

The PD, Renzi writes, should exercise leadership, be open to different strata of society and try to set their own agenda instead of following that of others. These are all points that have been discussed earlier, so their points need not to be repeated here. He also states that the left should be able to “give people hope” and that it is not possible to accept a left that resorts to “catenaccio”, as that is not the proper attitude for the “true left” (*la sinistra vera*). Catenaccio is used as a negative label, a metaphor for a timid mindset that prevents suggesting bold policies and reforms which should be the defining characteristics of the left and the PD.

Regarding the sociological base of the PD and its electoral tactics, Renzi resorts again to the concept of catenaccio to explain how the party should be renewed:

Il Pd deve affermarsi come partito che rifiuta il catenaccio e gioca all'attacco, socialmente ed elettoralmente.¹⁴⁷ (Renzi 2013c)

Here, Renzi claims that the PD should “reject catenaccio and attack, socially and electorally”. As previously discussed, Renzi's understanding of the challenges within the centre-left was based on the idea that since the present-day world no longer consists of clear-cut social cleavages but rather of heterogeneous “micro-trends” (see Renzi 2008, 142–144), the PD should be able to identify and try to represent these various groups and their demands and to persuade those who have previously completely abstained. As a football tactic that prioritizes the preserving of status quo (see section 4.3), catenaccio can instead be understood as referring to a political and electoral tactic which is based on convincing the core constituencies, as opposed to tactics that would try to appeal to as many voters as possible across the political spectrum and not only those traditionally close to the party.

Several changes—such as the emergence of new parties and movements, the fragmentation of world views, the weakening of ideological positions, and globalisation—have transformed the political context to make this analysis at least partly plausible. Relying on the traditional core constituency of the left is illusory because the working class does not constitute a unified and

¹⁴⁶ “There are four key characteristics that should define the Partito Democratico. The PD must give people hope, be open, and demonstrate leadership. It should not focus on the adversary but start by examining itself.

When it comes to hope, the PD must abandon timidity. It is not possible to accept a resigned, hesitant, and inward-looking left that resorts to catenaccio. The true left, all over the world, is not timid.”

¹⁴⁷ “The PD must establish itself as a party that rejects catenaccio and plays attackingly, socially and electorally.”

homogeneous majority and their vote can shift from both to more extreme left and to the right.

In addition to the debates regarding the party model, its leadership and its tactical and strategical aspects, Renzi relied on football language also to discuss some specific policy areas that the PD should focus on. Here, football language is used to outline broad visions without that the details or complexities of the policies are discussed. Football analogues, concepts, and expressions work as rhetorical short-cuts to Renzi's ideas.

As an example of a political question that should be confronted with more determination within the PD Renzi raises immigration and globalisation more broadly. This poses a dilemma for the centre-left, which has struggled to find a balance between the commitment to the most vulnerable and their core constituencies, who feel threatened by these changes. According to Renzi, the so-called Bossi-Fini law (No. 189/2002), which was proposed by the centre-right government and introduced measures to combat illegal immigration, are products of an autoreferential political class that has grown detached from the reality, which is already multicultural:

La Bossi-Fini parla all'Italia della politica autoreferenziale, mentre la coppia d'attacco della Nazionale è composta da Balotelli ed El Shaarawy, senza che nessuno si scandalizzi. ... Per la politica, la coppia d'attacco è Bossi-Fini, non Balotelli - El Shaarawy.¹⁴⁸ (Renzi 2013, 21)

In regards to the Italian economy, Renzi believed that one of the most crucial reasons for the country's stagnating growth was the byzantine bureaucracy and excessive number of norms, which make Italy an unattractive business environment to invest. Politicians' duty, in his view, was to simplify this framework, as explained with a football analogy:

Quando c'è un buon giocatore, il primo compito di un allenatore è insegnarli a evitare il superfluo. Il tocco in più, il virtuosismo che lo frega. Giocala semplice.¹⁴⁹ (Renzi 2013, 82)

Another key issue for Renzi was to recognize the essential role of culture for Italy, not only in terms of aesthetic pleasure but also of economic and social development, arguing that the government of Letta has an "important match" to play here: "[S]u questo tema il governo Letta giocherà una partita molto più seria di quanto si pensi" (Renzi 2013, 98). He lamented that despite the country's considerable cultural treasures and heritage, Italy is only the fifth country in the world in terms of visitors, in Renzi's word, "*fuori dalla zona Champions*"¹⁵⁰ (Renzi 2013, 98). The most prestigious European club competition in football, the

¹⁴⁸ "The Bossi-Fini law is an example of the autoreferential politics of Italy, while the attacking duo of the national team consists of Balotelli and El Shaarawy, without anyone getting upset about that. ... As for politics, the attacking duo is Bossi-Fini, not Balotelli - El Shaarawy."

¹⁴⁹ "The first thing that the coach must teach to a good player is to avoid what is inessential. Another touch here or there, and the player makes everything more complicated by his own virtuosity. Keep the game simple."

¹⁵⁰ "Outside the Champions League"

Champions League (*zona Champions*) is used to illustrate the international quality and standard that Italy should strive for.

Finally, Renzi outlined that Europe is the most important playground for the political battles of our time: “*La vera partita si gioca lì*”¹⁵¹ (Renzi 2013, 111). However, partly because of the populist challenge from both the M5S and the Lega, Renzi was also convinced that Italy should take on a more assertive role within the EU, which led him to adopt some quite combative stances especially regarding the austerity measures that the EU had imposed because of the euro crisis.

Although Renzi argued for a re-invention of what the “left” stands for today, in terms of ideology he did not represent anything particularly new or innovative. He did not devote time to elaborating an original theoretical vision but rather fused some traditionally leftist positions, such as interest for the underprivileged (*ultimi*) or the excluded (*esclusi*) with some neoliberal stances (especially when it comes to economic policies). It is also understandable that Renzi did not devote time to ideological elaboration; when the circumstances change or turn out different than expected, ideologies may turn into constraints. Renzi’s football language suggests that he embraces the contingency of politics and thinks that politicians should learn how to handle it rather than how to diminish it.

7.2 The captain of the team

Renzi’s adversaries in the 2013 primaries were Gianni Cuperlo and Giuseppe Civati. Representing the post-communist left-wing, Cuperlo was the favourite candidate of the PD party leadership that had just been defeated in the parliamentary elections. Civati, instead, represented a more radical left-wing in the party. Formerly a close collaborator of Renzi, Civati had become disappointed by Renzi’s programme. Renzi, who embarked on the journey as a clear favourite, had maintained a profile of a clear alternative to the party leadership because he had refused alternative posts after the defeat in the 2012 primaries to Bersani.

Cuperlo’s strategy for the primaries consisted of rallying especially long-standing militants of the party by insisting that he is a more credible “left-wing” candidate than Renzi, who still appeared as a foreign figure to the party. To prove his ideological credentials, Cuperlo criticized that the venue of the 2013 *Leopolda* convention, which was organized in Florence in October, was devoid of any symbols of the PD. Cuperlo insisted that if Renzi wants to represent the largest leftist party in Italy, he cannot dispense with its symbols but should carry them proudly. This idea was formulated in a curious manner relying on football:

Niente simboli? Ce la immaginiamo la Fiorentina che acquista Messi dal Barcellona, fa la conferenza stampa per presentarlo ai tifosi e alla città e non c’è la foto del giocatore

¹⁵¹ “The real match is played there.”

che tiene in mano la maglietta viola con scritto il suo nome? Non potrebbe mai accadere.¹⁵²

It seemed rather curious that Cuperlo chose to adopt the vocabulary that was so closely associated with Renzi, his main adversary in the competition. The analogy was also far-fetched, as it is very unlikely that a world-class champion like Lionel Messi would sign with a medium-size club like Fiorentina. Perhaps amused by this rather clumsy analogy, Renzi answered to Cuperlo, with an obvious twist of humour, “*Tu mandaci Messi che poi una maglia si trova.*”¹⁵³ Renzi also seized on the actual critique that Cuperlo presented, the absence of symbols of the PD and what it denotes and explained that Cuperlo had failed to understand the idea of the Leopolda convention, which was an initiative to encourage political participation regardless of partisan lines.

However, the argument between Cuperlo and Renzi also contained a political point that was picked up by the columnist of *Corriere della Sera* Paolo Franchi. He explained, always relying on football language, why Cuperlo’s point was implausible:

Visto che Messi a Firenze non arriverà, non sapremo mai se, dal lato calcistico, Cuperlo abbia qualche ragione. Ma, dal lato politico, ha sicuramente torto. Per un motivo semplicissimo: a differenza della Fiorentina, dei partiti di un tempo, e dei partiti europei, tutti più o meno in difficoltà ma tutti comunque vivi, il Pd “tifosi”, intesi come militanti che coltivino un forte senso di appartenenza a quella comunità, con la sua storia, i suoi simboli, le sue insegne, le sue sedi, i suoi dirigenti, praticamente non ne ha. Se qualcosa di simile a una “tifoseria” esiste, quel che la tiene insieme è solo la comprensibile voglia, dopo tante sconfitte, spesso subite anche per via di clamorosi autogol, di vincere finalmente, costi quel che costi, uno scudetto, o almeno una Coppa Italia. Importa poco con quale modello di gioco, con quale allenatore, con quale capitano, figurarsi che cosa possono contare i vessilli.¹⁵⁴

In Franchi’s view, Cuperlo is mistaken because as a fairly recently founded party, the PD simply does not have a devoted constituency, which would strongly identify itself with a commonly shared history, traditions and symbols in the same sense that football clubs or traditional mass parties from the 20th century have them. The only ideological glue that holds the PD together, in

¹⁵² “No symbols? Can we imagine that Fiorentina signs Messi from Barcelona and organizes a press conference to present him to the fans and the city, and that there will be no photo of the player holding the purple shirt with his name on it? It could never happen.” In “Mancano i simboli pd: il caso della convention ‘no logo’”, *Corriere della Sera*, October 27, 2013.

¹⁵³ “Bring us Messi and we will find a shirt for him.” In “Mancano i simboli pd: il caso della convention ‘no logo’”, *Corriere della Sera*, October 27, 2013.

¹⁵⁴ “Since Messi will not sign with Fiorentina, we will never know if, observed from a football perspective, Cuperlo has a point. Politically, he is certainly wrong. That is for a very simple reason: unlike Fiorentina, the parties of the past, and the European parties, all of which are more or less in trouble but still alive, the Democratic Party practically does not have any ‘fans’, understood as militants who cultivate a strong sense of belonging to that community, its history, symbols, signs, sites, and leaders. If something like a ‘fan base’ exists, it is kept together only by the understandable desire, after so many defeats, often suffered because of glamorous own goals, to finally win, whatever it takes, a scudetto or at least one Coppa Italia. It matters little with which style of play, with which coach, with which captain, let alone the banners.” In Paolo Franchi “Contano i voti, non le bandiere del Pd”, *Corriere della Sera*, October 29, 2013.

Franchi's opinion, is the desire to finally achieve electoral success. Franchi's analysis seems to follow Renzi's thoughts, that is, if the old ways of conducting politics no longer function, it is better to try to find new alternatives than sticking to traditions and symbols that have become obsolete among the voters. Moreover, Cuperlo's argument that Renzi's ideology and values would not be compatible with those of the party seemed to have lost its persuasive power. On the contrary, Renzi's distance from the party establishment could be considered an advantage in a situation in which many voters, disappointed by the electoral result which ended in a deadlock, would no longer support the candidate of the establishment. Indeed, a major motive for supporting Renzi was that he was considered the only candidate who could finally lead the PD to electoral victory. As Franchi sums it up, the driving force behind Renzi's popularity was the desire to make the PD victorious again, and the discussions about the playing style, let alone the symbols, were of secondary importance.

Renzi was elected secretary of the PD in December 2013, with 67.6% of the vote (Cuperlo 18.2% and Civati 14.2%).¹⁵⁵ Renzi assured that his victory does not mark the end of what is understood as "the left", but that he will make space for new players to enter the scene: "*La mia vittoria non è la fine della sinistra. Stiamo solo cambiando i giocatori.*"¹⁵⁶ Echoing his campaign appeal, Renzi depicted his own role as that of the "captain" of the new team: "*Sarò il capitano della nuova squadra.*"¹⁵⁷

During the autumn of 2013, there had been continuous reports of increasing tensions between Renzi and Letta and speculation about how Renzi's potential election as party secretary would affect the work of the Letta government. The leadership of the PD, especially when backed by a wide support in the primaries, offered a strong legitimation for Renzi's programme which, however, risked being watered down in case Renzi would have to operate in the shadow of Prime Minister Letta.

In the aftermath of the 2013 elections and after the formation of Letta's government, Renzi denied any "derby between personalities" (*derby dei personalismi*) (Renzi 2013, 42) and affirmed that he would not cause instability in the government only to promote his own fortunes: "*Ma è addirittura dannoso tifare per il caos solo per una presunta esigenza personale*"¹⁵⁸ (Renzi 2013, 39–40) and "*Noi vogliamo che l'Italia cambi, dunque non facciamo il tifo perché tutto salti*"¹⁵⁹ (Renzi 2013, 40). Before the primaries, Renzi continued to send assuring messages regarding his support for Letta's government. In October 2013, Renzi granted an interview to *La Stampa* where he guaranteed his support for Letta also in case he was elected the secretary of the party. However, Renzi also reflected on how important it is for politicians to grasp the post-election *momentum*, namely the period of

¹⁵⁵ The website of Partito Democratico <https://www.partitodemocratico.it/archivio/la-nuova-direzione-del-pd-e-i-risultati-definitivi-delle-primarie-2013/>. Accessed April 6, 2022.

¹⁵⁶ "My victory is not the end of the left. We are just bringing new players in." "Renzi stravince: scardinare il sistema", *Corriere della Sera*, December 9, 2013.

¹⁵⁷ "I will be the captain of the new team." Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ "It is destructive to root for chaos only for an alleged personal gain."

¹⁵⁹ "We want Italy to change so we do not cheer for everything to fall apart."

popularity that the new occupant of a post enjoys right after the election, in order to establish authority and fulfil expectations. He exemplifies this by proposing an analogy between politics and refereeing and explains that to gain authority in the game, it is fundamental that the referee awards the first booking around the 20th minute: *“La prima ammonizione è fondamentale. Va data intorno al ventesimo minuto per far capire ai giocatori che ci sei.”*¹⁶⁰ To put it another way, the situation appeared paradoxical for Renzi because the momentum of the possibly victorious primaries is likely to fade away rather quickly, after which it cannot be easily recovered. Yet to grasp the momentum he was forced to give up his previous promises of support for Letta’s government.

Former leader of the PD, Dario Franceschini, argued for a compromise and peaceful coexistence of two leaders in case Renzi was elected as the new leader of the party: *“I talenti vanno usati tutti. Quando ero bambino mi arrabbiamo se Valcareggi faceva giocare un tempo Mazzola e l’altro Rivera e mi chiedevo ‘perché non usarli assieme?’”*¹⁶¹ With this football analogy, Franceschini refers to the “unhappy compromise of the *staffetta*” (Wilson 2018, 286) devised by Italy’s national team coach Ferruccio Valcareggi and infamously used in the 1970 World Cup. Valcareggi had two of the most creative playmakers of that time on his team, Gianni Rivera and Sandro Mazzola, but he was convinced that two players with similar characteristics cannot be fielded alongside each other and made them play alternately. In other words, Franceschini suggests that nothing necessarily needs to be changed, and Renzi and Letta could find a compromise about how to share the duties between prime minister and party secretary. However, contrary to what Franceschini suggests, the holding of offices of prime minister and party leader by two persons has often resulted in trouble, especially within the context of the centre-left. The two centre-left governments led by Prodi (1996–1998, 2006–2008) collapsed precisely because Prodi did not have a firm grip on the parties that formed the coalition.

After his election as the party leader, Renzi denied that there was any serious rift between him and Letta. Again, Renzi reassured Letta that he was ready to “pass the ball” to him if that was in the best interests of the country:

*C’è uno della mia squadra, Enrico Letta, che è solo davanti al portiere, non è in fuorigioco e io sono con il pallone a centrocampo. Io che faccio? Se voglio vincere la classifica dei cannonieri faccio un’azione personale, ma se voglio vincere il campionato do volentieri il pallone a Letta.*¹⁶² (Quoted in Ferrarese and Ognibene 2013, 157)

¹⁶⁰ “The first booking is essential. It should be given around the 20th minute to show to the players what you are made of.” In “Intervista a Matteo Renzi: ‘Con me segretario del Pd Letta sarà più forte’”, *La Stampa*, October 6, 2013.

¹⁶¹ “All the talents should be used. When I was a child, I used to get upset if Valcareggi fielded Rivera and Mazzola in relays and I kept asking myself ‘why not to field them together?’” In “Renzi incassa il sostegno dagli ex popolari”, *Corriere della Sera*, September 3, 2013.

¹⁶² “One of my teammates, Enrico Letta, is alone in front of the goalkeeper, he is not offside, and I have the ball in the midfield. What should I do? If I want to win the ranking of the top scorers, I opt for a personal solution, but if I want to win the championship, I will be happy to pass the ball to Letta.”

Unlike Renzi, who enjoyed a strong legitimation derived from the primaries, Letta was caught leading a disharmonious government, accommodating the demands of several parties while at the same time trying to respect Italy's commitments to the European Union. While Renzi pressured the government to proceed with the reforms, Letta sought to remind everyone how complicated it was to be caught in constant bargaining and searching for compromises:

La nuova fiducia che il governo chiederà al parlamento ci consentirà di passare da un 2013 che ha ottenuto dei risultati pur giocando in difesa a un 2014 in cui saremo in grado di giocare all'attacco. Il primo tempo per adesso è andato bene. Nonostante l'assedio subito da tanti fronti contemporaneamente credo che non abbiamo preso gol. Quindi adesso possiamo giocare il secondo tempo in attacco.¹⁶³

Interestingly enough, Letta also relies on football language in his analysis of the situation. He defends the work of his government by saying that despite having been forced to “play defensively”, the government has not “conceded goals”, and that it is likely that the government will be able to “switch to attack in the second half”.

This remark, precisely like the earlier cited examples from Cuperlo and Franceschini, proves that Renzi was able to shape the language with which politics was discussed and thus also to influence the interpretations of the situation. Other politicians adopted football language too, but in so doing, they often bought the analysis of Renzi, which was frequently constructed on presenting political alternatives as clear opposites (e.g. attack vs. defence). Even Letta conceded that the government should “attack”, an often-repeated slogan used by Renzi, even though he was clearly aware that no single player could dictate the game without considering the politics of one's allies and adversaries.

After his election as the leader of the PD, Renzi proposed an alternative agenda for the government and thus invalidated the programme of the actual Prime Minister Letta (Seddone and Venturino 2015), whose progress Renzi considered too slow despite several reassurances of cooperation made previously. The aim of the campaign was to replace Letta as prime minister, which also meant that Renzi had to revise his previous principle according to which he would accept to be appointed prime minister only with the legitimation deriving from elections (which he did not have since he had refused to run in the parliamentary election).

To add credibility to his actions, which were likely to cause resentment, and instinctively for a former referee, Renzi could again appeal to the statutes of the PD, which stated that the role of prime minister should coincide with that of party leader. It mattered little that the statute had been previously challenged by Renzi himself, who pressured Bersani in 2012 to organize the primaries to select the prime minister candidate although according to the statute the candidacy

¹⁶³ “The vote of confidence that the government will request from the parliament will allow us to move from the 2013, which saw us achieving results despite playing defensively, to the 2014, when we will be able to play at the attack. The first half has gone well. Despite having faced difficulties simultaneously on many fronts, we have not conceded goals. Therefore, we can switch to attack in the second half.” In “Letta: verifica e svolta dopo le primarie”, *l'Unità*, November 30, 2013.

belonged automatically to the incumbent secretary Bersani. The regulation that states that the two roles should coincide was again watered down by Letta's appointment to prime minister in 2013, but it nevertheless offered Renzi, once he was elected party secretary, a way to legitimize his move to replace Letta.

Renzi also distanced himself from Letta by rejecting the term *staffetta* to describe the passing of power from Letta to himself as he claimed that a relay is about moving in the same direction and compared to the Letta-led government, he was rather changing the direction: "*le staffette vanno sempre nella stessa direzione, noi vogliamo provare a cambiare l'orizzonte*".¹⁶⁴ In truth, Letta's government had accommodated many of Renzi's demands by selecting younger ministers to his cabinet and making more space for women, but Renzi took these changes even further than Letta (Seddone and Venturino 2015). Remaining faithful to the idea of *rottamazione*, Renzi's cabinet was the smallest (16 members excluding the prime minister) and youngest in Italian history and at the outset it achieved gender parity for the first time.

The traditional inauguration ceremony of the new government, where the oath of office of the new government is followed by a ritual where the outgoing prime minister hands over a bell to the successor as a symbol of the transfer of power, was characterized by a particularly cold atmosphere between Letta and Renzi. In 2017, after having resigned as prime minister, Renzi returned to lament the scene and criticized Letta for showing his resentment in a moment which should always be "played in the spirit of fair play" (*giocati all'insegna del fair play*) (Renzi 2017, 56). Although Renzi is clearly aware of the importance of fair play in politics, as demonstrated by his frequently raised disputes regarding the rules of the primaries, the ceremony of the transfer of power is the only occasion that he explicitly uses the concept.

7.3 "Io sono un mediano": Renzi as prime minister

After Renzi was appointed prime minister, he started to practice what he had preached and launched an ambitious plan to deliver one reform a month. This reflected Renzi's enthusiasm but also lack of parliamentary experience when it comes to the working of the parliament and the time it inevitably requires. However, although the parliamentary majority had remained intact, compared to Letta Renzi enjoyed a strong legitimation deriving from the victorious primaries and faced no serious challengers to his leadership, which enabled him to impose his agenda for the government's work more forcefully than Letta had been able to do. Renzi's seizing of the initiative did not go unnoticed, and it was both criticized and admired. Political scientist Giovanni Sartori claimed that Renzi is a "political lightweight", and that despite the appearance of dynamism,

¹⁶⁴ "Letta e il messaggio a Pd: Poi la resa di San Valentino", *Corriere della Sera*, February 14, 2014.

he lacks the necessary *gravitas*.¹⁶⁵ The columnist of *l'Unità*, Luca Landò, expressed a more sympathetic view, paralleling Renzi's authority of setting the political agenda to Arrigo Sacchi's football philosophy, which consisted of dominating the ball and the space:

Piaccia o meno, Renzi ha portato nella politica (e in televisione) le tecniche del calcio moderno fatto di controllo, ripartenza e contropiede. E il risultato, come intuì Sacchi anni fa, è un "gioco spettacolo" capace di trasformare un consiglio di ministri in un evento agonistico commentato e analizzato per tutta la settimana come le partite di campionato durante la *Domenica sportiva*.¹⁶⁶

Landò also anticipated the problems that Renzi would face. One of the concerns he brought up was if Renzi will "receive the ball before ending up in offside", and if so, who will "pass the ball" to him.¹⁶⁷ In other words, the concerns were if Renzi could keep up with the announced speed of the reforms and would he find enough support for pushing forward the reforms. This was a legitimate concern, bearing in mind the institutional constraints, a rather heterogenous majority in the parliament, and economic pressures coming mainly from the European Union, which expected Italy to proceed with the announced reforms.

The European Union elections in May 2014 represented the first test for Renzi's leadership. Though a traditionally Europhile country, anti-EU sentiments had been fuelled in Italy in the aftermath of the global financial crisis that had hit the EU. Especially populist right-wing parties *Lega* and *Fratelli d'Italia* expressed anti-EU stances, but also M5S, which had gained a remarkable share of the vote in the previous general election, had proposed a referendum on Euro. As a response to the populist and Eurosceptic challenge, Renzi adopted quite forceful rhetoric towards the EU and reproached the technocratic approach and austerity measures that the Union had adopted.

In the European Union election in May 2014, the PD earned a remarkable 40.8% of the vote, which Renzi immediately interpreted as a mandate for his government and as a sign that his move to replace Letta as prime minister had been the right one. M5S, led by Grillo, garnered 21.2% of the vote, which Renzi interpreted as a sign that the PD had offered a credible alternative to the anti-establishment and Eurosceptic line of M5S and effectively outplayed them in the contest:

¹⁶⁵ "Sartori: 'Renzi è un peso piuma malato di velocismo'", *La Repubblica*, February 26, 2014. Available at

https://www.repubblica.it/fischiailvento/2014/02/26/news/sartori_renzi_un_peso_piuma_malato_di_velocismo-79658409/. Accessed April 6, 2022.

¹⁶⁶ "Whether one likes it or not, Renzi has brought to politics (and television) the techniques of modern football, consisting of control and counterattacks. The result, like Sacchi grasped years ago, is a spectacle that turns a ministerial meeting into a competition-like event, commented and analysed throughout the week like the championship matches in *Domenica sportiva*." Luca Landò "La partita in contropiede del premier", *l'Unità*, March 16, 2014.

¹⁶⁷ Luca Landò "La partita in contropiede del premier," *l'Unità*, March 16, 2014.

[S]e avessimo ancora lo stesso governo Grillo sarebbe inarrestabile. Lo abbiamo fermato. E se dobbiamo frenare ancora la sua espansione 'je faccio er cucchiaio'.¹⁶⁸

Boosted by the legitimation that the electoral victory granted, Renzi assured that in order to further contain the rise of the M5S, he is ready to outmanoeuvre them time and again, which he refers to using the football concept of *il cucchiaio* (literally "the spoon", internationally known as "Panenka"). It refers to a penalty kick technique which consists of chipping the ball gently in the middle of the net instead of trying to shoot the ball either to the left or right to the goalkeeper. In Italy, it is most famously used by Francesco Totti, to whom the expression in Roman dialect "*mo' je faccio er cucchiaio*" is attributed. Here is Totti himself describing the point of the move:

È un numero ad alto rischio, perché il portiere capace di non muoversi non deve fare altro che ricevere il "passaggio" del rigorista: ma se sei abbastanza bravo da nascondere fino all'ultimo le tue intenzioni, sei quasi certo di fare gol, perché il novanta per cento dei portieri prima o poi battezza un angolo e ci si lancia.¹⁶⁹ (Totti with Condò 2018, 247)

In other words, *cucchiaio* is an elegant albeit risky way of outwitting the opposition: if the goalkeeper does not anticipate the corner the player is about to shoot by diving, he has no difficulties in grabbing the gentle shot. Using this concept, thus, also portrays Renzi as a player, one who is not only more astute than his opponents but also someone who prioritizes risk over prudence.

The victory in the EU elections further strengthened Renzi's position and the PD's standing. Inspired by the on-going World Cup in Brazil, the president of the PD, Matteo Orfini, explained in football terms the political dynamics of the key players in the aftermath of the European election. He argued that the PD is dominant and decisive like the midfielder Andrea Pirlo, and that Grillo, despite having reached over 20% of the vote, is "on the bench" like *Ciro Immobile*, the forward of the National team¹⁷⁰. Authoritative figures from football world also took part in analysing Renzi's performances as prime minister. Faithful to football analogies, former football manager Arrigo Sacchi argued that "instead of following, [Renzi] is imposing his game on others, exactly like Berlusconi has done for 20 years."¹⁷¹

However, not everybody was convinced of Renzi's leadership abilities and the most arduous challenge seemed to originate from the ranks of the PD's

¹⁶⁸ "If we still had the same government, Grillo would be unstoppable. We stopped him. And if we must further contain his rise, I will outmanoeuvre him with *cucchiaio*." (Italics mine) In "Renzi incassa il risultato: li ho fermati, ora altre mosse", *Corriere della Sera*, May 26, 2014.

¹⁶⁹ "It is a high-risk move, because a goalkeeper who is able to stand still can easily grab the gentle 'assist' of the penalty taker: but if you are cunning enough to hide your intentions, you will almost certainly score since the ninety per cent of the goalkeepers try to anticipate the corner by diving."

¹⁷⁰ See RAI News https://www.rainews.it/archivio-rainews/articoli/orfini-mondiali-calcio-politica-pirlo-4436d1e8-78d3-43e1-b373-004fbf4d4e47.html?refresh_ce. Accessed April 6, 2022.

¹⁷¹ "In politica e nel pallone vince sempre chi impone il proprio gioco", *Corriere della Sera (Sette)*, March 27, 2015.

parliamentary group, as many of them often dissented both with the bills proposed by Renzi as well as the style of his leadership. The EU election campaign was heavily focused on Renzi, to the extent that Renzi's former collaborator, Giuseppe Civati, criticized the PD as suffering from a "syndrome of centre-forward" (*la sindrome del centravanti*), an excessive exposure of the leader, and argued for a multi-voiced party where also "defenders and midfielders" should be valued and given space.¹⁷² Especially the more radical left-wing of the party, to which Civati belonged, were frustrated with Renzi's assertiveness, and saw that their fear of the PD turning into a "one-man party" was becoming reality. Civati broke from the PD in spring 2015 as a protest to Renzi's policies and established a new party.

In trying to define his role as prime minister, Renzi resorted again to football:

Calcisticamente parlando, qualcuno pensa che io sia un fantasista, cioè quello che inventa il colpo a sorpresa, o il portiere fortunato, che para i rigori perché provoca l'avversario. Non hanno capito che, dal punto di vista amministrativo, io sono un mediano ... che su tutti i palloni si mette lì ...¹⁷³

Renzi explains here that his role is like that of the defensive midfielder, "*mediano* who fights for every ball", rather than that of *fantasista*, a creative player who surprises the opponent, or the goalkeeper who "saves penalties". Again, he resorts to different player types to make sense of his political role, which—as we have seen—is never fixed but alters according to changing political circumstances. Earlier Renzi stated that *mezzala* is the player type that comes closest to the ideal typical politician, and it was argued that this was because these days politicians are expected to possess a wide array of competencies and skills rather than being narrow-field specialists. A *mediano*, instead, is a player whose essential task is that of confining the creativity of opponents and to make it difficult for them to play their own game. The change of perspective here is linked to Renzi's new role as prime minister, which puts different kinds of demands on a politician and asks different qualities from him. If politicians who are considered contenders are expected to be creative in manoeuvring their fortunes and to undertake initiatives that expand their political space, the prime minister, besides overseeing the government's work, has an interest in advancing his agenda. In this sense, the prime minister might be persuaded to delimit their opponents' chances for play or to nullify their attempts to gain more power, which might make this statement intelligible.

¹⁷² "Civati e la campagna Pd: c'è solo il centravanti? Guerini: tutti mobilitati", *Corriere della Sera*, May 12, 2014.

¹⁷³ "Speaking in football language, someone thinks that I am *fantasista*, that is, the one who invents surprising moves, or a fortunate goalkeeper, who saves penalties because he provokes the opponents. They have not understood that from an administrative point of view, I am *mediano* ... who fights for every ball." (Italics mine) In "Renzi: il mio gioco da mediano per cambiare l'Italia e l'Europa", *Corriere della Sera*, July 13, 2014.

7.4 *Le regole del gioco*: The 2016 referendum on constitutional reforms and 2018 elections

The constitutional referendum held on December 4, 2016 and rejected by the voters represented an ambitious attempt to reform Italian institutions (Pasquino and Valbruzzi 2017b; Ceccarini and Bordignon 2017). The reform, introduced in 2016, was extensive, aiming at modifying 47 articles of the constitution. In the history of the Republic, only the reform proposed by Berlusconi in 2005, aimed at modifying 56 articles and rejected in a referendum the next year, was more wide-ranging (Pasquino and Valbruzzi 2017b).

Although the impetus for the constitutional reform in 2016 was contingent, originating from President Napolitano's initiative after the 2013 general election and its difficult aftermath in forming the government and handling the presidential election (see section 6.4), the debate on the need to reform Italian institutions has been a long-running political question, and there have been several attempts to revise the constitution over the years. The debate intensified in the early 1990s, when the new majoritarian electoral law was introduced and which saw the disintegration of the party system as a result of the corruption revelations (Ceccarini and Bordignon 2017, 282–285; see also section 3.2). The political turmoil that Italy went through during that period strengthened a commonly held belief that Italy would need a reform of its institutional structures, an idea that was well summarized by Massimo D'Alema (then the leader of the PDS) who, in 1995, criticized the institutional structure of Italy and lamented its lack of democratic rules by resorting to a game (but not necessarily football) simile:

È come se fossimo tutti su un grande prato, con un folto pubblico sugli spalti. La partita inizia, ma non si sa bene che gioco si stia giocando: mancano le righe sul campo, ognuno si costruisce le porte della misura che vuole, usa indifferentemente le mani o i piedi per colpire il pallone, si sceglie l'arbitro che gli piace di più. Dopo un po', è inevitabile, scoppia la rissa. All'inizio il pubblico si diverte, poi si arrabbia, infine si annoia e se ne va. Senza regole, non si può giocare una partita. Senza regole, una democrazia può morire.¹⁷⁴ (D'Alema 1995, 15)

The mainstream understanding at that time regarding the desirable reform was that it was necessary to strengthen the role of the executive and to create an institutional framework that would reduce the fragmentation of the party field and encourage bipolar competition. Many proponents of the centre-left endorsed this idea. Among them, Massimo D'Alema, in 1997–1998, led a bicameral parliamentary committee to revise the constitution, which was buried later

¹⁷⁴ "It is as if we were all on a wide field, with a large crowd watching from the stands. The match begins, but nobody knows what game is being played: the pitch lacks lines, everybody moves the goalposts to serve their own purposes, using both hands and feet to strike the ball and choosing whichever referee they like the most. After a while, inevitably, the game degenerates into a fight. At first the crowd is amused, then it gets angry, then bored and finally leaves. Without rules, you cannot play any game. Without rules, a democracy may die."

because it failed to gain cross-party support. Walter Veltroni, when he was elected the first secretary of the PD, also looked to the American model and outlined that the PD should be a party with “majoritarian vocation”. Renzi, too, has adopted this stance, declaring his preference for an American-style democracy with bi-partisan competition, where elections would deliver a clear winner (see Renzi 2014, 164; 2013, 52–53).

As prime minister, Renzi inherited the constitutional reform project, which was put into motion by President Napolitano’s initiative in 2013. The content of the reform as well as its pros and cons have been discussed in greater detail elsewhere (Pasquino and Valbruzzi 2017b; Ceccarini and Bordignon 2017; Bianchi 2017), so here it suffices to summarize its main points briefly. The reform entailed the abolishment of the perfect bicameralism (a reduction of the powers of the senate and the number of senators), which was justified by arguing that it would streamline the legislative process. The reform also entailed the elimination of provinces and reshaping the powers between the state and the local institutions in favour of the former, the abolishment of the National Council of Economic and Labour (CNEL) and new rules for referendums and citizens’ initiatives laws. Renzi’s aimed at a reform that would have transformed Italy towards a logic of presidential rule (see Poguntke and Webb 2005), granting the prime minister more power resources within the system. Those in favour of the reforms argued that they would simplify the legislative process and increase political stability, while the opponents criticized that, combined with the new electoral law *Italicum*,¹⁷⁵ they would place too much power in the hands of the executive at the cost of the parliament.

To carry on with the reforms, in January 2014 Renzi forged an agreement with Berlusconi on constitutional reforms and a new electoral law, which became known as the “Nazarene pact”¹⁷⁶ and which would have secured *Forza Italia*’s support in the parliament. According to Art. 138 of the Italian constitution, constitutional modifications must be approved in double reading by both houses and the referendum is unnecessary if the laws are approved by a majority of two-thirds in the second vote (Costituzione Italiana, Art. 138).

However, in early 2015, the pact was dissolved by Berlusconi, because he did not approve of Renzi’s decision to endorse Sergio Mattarella as President of the Republic. With the cessation of the agreement, Renzi lost an important ally in the parliament. This meant that he could no longer pursue the road of having the reforms approved by the qualified majority in the parliament. Instead, he had to

¹⁷⁵ In brief, *Italicum* (which has never been used in elections) was a proportional electoral law, which included a majority premium. In 2017, the constitutional court ruled it partly unconstitutional, rejecting the second ballot between the two best performed parties if neither of them had obtained the 40% threshold on the first ballot. The decision ripped off the most crucial majority-ensuring element, turning it effectively to a proportional system. (Corte Costituzionale <https://www.cortecostituzionale.it/actionSchedaPronuncia.do?anno=2017&numero=35>. Accessed April 6, 2022)

¹⁷⁶ The Nazarene pact (called so because the meeting was held in the PD’s headquarters in Largo del Nazareno in Rome) was an agreement between Renzi and Berlusconi on constitutional reforms.

pursue an alternative road by having the reform approved by an absolute majority of the members of both houses in the second voting and then winning the popular referendum.

The constitutional reform was rejected in a referendum held on December 4, 2016 (59.1% voted “No” and 40.9% voted “Yes”, with a turnout of 65.5%). As a result of the resounding defeat in the referendum, Renzi resigned as prime minister, but remained the leader of the PD. The defeat marked an end to the agenda pursued by Renzi, although he exaggerated its drama by stating that the occasion to reform the institutions will be gone for long: *“L’occasione di cambiare le regole del gioco non tornerà per anni, forse per generazioni”*¹⁷⁷ (Renzi 2017, 21). He also argued that the reform would have improved the efficiency of the institutions and strengthened Italy’s status in the eyes of other states. However, the perverse effect of all the efforts was that Italy’s international reputation seems to have suffered damage: *“La nostra credibilità internazionale sembra più debole dopo tre anni vissuti giocando all’attacco”*¹⁷⁸ (Renzi 2017, 21). Following Renzi’s resignation, Paolo Gentiloni (PD), the minister for foreign affairs in Renzi’s government, was appointed prime minister and the composition of the cabinet remained almost untouched.

Among the many miscalculations Renzi made during the process (see Bianchi 2017), several scholars have pointed out Renzi’s hubristic decision to rely on his personal popularity and to tie the result of the referendum to his own political fate, like President Charles de Gaulle did in the French Constitutional referendum in 1969. Several times Renzi announced that he would withdraw from politics if the referendum ends in defeat. Renzi’s approach to pursue the reform was described tellingly as “gambling” (Bianchi 2017; Ceccarini and Bordignon 2017). The nature of the reform was extensive and it contained obvious risks due to Renzi’s announcement to leave politics in case of defeat, as the opponents of the reform could and indeed did depict the referendum as an opportunity to remove Renzi from office.

A less ambitious or gradual reform and a more prudent approach in the referendum campaign may have been less damaging, as it was pointed out to Renzi by a commentator who lamented that the PD is a “good team” but misses too many “easy passes”:

“Siete come una bella squadra, ma sbagliate troppi passaggi, alcuni facili,” mi dice un commentatore di lungo corso della politica romana. Può darsi che abbia ragione, in fin dei conti. Ma sbagliamo qualche passaggio di troppo perché giochiamo all’attacco dopo che per anni altri hanno fatto sempre e solo catenaccio.¹⁷⁹ (Renzi 2017, 33)

Renzi admits that some mistakes were made, and attributes them to the “attacking” playing style, which refers to his ambitious but also controversial

¹⁷⁷ “The opportunity to alter the rules of the game will not return for years, maybe generations.”

¹⁷⁸ “Our international credibility seems weaker after three years of attacking play.”

¹⁷⁹ “You are like a good team, but you miss too many passes, some of them easy,” a long-term commentator on Roman politics tells me. In the end, he may be right. But we miss a few too many passes because we play attackingly, after years of catenaccio by others.”

agenda, and contrasts it with the “catenaccio” that other political forces have in his view practised for years. Again, *catenaccio* is used as a negative assessment of the work of previous parliamentarians and party leaders, as if they had pursued unambitious institutional reforms and contented themselves with preserving the status quo or striving only for minimal changes (which was not entirely accurate, as there have been many previous, albeit unsuccessful, attempts to reform the constitution). For example, the difficulty of reaching an agreement regarding the new electoral law after the 2013 elections was described by Renzi as “*melina*” (Renzi 2017, 50), a concept that is familiar from football as an obstructive time-wasting tactic to protect the status quo. The state bureaucracy had its share of criticism when it comes to their attitude towards Renzi’s programme of reforms. In Renzi’s view, his government’s methods represented an earthquake in the usually serene life of bureaucratic officials (see Renzi 2017, 42).

Renzi also appears annoyed that the commentators failed to recognize that his government’s way of pursuing several ambitious reforms simultaneously, including his “all or nothing” approach in the referendum, might have marked some innovations in the ways politics is conducted, independently of the results. Echoing Max Weber, Renzi even defended his much-criticized decision to risk his own and the government’s future, insisting that putting his own political fate at stake was a way of exhibiting an “ethic of responsibility” and that his resignation was the price to pay for a “different style of doing politics” (Renzi 2017, 22). He also saw that the idea of renouncing causes because they are likely to fail or encounter opposition is unbearable for those who believe that Italy should “play offensively rather than surrender itself to *catenaccio*” (*andare all’attacco anziché vivere nel catenaccio della rinuncia*) (Renzi 2017, 99). Renzi also explicitly opposes “gambling” (*azzardo*) as a political method yet defends the willingness to take risks and pursue ambitious aims, claiming that without taking challenges, a politician can make an honourable career, but he will never be able to make a difference (Renzi 2017, 120).

In early 2017, despite his previous announcements that he would “leave politics”, Renzi entered the scene again to analyse the referendum result. In an interview released to *Corriere della Sera*, Renzi compared the referendum with a “penalty” that he glamorously missed:

Io ho avuto la possibilità di tirare un calcio di rigore il 4 dicembre. Me l’hanno parato... Anzi 41 a 59 significa che l’ho tirato male, malissimo. E adesso è cominciata una fase politica diversa.¹⁸⁰

“The penalty”, again, translates into a political opportunity in Renzi’s rhetoric, but it is less dramatic than the researchers’ description of a “gamble”, which usually entails much more dramatic consequences to the player. The

¹⁸⁰ “I had the possibility to take the penalty on 4 December. They saved it... In fact, 41 against 59 means that I failed miserably. Now, a different political phase has opened.” In “Il 4 dicembre era un rigore e l’ho tirato malissimo. Posso non fare il premier”, *Corriere della Sera*, February 3, 2017.

penalty is also a recurring rhetorical topos that has been used in several other contests: in 2008 when Renzi announced that he would seek the centre-left candidacy for the mayor of Florence, in 2012 when he took part in the coalition primaries, and in 2013 in the aftermath of parliamentary elections.

Notwithstanding the defeat in the referendum, or “the missed penalty”, Renzi did not leave politics altogether. Instead, he remained the leader of the PD and announced a change in his approach:

Adottiamo lo schema Bearzot. Ripartiamo da fondocampo, giochiamo di rimessa, lasciamo andare avanti gli altri, per poi andare in contropiede.¹⁸¹

The new approach was expressed in football terms as “Bearzot tactics”, which owes its name to Enzo Bearzot, who coached Italy to 1982 World Cup victory with defensive *catenaccio*. As prime minister, Renzi had been assertive and at times impatient in the pursuit of his political agenda, which translated into continuous demands for “offensive play” or “ball possession”. Now, with a diminished political standing, Renzi had to re-assess his politics and strategies. The defeat attested a failure to bring about a bipolar competition with strong majorities and a return to proportional logic (Ceccarini and Bordignon 2017), which meant that bargaining, negotiating, and compromising between several parties was of paramount importance.

In February 2017, Renzi stepped aside as secretary of the PD with a view to obtaining a new party congress and to launch himself as a candidate again. Renzi was easily re-elected as secretary with 69.2% of the vote, but the primaries were conducted in an atmosphere of discord, as some members of the PD had decided to leave the PD and establish a new political party (Sandri and Seddone 2018). Nonetheless, Renzi seemed to enjoy strong legitimacy within the party, as demonstrated by Graziano Delrio, a supporter who praised Renzi’s leadership using a football comparison: “In Napoli, nobody hesitated to field Maradona. Without him, they would not have won.”¹⁸² With an eye to the upcoming elections in spring 2018, however, there were ambiguities regarding the leadership of the party. Although the statutes of the PD stated that the secretary of the party is also the potential prime minister candidate, the party never completely excluded the possibility that in case of electoral victory, Paolo Gentiloni could continue as prime minister. Gentiloni and Renzi were also very different figures in their style, as Gentiloni’s down-to-earth manner was in sharp contrast with Renzi’s more energetic approach. This difference was described by the economic advisor Luigi Marattin, who had served in the governments of both Gentiloni and Renzi, according to whom Gentiloni was a

¹⁸¹ “Let’s adopt the tactic of Bearzot. We will start the build-up from deep, leaving the initiative for others and then launch a counterattack.” In “Il leader cambia tattica e rispolvera il caminetto con tutti i big”, *Corriere della Sera*, February 3, 2017.

¹⁸² “Renzi condanna il giustizialismo. Agli scissionisti: nessuno ci distrugge”, *Corriere della Sera*, March 13, 2017.

director (*regista*) in the style of Andrea Pirlo, while Renzi was more of a *fantasista* à la Diego Maradona.¹⁸³

Renzi led the PD to the general elections that were held in March 2018. Even though the constitutional reform was rejected, Renzi believed that the PD still represented the most convincing centre-left party across Western Europe (Renzi 2017, 171). He also saw the PD as a bulwark against the populism of the M5S and the Lega, who “battle for the same playing field” (*si contendono lo stesso campo di gioco*) (Renzi 2017, 172).

Despite his previous statements regarding the change of approach, Renzi seemed to re-launch his agenda, demanding the PD adopt an attacking playing style instead of defensive *catenaccio*:

Vogliamo giocare all’attacco, non col *catenaccio*: più sul modello del profeta Arrigo Sacchi che su quello del pur grandissimo Nereo Rocco. Sapendo che giocando all’attacco qualche volta si prende qualche gol. Ma sapendo anche che un grande paese come l’Italia non può permettersi di vivere di solo *catenaccio*.¹⁸⁴

At the general level, the statement seems to offer two distinct ways to approach politics, curiously offering Arrigo Sacchi and Nereo Rocco as models. Since Renzi does not specify what these different playing styles entail politically, it leaves room for different interpretations. With an eye to the immediate circumstances in which this statement was made, that is, the upcoming parliamentary elections, Renzi seems to warn that the PD, despite their status as the incumbent party, should not run a too prudent campaign and merely defend their record in office but also launch new initiatives. From a more detached perspective, considering the stylistic and tactical elements of these approaches as well as Renzi’s previous interpretations of politics in terms of football tactics, *catenaccio* à la Rocco might entail an approach that is characterized by prudence and adaptation of one’s politics to what can surely be achieved. Instead, Renzi’s interpretation of Sacchi’s approach, which clearly inspires him more, suggests a more experimental attitude, even when it means facing greater risks or an outright political failure.

In the 2018 elections, the PD won a disappointing 18.7% of the vote, while M5S and Lega conquered the majority of the votes and, after long negotiations, formed the government together. Renzi himself was elected senator for Florence, and after steering the PD to the opposition, Renzi resigned as secretary of the PD. When analysing the electoral result, Renzi indicated several points that led to the disappointing outcome. In particular, the confusion regarding the leadership had a damaging effect in Renzi’s view, making it seem as if the PD did not have a

¹⁸³ “Marattin: ‘Non fate il funerale al renzismo’”, *Panorama*, December 10, 2019. Available at <https://www.panorama.it/news/marattin-italia-viva-renzi>. Accessed April 6, 2022.

¹⁸⁴ “We want to play offensively and not rely on *catenaccio*: more according to the model of the prophet Arrigo Sacchi than that of the nonetheless great Nereo Rocco. Being aware that playing offensively sometimes means conceding goals. But also acknowledging that a great country like Italy cannot live by resorting only to *catenaccio*.” In “‘Il 4 Marzo è un match point contro Grillo. Il voto a FI è un voto a Salvini’. Parla Renzi”, *Il Foglio Quotidiano*, January 30, 2018. Available at <https://www.ilfoglio.it/politica/2018/01/30/news/matteo-renzi-intervista-4-marzo-match-point-contro-m5s-175826/>. Accessed April 6, 2022.

clear and unambiguous leader: “*Ci siamo innamorati dell’idea di giocare con il falso nove*”.¹⁸⁵ “False nine” was yet another example of how the changing game vocabulary can be used to point out changes in politics.

¹⁸⁵ “We were too enchanted by the idea of playing with a false nine.” In *Corriere della Sera*, July 8, 2018.

8 RENZI AS A POLITICAL PLAYER

While the previous chapters have analysed in detail how Renzi employed football language in the political struggles of the time, this chapter offers a summarizing overview of Renzi's football language, political thought, action, and methods from a perspective that is more detached from the political debates that have been under scrutiny in this study.

The first section of this chapter will discuss Renzi's football language from a rhetorical point of view and connect this discussion to the premises set out in Chapter 2 regarding the intertwining of politics and football as well as related to Renzi's own profile as a football-using politician in Chapter 4.

Section 8.2, instead, attempts to describe what kind of politician Renzi can be regarded as in the light of the analysis conducted in this study. Because Renzi is an active politician, the study can offer only a provisional interpretation. Yet, his ousting from power, first from the government (2016) and then from the PD party leadership (2018), marks an end to the political project he pursued and thus an appropriate occasion to pause and assess his politics in general.

Before turning to discuss these topics in more detail, a brief recapitulation of the events that are excluded from the analysis is necessary. After Lega withdrew from the government in August 2019, Renzi had a pivotal part in bringing the PD and the M5S to government together, even though he had previously strongly opposed the idea that the PD would govern with any of the populist parties. Soon after this, Renzi broke from the PD and established a new party, *Italia Viva*, whose leader he became. In the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic in winter 2021, Renzi pulled his support from the Conte II government, to the birth of which he had strongly contributed, and sparked a political crisis that eventually replaced Giuseppe Conte with Mario Draghi as prime minister.

All the above-mentioned events have been explained and analysed by Renzi by resorting to football language. His fascination with using football language in political analysis and rhetoric continues unabated. Although no statistical analysis has been made in this study, it seems that Renzi's habit of using football language has acquired new nuances and perhaps even more intensity since his resignation from the offices of prime minister and secretary of the PD. While a

comprehensive analysis of these changes will remain a subject of another study, the following sections will include some interesting examples of his more recent football language and speculate on what they might say about his understanding of politics.

8.1 Rhetorical assessment of Renzi's football language

In view of the analysis carried out in this study, Oliviero Beha's observation that football offers an interpretative key to analyse Italian politics (see section 2.1) is still accurate. Football language has preserved its saliency in contemporary Italian politics, being an ingrained part of Italian political rhetoric. As discussed in Chapter 2, football is the most prevalent sport from which Italian politicians draw. The game is immensely popular, and it arouses passion that transcends differences. It was also argued that football has certain affinities with politics – namely contingency, controversiality, and fair play – that facilitate the connection and enable politicians to imagine politics in terms of football and use the language of the game in their rhetoric. While the empirical chapters took a detailed look at how Renzi deployed the terminology of the game in political controversies, here I will offer a summarizing rhetorical assessment of his language, highlighting certain features I consider worth taking up.

Renzi acknowledged the vital importance of rhetoric in outlining his political vision and in trying to inspire people to follow his course. According to Edelman, it is of paramount importance for aspiring leaders to embody ideas of innovation and novelty, which are often displayed by “stylistic play with language” (Edelman 1988, 49–54). Football language was an intrinsic part of Renzi's political rhetoric and his attempt to bring forth a change in Italian politics. Renzi has used it to analyse political controversies, tactics, styles of doing politics, and his own and others political manoeuvres as well as to make politics intelligible for his audience.

The popularity of football creates a strong temptation for politicians of all persuasions to use the game for political purposes. However, inauthentic interest or amateurish statements, taken only for the sake of appearing to be on the same wavelength with the people, are easily noticed. Renzi's *ethos* as a credible football language deploying politician is based on his personal experience and detailed understanding of the game, especially its recent developments (see Chapter 4). Renzi has self-ironically confessed that he was somewhat of failure at playing football, which led him try football refereeing, until he abandoned it and started to pursue a political career. Renzi follows the game keenly, which can be seen in his frequent commentaries on the latest football news and swift adoption of new football concepts to his political rhetoric. Like many other Italian politicians, Renzi follows the fortunes of his hometown club, Fiorentina, which he has persistently supported throughout its highs and lows. All this makes Renzi credible enough to use football language in his political interventions, yet at the same time his football profile and the way he deploys the language of the game

is sufficiently unique to be considered something else than a mere mimic of Berlusconi.

In Renzi's own words, his relatively short experience as a referee has been in many ways an educative experience beyond the boundaries of the football pitch. Considering this background, it is perhaps not surprising that appeals to the "rules of the game" are intrinsic for Renzi's rhetoric and politics. For example, Renzi justified his decision to run as a candidate in the primaries for choosing the centre-left candidate for the mayor of Florence (2009) by referring to the statute of the PD that had adopted primaries as a selection mechanism for public offices. The coalition primaries (2012) involved disputes regarding the vote procedure, as Renzi raised doubts that the procedure was interpreted on a partisan basis (with an eye to "a Bersani-Renzi derby") and in a manner that did not sufficiently ensure the contingency of the outcome. Also, the most important political objective Renzi set for his government was to devise "the rules of the game", that is, to pursue an ambitious constitutional reform that would have implied a shift towards a logic of presidential rule. However, it was argued that the insight gained from refereeing was probably something other than Renzi himself imagined; it had less to do with decisiveness as with the rhetorical ability to "read the game", that is, to foresee when the rules are ambiguous enough to be challenged and when it is better to adhere to them.

Renzi's football language can be considered somewhat innovative in its scope. He did not hesitate to bring this kind of language under the banner of centre-left and used it above all to challenge his own party. Some saw this as harmful "playing" aimed at undermining the unity of the party, but Renzi believed that fair competition between leader candidates is not only at the core of the idea of the PD but also something that reinvigorates it and thus should be encouraged. Despite accusations that he modelled the ideas and methods on Berlusconi, Renzi displays a greater sensitivity for fair play in his language and approaches than Berlusconi did. Renzi's treatment of Berlusconi as a legitimate opponent as well as his generous acceptance of defeats were politically expedient moves but also markers of respect for the basic tenets of democratic confrontation, in evident contrast to Berlusconi's "paranoid desire for victory at any cost" (Porro and Russo 2000, 367) and exemplified for instance by his attempts to pursue legislation designed for his personal benefit.

Differences in Berlusconi's and Renzi's language might also reflect their different perspectives on football and politics. Berlusconi relied on football language that consisted of commonplaces, such as the famous "entering the field" (*discesa in campo*), or calling his party *Forza Italia* or his party members *azzurri* – all gestures that were easily accessible and understood even by those who would not call themselves football enthusiasts. This relative simplicity has been interpreted as a sign of Berlusconi's populist style and rhetoric (Semino and Masci 1996), and it could be added that Berlusconi's football language seems to be targeted at a much larger audience than that of Renzi, which more clearly addresses those who regularly follow the game and are aware of its developments.

While Berlusconi's interest in football is likely authentic, he has always treated the game above all as a part of his business empire, and whether he was truly acquainted with the finer points of the game remains an open question. Some of his remarks regarding football suggest that he was not always up to date regarding the latest developments in the game, perhaps best exemplified by his fixations on man-marking (even when it had gone out of fashion) and on playing with two forwards (orders he tended to give to AC Milan managers). Although the most well-known examples of football language in Italian politics are still those coined by Berlusconi, they do not come across as very inventive (apart from few exceptions), and their persuasiveness is based on familiarity rather than on originality.

Renzi, instead, does not treat football primarily as business (although he sometimes denounces its excesses and corruption), but likely cultivates an interest in the game as such. He also knows the game from within, which colours his ways of using football language. He adopts new football words to his lexicon, occasionally revises his preferred tactics and styles, and weaves topical football debates—both Italian and international—into his political analysis. To summarize, it could be argued that the differences in how Berlusconi and Renzi use football language suggest that the game probably inspires Renzi's political thinking in a much more profound way compared to Berlusconi, whose approach to both football and politics is that of an entrepreneur and shaped above all by insights from business world. Renzi's approach to politics is more like that of a player (or "gambler" as some scholars depicted it), who is always ready to respond to contingent moves by other players.

Renzi uses memorable scenes from the pitch to create captivating analogies and as a source of anecdotes. Important decisions are framed as "penalty kicks" (*calcio di rigore*), evoking both individual initiative and responsibility that Renzi is prepared to assume in politics. References to footballers or managers and their actions and words are a regular part of Renzi's football language, aimed at bringing some insight or support to his political claims and action. They might be "well-known" persons like the witnesses recommended by Aristotle (2001); references to such famous football personalities like Pep Guardiola or Roberto Baggio might fall into this category. Renzi's football language borrows heavily from Fiorentina and its football history and traditions. References to the team, its players, and famous episodes are a regular part of Renzi's rhetoric. They have a specific symbolic significance in the Florentine context and function as means to create identification (Burke 1969) between Renzi and his core constituency by showing that he shares the same passions as his voters, and by suggesting fitting arguments to address the audience. However, unlike Berlusconi who could use AC Milan to propagate the idea that the "winning philosophy" of the club is transferable to all areas of life, including politics, Fiorentina does not symbolize success or triumph. On the contrary, as a club that challenges the great ones, Fiorentina worked also as a metaphor of Renzi's many confrontations with the party establishment.

The most innovative aspect of Renzi's football language is his habit to rely on the tactical-technical vocabulary of the game. Compared to Berlusconi, Renzi's football language comes across as more versatile in both content and purview. For example, a highly interesting feature of Renzi's rhetoric consists of his thinking regarding the figure of the politician in terms of football player roles. These comparisons are sometimes made more vivid by identifying famous footballers that have interpreted these roles. This is probably the feature that most sets him apart from other politicians who use football language, as these comparisons are rather regular in Renzi's rhetoric. In his thinking, the closest football equivalent for a politician seems to be the *mezzala*, a player type that must master a broad repertoire of skills (or *bagaglio tecnico* if we want to rely on Italian football jargon), analogously to modern-day politicians, who must be prepared to handle all kinds of political questions that raise to the agenda, and simultaneously be adept rhetoricians, campaigners, negotiators, and decision makers among other things. *Mediano*, *false nine*, *centravanti* and *fantasista* are further examples of player types that Renzi uses to reflect political positions and roles. It is also noteworthy that Renzi never commits to a single role or position but changes them according to altering situations. For example, Renzi occasionally compares the role of prime minister to both defensive players (e.g. *mediano*) and to players with more attacking flair (e.g. *fantasista* or *goleador*). Both examples are comprehensible depending on the perspective: the premiership both grants a remarkable possibility to advance one's agenda, but also limits some alternatives and chances to act by bestowing perhaps a stronger sense of responsibility upon the head of the government.

Regarding rhetoric related to player roles, we can detect some thought-provoking changes in Renzi's language since the establishment of *Italia Viva* (2019). Renzi has found himself in a situation where he has neither authority nor enough parliamentarians to be such a decisive agenda-setter in Italian politics as he once was. Thus, he has been forced to re-invent himself as a politician. In spring 2020, Renzi's own description of his role in Italian politics was as follows:

In questo momento sono un numero 8 o un numero 4. Sono un mediano di spinta. Sto in mezzo al campo e tiro qualche pedata, cercando però di impostare il gioco. C'è stato un tempo, quando ero premier, che giocavo per fare il goleador. Poi ho fatto il portiere quando ero segretario del Pd e cercavo di parere [sic] tutto. Ora voglio solo che vinca la squadra.¹⁸⁶

Both the number 4 and 8 in football point out "intermediary" player types (namely *mediano* and *mezzala*), that is, players who cannot be pure defenders or attackers but must master an extensive set of skills for both defending and attacking. Furthermore, to identify his role as a *mediano di spinta* is a further

¹⁸⁶ "For the moment I am number 8 or number 4. I am *mediano di spinta*. I am in the middle of the pitch, I make some challenges, while also trying to dictate the game. There was a time when I served as the premier and tried to score goals. As a secretary of the PD, I was the goalkeeper and tried to keep the ball out. Now, I only wish success to the team." In "Puntare solo sull'assistenzialismo è un messaggio sbagliato", *Agi*, May 4, 2020. Available at <https://www.agi.it/politica/news/2020-05-04/fase-2-coronavirus-renzi-8517039/>. Accessed April 6, 2022.

example how Renzi relies on his status as a specialist who masters the subtleties of the game and does not hesitate to show it off. The *mediano di spinta* is indeed a subtype of different kinds of defensive midfielders, one who needs more skills to build the play upwards compared to, say, the *mediano incontrista*, whose tasks consist mainly of obstructing the play of the opponents. Such nuanced descriptions easily become excessively obscure and might alienate those who are unable to understand his point or who simply dislike this kind of parlance.

A rhetorical figure that regularly appears in Renzi's rhetoric is *antithesis*. His rhetoric is often based on clear-cut divisions and opposition of ideas and proposals. Catenaccio was often opposed to whatever more flamboyant style, such as *calcio totale*, *gioco all'attacco*, or *calcio champagne*. Constructing the alternatives in this manner had both advantages and weaknesses. From a rhetorical point of view, it was well adapted to contests with plebiscitary dimensions (such as primaries), where the choice was centred around a limited number of alternatives. It also simplified the choice by making it seemingly easy and unambiguous. If one must choose between Renzi's *calcio totale* and his opponent's catenaccio, Renzi's argument suggested, why would anybody choose catenaccio? According to Edelman (1988, 49–51) unconventional uses of language might be used to create contrasts where ideological differences are minor. However, Renzi probably also believed that stylistic performance is not just something superficial compared to more substantial dimensions of politics (such as policies or ideologies), but on the contrary, it should be one of the dimensions that voters consider when choosing their leader.

Observed from a football perspective, this kind of rhetoric that is based on oppositions makes an easy target for criticisms and competing perspectives. Renzi's interpretations of football styles and tactics are rather one-sided. His paradigms for "attacking football", such as the Dutch *calcio totale* or Sacchi's style of play, were by no means indifferent when it comes to defending, as sometimes implied by Renzi. This would have offered possibilities for Renzi's critics or competitors to form counternarratives, to challenge his interpretations by pointing out inconsistencies in his ways, or to argue for a more balanced approach. Renzi's insistence on "attacking football" overshadowed that no political party, or football club for that matter, can rely merely on imposing their playbook on others, but they must also take into consideration the (expected) plans and actions of their opponents. This idea was grasped by some other politicians, such as Enrico Letta, and by certain pundits, but it was not enough to challenge the narrative put forward by Renzi. He managed to control, if only for a rather brief period, the agenda of Italian politics and how politics was discussed and debated in Italy. However, as time passed, insisting on the importance of "attacking" or "ball possession" made Renzi a prisoner of his own rhetoric, leading to a frenetic pace of introducing reforms and creating high hopes that he struggled to live up to. Paradoxically, the authoritativeness of Renzi's manners is most likely to evoke impressions of catenaccio-styled football figures, that is, those from whom he most wanted to distance himself. As time passed, Renzi also understood the value of changing approaches according to the circumstances.

The examples at the end of Chapter 7 suggest that Renzi, after he was ousted from power, no longer relied on such stark polarities in his rhetoric.

Perhaps the single most salient football term that Renzi uses and that originates from the game tactics is *catenaccio*, which Renzi uses to challenge the idea of the modern-day centre-left. Renzi interpreted *catenaccio* as a tactic that aims at preserving the present state of affairs, and thus incompatible with what he considered the appropriate politics for a centre-left with reformist orientation that seeks gradual political improvements. Renzi also envisioned a party that is able to accommodate different constituencies and not only defend its traditional voters. However, it remains questionable if Renzi's habit of using *catenaccio* as a negative label of his opponents' policies or ideas was eventually persuasive in the context of Italian politics. *Catenaccio* has reliably produced results on the pitch, and it is probably considered a more innovative tactic in Italy than elsewhere in Europe, as proved by many Italian writers who have hailed its merits. Although *catenaccio* can be considered an appropriate tactic for weaker teams, it is unlikely that Renzi, even as a diminished political force, will adopt prudence as a watchword of his own politics, as will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

On several occasions, Renzi has claimed that the inspirational power of the great ideologies of the 20th century has waned. His decision to rely on football language can also be understood against this statement: someone who proclaims the end of ideologies cannot plausibly base his thinking on the tenets of these theories. Renzi also thought that ideologies easily become restraints in an ever-changing world, and perhaps football language better articulated his understanding and vision of politics in a contingent world. Although Renzi's football language can be considered quite evocative, it also leaves wide ambiguities in terms of exact policies or courses of action, which gives the audience the possibility to read into it whatever they want to believe.

It is also worth looking at what is missing from Renzi's rhetoric. As noted previously, Renzi's football language is largely based on fairly recent, post-Bosman developments of the game. Terms and concepts that have fallen out of use due to the progress of the game are mostly missing, such as *libero* (a defender free from man-marking duties) or, say, *centromediano metodista* (a deep-lying midfielder in Vittorio Pozzo's *metodo* tactic), to give a few examples. Some of the earliest of Renzi's statements quoted in this work could not be plausibly used anymore. For example, in the context of top-flight football, referees are no longer expected to take immediate decisions thanks to VAR, which allows the review of incidents that occur on the pitch. As time goes by, the concept of the away-goal (a rule now abolished by UEFA), which Renzi used to emphasize the need to attract voters beyond the centre-left's core constituency, is also likely to become unfamiliar, at least for younger generations.

Inversely, since promises of novelty and renewal are themes that carry a powerful resonance in political rhetoric (see Edelman 1988, 49–50), the introduction of neologisms to football vocabulary may open new rhetorical possibilities for politicians, whose swift adoption of new terms might allow them

to talk about politics in a way that could be interpreted as promises of innovation and change.

8.2 Renzi's political style

I cicli si aprono e si chiudono. Vale per le squadre di calcio, vale per i grandi allenatori, vale anche per la politica.¹⁸⁷ – Matteo Renzi

Renzi is a politician that inspires devoted followers as well as fierce opponents. His cunning and seizing of opportunities arouse both admiration and derision within the parties and the wider public. His energetic attitude is applauded by supporters, while critics contend that he is all style and no substance. Some points of comparison for Renzi can be found among politicians, but none of them fits perfectly. At the beginning of his career, Renzi has been compared to Tony Blair, who also had the aura of a young charismatic leader when he took over the Labour Party and began to modernize it. There are also some similarities between Renzi and the President of France, Emmanuel Macron, as they both shared a similar reformist zeal when they came to power and advanced corresponding policies. However, these comparisons should also take into consideration the differences in political cultures.

In Italy, the closest point of comparison is usually found in Berlusconi because they are both deemed to be skilled speakers. Analogously to Berlusconi, Renzi has undoubtedly made use of the transformations of Italian politics of the last decades, which include the de-ideologization of politics and the growing importance of leaders over parties among other things. Yet, despite how Renzi is sometimes considered an "heir" to Berlusconi, there are obvious differences between these politicians. Berlusconi could more credibly represent himself as a "new man" compared to Renzi. Berlusconi's rise to power coincided with a serious crisis of the political system and he responded to it by founding his own party, and has been its undisputed leader ever since. Berlusconi wanted to be recognized above all as a successful businessman and he promised to lead Italy with his entrepreneurial skills and expertise, a promise that included an evident hue of technocracy.

Renzi, instead, despite his attempts to paint himself as an outsider to the political establishment, has spent most of his adult life in the circles of political power and is thus a career politician. He also passionately defends politics and politicians and forcefully opposes himself to forms of populism and technocracy (see e.g. Renzi 2012; 2020; 2021). This is something that Berlusconi would never do, as he has always been downright contemptuous of professional politicians, despite being one himself. Comparisons with Berlusconi also suggest that Renzi

¹⁸⁷ "Successful cycles begin and fade away. This holds true for football teams, celebrated football managers, and politics." In "Renzi: 'Alle politiche un nuovo centrosinistra'", *Quotidiano Nazionale*, May 22, 2019. Available at <https://www.quotidiano.net/politica/renzi-europee-2019-1.4604425>. Accessed May 31, 2022.

should be qualified as “populist”, yet I remain dubious whether the concept of populism is useful in explaining or understanding Renzi’s politics. If populism is based on the idea that there is some kind of divide between the “people” and the “elite”, it remains vague who these “people” are for Renzi. Although his rhetoric draws from some populist commonplaces, for instance by inviting to see the world in terms of clear-cut categories, these appeals are based on a generational divide rather than on appeals to virtuous “people”.

This section discusses Renzi’s style as a politician, that is, the distinctive methods and manners that mark his ways of doing politics. The aim is not to determine whether his style should be judged good or bad, but rather to try to distinguish some of its most salient characteristics. The discussion also relies on the rich conceptual repertoire and discussion of Max Weber regarding the figure of the politician as presented in his *Politics as a Vocation* (Weber 2007), and uses it as a reference point to evaluate and assess Renzi as a politician during the period under scrutiny in this study.

Mayor of Florence, Dario Nardella (PD), has offered an apt evaluation of Renzi, which forms a good point of departure for the analysis. He interpreted Renzi’s approach to politics as follows:

Per lui, in fondo, la politica è un gioco: serio, importante, appassionante, ma pur sempre un gioco che quindi, prima o poi finisce. Questo gli permette di maneggiarla con distacco.¹⁸⁸ (Quoted in Ferrarese and Ognibene 2013, 20)

Nardella portrays Renzi as someone who considers politics as a “game”, but without the derogatory connotations this expression usually contains. On the contrary, he suggests that Renzi considers politics as both serious and exciting but approaching it as a game also allows him “distance”, which is a necessary condition for political action (see Weber 2007, 193). As evidenced by Renzi’s use of football language, Renzi can be regarded as someone who thinks politics is a game and regards himself as a player.

Curiously, when looking for his counterpart in world football, Renzi is often compared with Diego Maradona. This comparison usually refers to Renzi’s charismatic qualities and some scholars have considered Renzi a charismatic politician in the Weberian sense (e.g. Salvati 2016). However, Renzi’s political rise did not coincide with any serious collective anxiety or crisis that usually precedes the emergence of charismatic leaders. When Renzi was elected the leader of the PD in late 2013, the country had experienced a tumultuous period after the elections in the spring and was led by an inharmonious government, but the situation was not as serious as the political turmoil from which Berlusconi emerged in the early 1990s. Yet, Renzi’s pledge to “scrap” the old political elite could be interpreted as a challenge thrown at the legal-rational establishment, and his rapid rise within the party ranks indicates that he was, at least from some

¹⁸⁸ “For him, after all, politics is a game: serious, important, exciting but nonetheless a game, and therefore something that sooner or later comes to an end. This allows him to handle it with detachment.”

people's perspective, seen as a politician with exceptional or extraordinary qualities.

Renzi's political ascent was made possible by his seizure of the possibilities that the changing political landscape offered. The establishment of the PD (2007) and the adoption of primaries allowed a quick rise in the party hierarchy in a way that had not been possible when the advancement required above all a mastery of cumbersome party politics and negotiations. Unlike many centre-left figures who looked at any personalization of politics with suspicion, Renzi was not shy to exploit the possibilities it offered. Here, the declining fortunes of Berlusconi also lent space for a politician like Renzi, who was inclined to appeal directly to the public and to use his persuasive skills to conquer the voters who had had enough of Berlusconi. By adopting football language as a part of his political rhetoric, Renzi also adopted Berlusconi's own measures and used them to persuade previous centre-right voters to vote for the PD instead. Renzi's style was most vocally contested by his own team, the PD, who voiced their reservations about following Berlusconi's playbook.

Renzi does well in competitions with plebiscitary tendencies, such as primaries, but when he must deal with intra-party negotiations within the PD, he often appeared frustrated and impatient to have a dialogue with those who did not share his views. Or as the *Corriere della Sera* columnist Beppe Severgnini put it after Renzi broke from the PD and founded his own party *Italia Viva*: "*Non sopporta di giocare in una squadra, pretende di schierarla e guidarla.*"¹⁸⁹ The impatience to handle dissenting opinions was most explicit in the early stages of his career and in his commitment to "scrap" (*rottamare*) the party establishment. Some of Renzi's actions were also likely to increase discontent within the party, such as his quick dismissal of Letta in early 2014, despite all the contrary assurances of co-operation made before that. During his tenure as prime minister, the most strenuous challenge seemed to come from the PD itself.

When Renzi was appointed prime minister, he had no previous parliamentary experience. Perhaps because of this inexperience, he demonstrated a certain insensitivity towards the time-consuming practices of the parliament. This could be seen in his ambitious programme for one reform a month that he announced when he became prime minister, and in his way of justifying the importance constitutional reform in the name of efficiency above all.

During his time in the parliament, Renzi seems to have developed some interest in the subtleties of parliamentary politics and respect for the clever use of parliamentary rules and regulations. Renzi has accused Conte's government of "dribbling parliamentary procedures" (Renzi 2020, 42), and explained how the mastery of the procedure has allowed his numerically relatively small *Italia Viva* to "play and construct games" that the constitutional reform he pushed for would have likely made more difficult.¹⁹⁰ The constitutional reform, combined

¹⁸⁹ "He cannot withstand playing on a team, he expects to draw up the formation and to be its leader." In Beppe Severgnini "Ambizioni, rimpianti, sfide: l'ossessione di Renzi", *Corriere della Sera*, September 20, 2019.

¹⁹⁰ "Il talento di Mr Renzi", *Il Foglio Quotidiano*, September 6, 2021.

with the sizeable majority bonus that the electoral law *Italicum* would have granted for the winner, would have strengthened the powers of the government, and offered fewer possibilities for play for minor players to intervene. Although Renzi continues to praise the merits of the failed reform, he has probably updated his understanding about the importance to grant possibilities not only to large parties or majorities but also for minor players and backbenchers to voice their demands.

Renzi's way of seeking allies also lent itself to criticism within the PD. His way of cultivating a relationship with Berlusconi (until the cessation of the "Nazarene pact") was especially hard to digest for many within the centre-left because for a long time, opposing Berlusconi seemed to be the only glue that held them together. Since the turmoil of the early 1990s, the collapse of the old parties and the birth of new parties increased the contingency of politics, as the voters could no longer vote out of habit for the same parties as always. Renzi's adoption of football language, Berlusconi's trademark, to persuade centre-right voters was a tactic that exploited the contingency that the weakening of ideologies had opened. It also triggered resistance in the more left-wing members of the party, who accused Renzi of not being ideologically consistent.

It is, indeed, hard to define Renzi in terms of clear-cut ideologies, not least because he has himself argued that they no longer offer guidance for parties and politicians, who must be ready to constantly re-assess and change their courses. The lack of a clear ideological programme could be interpreted as a major drawback of Renzi, and his approach to politics could be denounced as opportunistic, yet I doubt that Renzi would take these as severe blames. On the contrary, he considers the inability to interpret situations and act accordingly to be one of the most fatal shortcomings of any politician.

One senses that Renzi is not such an interesting politician when he is in power as he is when he finds himself—if not on the "losers' side"—at least in circumstances where he is determined to improve his own standing. He appears most innovative in situations where he must act as a challenger. The centre-left primaries for the mayoral candidate of Florence in 2009 was the first significant attempt to challenge the party establishment. In 2012, the challenge thrown at the current party leader Bersani in the coalition primaries was unsuccessful, but it nevertheless legitimated Renzi as a potential future leader of the party. Even after the defeat in the constitutional referendum in 2016 and the defeat in the 2018 general elections, Renzi has all but disappeared from the political scene, using his leverage whenever possible.

Although Renzi is inclined to exaggerate the significance of some political choices as some kind of "now or never" occasions, he seems to confront the outcomes of political struggles with much less seriousness. He has claimed that every politician should experience a "political death" at least once in their career (Renzi 2017, 209–210), which suggests that setbacks do not upset him. Renzi seldom dwells on defeats. On the contrary, he seems to accept them as unavoidable contingencies of politics and tries to elaborate something new from them. As a long-time supporter of Fiorentina, he knows that defeats might

contain some privileges: defeated are not only sympathetic, but they must also be more innovative and creative, as they are constantly forced to plan how to thwart the policies of their mightier opponents.

Those who oppose Renzi regularly remind him of his unfulfilled promise to “leave politics” after the referendum defeat. The defeat forced him to re-think this promise, and as it turned out, Renzi never “left politics”, if that is understood as retreating from public and political life altogether. Renzi justified his decision to continue as an act of responsibility towards those who have put faith in his platform and leadership. His decision may be mocked for manifesting excessive ambition and a desire for protagonism, but it is hard to deny that Renzi is truly passionate about politics. The defeat in the referendum probably crystallized for him that in politics successes and failures alternate and failing to reach political objectives is no reason to abandon politics. Everybody who has played or followed football knows that the game can be satisfying and of high quality even when one loses and the same holds for politics. Pursuing victories is important, but certainly not all-important: the respect for the game and how it is played has a value that transcends single victories or defeats. This is what Renzi tried to argue when he lost the referendum, even though the merits of the reform and Renzi’s political style during the campaign remain open to debate. Renzi’s undisguised accentuating of his own cunning and political moves reveals that he genuinely enjoys political battles and the excitement they offer. Renzi is a politician who considers politics fascinating to the extent that it makes “one’s wrists tremble” (*da far tremare i polsi*) (Renzi 2017, 17). To use Weberian concepts, Renzi is a politician “living for politics” (Weber 2007), someone for whom politics gives pleasure and meaning for life, even in moments of defeat.

Renzi is also attracted to risks. The way he challenged the party leadership on several occasions had the potential to jeopardize his career, but it also contributed to his dazzling rise within the party ranks. Renzi considers risk-taking as a part of the profession of politicians and believes that on some occasions, politicians must follow their conviction and give their all for the cause they believe in. Even the defeat in the referendum has not made him change his mind on this:

Se l’agenda la subisci, perché speri solo in un’azione di contropiede, prima o poi un gol lo incassi. La difesa passiva a oltranza in politica non porta a nulla.¹⁹¹ (Renzi 2019, 80-81)

Taking risks is also something that makes politics intriguing for Renzi, as aptly described by philosopher Biagio De Giovanni: “*La politica è un problema di sistema nervoso. Renzi somiglia a quei giocatori che possono giocare solo se si giocano tutto. In questa maniera, anche perdere, risulta straordinario.*”¹⁹² In other words, sometimes the courage to follow one’s conviction is rewarding despite the

¹⁹¹ “If you let others set the agenda and only wait for a counterattack, sooner or later you are doomed to concede a goal. Passive defence to the bitter end leads nowhere in politics.”

¹⁹² “Politics is a question of nerve. Renzi resembles those players who can only play when the stakes are high. In this sense, also being defeated might be considered tremendous.” In “Scissi è meglio”, *Il Foglio Quotidiano*, September 18, 2019.

outcome of political struggles. The penchant for risk is also something that sets Renzi's style apart from Berlusconi's, whom Renzi often reproached for having chosen an overly compromising and cautious line from the point of view of institutional reforms.

The fascination for risk resulted in a hubristic miscalculation during the referendum campaign, and judged in hindsight, a more conciliatory approach in reforming the constitution might have led to different outcome. In the end, the referendum was not indispensable in case a majority large enough could have been found in the parliament. In this sense, one could argue that Renzi was too impatient in "drilling through hard boards", (Weber 2007, 207) that is, to negotiate and formulate a proposal that would have been accepted by the required majority in the parliament. Renzi's confidence that he can persuade the voters to give their approval in the referendum and his decision to rely on his charisma ignored the fact that charisma is hard to sustain, as it is not an inherent trait of the person but rather depends on the audience's willingness to support the leader, as Weber (2007, 157-158) has theorized. This makes charismatic appeals volatile and fragile, as the result of the referendum proved. Following Weber, the challenge for any charismatic leader is to try to change the political system so that they leave a lasting impact on it (Weber 1968). In this test, Renzi was unsuccessful. In other words, the referendum defeat meant that Renzi was not able to "routinize" his charisma and to transfer some of it to the institutional structures of Italy.

Occasionally, Renzi seems to nurture nostalgia for his time as prime minister, or in his words, as "*centroavanti fantasista*":

Ero il centroavanti fantasista? Sì. Era il mio ruolo preferito? Sì. Io volevo un calcio che giocasse all'attacco, un calcio spettacolo. Ma dopo la vittoria del 'no' al referendum, vanno più di moda i mediani che interrompono il gioco altrui, alcuni dei quali sono bravi anche a costruire le azioni di gioco degli altri.¹⁹³

Politicians pursue power, and to serve as prime minister is the apogee of the career of any politician. If we take into consideration the words of the most famous *fantasista* of Italian football, Roberto Baggio, who deems that a *fantasista* is someone in constant search for artistic touch of originality and someone who wants to have his name remembered (Baggio 2001, 100), we can detect a bittersweet nuance in Renzi's remark. Like any *fantasista* in football who wants to be remembered for his goals, Renzi attempted to have his name associated with the legislation that would have established a new institutional framework in Italy, but like so many before him, Renzi was also unsuccessful.

Finally, what drives Renzi forward? Renzi has recently become the target of criticism because of his lavishly paid extra-parliamentary activities as a "lobbyist", most notably in Saudi Arabia. This has been considered inappropriate

¹⁹³ "Was I the centre-forward fantasista? Yes. Was that my favourite role? Yes. I wanted to play attacking and spectacular football. However, after the victory of 'no' in the referendum, the defensive midfielders who break down opponents' plays seem to be more in vogue, and some of them are also able to create playing opportunities for others." In "Il talento di Mr Renzi", *Il Foglio Quotidiano*, September 6, 2021.

for a senator in office because of potential conflicts of interest. Where these activities might not be formally illegal, they may still be morally reprehensible and contribute to deteriorating the trust in the political establishment and Renzi's own capacity of political judgment. Renzi, among other collaborators of his, has also been charged with illegal party financing, which he has denied and the trial is under way.

Despite these considerations, it would be far-fetched to argue that Renzi's politics are motivated by his own economic or judicial interests, as it was partly in the case of Berlusconi. Contrary to Berlusconi whose ethos was above all that of a successful businessman, Renzi is proud to be a politician, and if anything, he is driven by the will to earn political fame and greatness. In the pursuit of this, he is ready to risk failures and face setbacks like few other contemporary Italian politicians, although the persuasive power of this style might have largely faded away by now.

If there is an on-field analogy that best describes Renzi's political style during the period under scrutiny in this study, it would be a club coached by the Argentinian football manager Marcelo Bielsa. His teams are known for a highly intensive playing style that permits both great successes and major failures, but which also quickly consumes its protagonists.

9 CONCLUSIONS

Football language is a pervasive part of Italian politics and political rhetoric, which shows no signs of exhaustion or decline. The ubiquity of this language is both a benefit and a burden for a researcher. Potentially interesting football expressions spring up incessantly in books, interviews, talk shows, and parliamentary debates. This means that there is no lack of material, but since the study must be completed at some point, something is inevitably left out of the analysis. In this dissertation, I have analysed former Prime Minister Matteo Renzi's football language in Italian politics during a period which extends roughly from the early 21st century until 2018. The empirical analysis was based on Renzi's own writings and selected newspaper material, including his interviews. The dissertation was simultaneously a study of a phenomenon and a case: I argued that Italy is the epitome of the phenomenon of employing football as a Pocockian "political language", and considered Renzi as a paradigmatic example of contemporary Italian politicians who systematically use the vocabulary of the game as a part of their political rhetoric.

To understand Renzi's politics, it is important to understand football, among other things. This is for the simple reason that football terminology has been a defining feature of Renzi's political rhetoric throughout his career, from his time in the local government of Florence to the pinnacle of Italian politics during his tenure as prime minister. Such language was closely connected to Renzi's attempt to bring about innovation in politics both within the context of centre-left as the leader of the PD and at the institutional level as the prime minister, even though he was not always successful. Relying on expressions originating from the game, Renzi tried to challenge both the old establishment that governed the PD and the conception of the centre-left and what it should represent in the 21st century. He also pursued an ambitious constitutional change that eventually failed. In the study, I analysed how Renzi used football language in his political rhetoric and action, that is, how he employed concepts, metaphors, idioms, and vocabularies originating from football in the political struggles of the time. The narrative followed Renzi's career in an approximately chronological order, elucidating how his football-inspired rhetoric evolved through different

institutional roles and contexts. At the summit of his power, Renzi also managed to define the terms of political debate, which gave him an aura of an innovative leader, if only for a rather brief period.

The study has also offered an account of the birth of the PD and its first decade of rather tumultuous existence and the role Renzi played in steering the direction of the party. The study has taken part in research on contemporary Italian politics by examining the rhetoric and politics of Renzi, one of the leading, albeit not always victorious, Italian politicians of the past years, and trying to make his politics intelligible by interpreting the arguments and justifications he attributed to his own politics. In assessing Renzi as a politician, I argued, along Weberian lines, that Renzi is a politician “living for” politics, someone who is passionate about politics, attracted to risks, and resilient in the face of criticisms and defeats. Known for many turnarounds during his political career, Renzi can also be blamed for opportunism and ideological thinness. He embodied high hopes of change that his rhetoric further fostered, which also explains why his tenure could be interpreted as disappointing.

The study has also recovered the somewhat neglected strand of research on political languages in Italy. Football language became increasingly popular after the political turmoil of the early 1990s, which saw many established political parties and politicians fall into disgrace and many ideological certainties gone. When political languages that relied on ideologies lost their rhetorical and interpretative force, politicians experimented with new ways of speaking. In this context, football provided a language that was used to make sense of the wide-ranging changes in the political landscape of Italy. As observed by several scholars, the emergence of Silvio Berlusconi on the political scene was the driving force behind this development, although not even Berlusconi can be credited for “inventing” football language. Rather, he understood that football unites millions of Italians and that the game provides a language that is spoken and understood by those people. In other words, he picked an already familiar language for most of the Italians and cleverly used it to boost his political career.

By the time Renzi rose to prominence, it was clear that this way of speaking was not just a peculiarity of Berlusconi. Instead, football language was an established and widespread “political language”, which politicians of all persuasions, journalists, and commentators regularly used. By focusing on Renzi, the study has brought a new protagonist on the scene, which allows us to better consider the changes in how football language is used as a “political language” and to better evaluate, assess, and criticize the possibilities and limits of this kind of parlance in politics.

Renzi was unique in how he brought this parlance to the context of centre-left politics more forcefully than anyone before him had. Renzi’s football persona relied on his status not only as a football enthusiast (as a fan of Fiorentina) but also as a connoisseur of the game, and on his brief but intense experience as a referee. Renzi exploited the fact that he knows the game from many angles, which gave his football language a unique imprint. He exploited a broad range of imagery originating from the game and deployed its language both within the

internal power struggles of the PD as well as to challenge the party's adversaries. The analysis of Renzi's rhetoric revealed that football expressions could be used to analyse political procedures, tactics, as well as political style and artistry, which are all aspects of political battles worthy of attention beyond simple "results", victories or defeats.

In the light of the analysis conducted in this study, among politicians who rely on football language in Italy, Renzi is arguably the most innovative in terms of purview and content, even surpassing Berlusconi, who is usually deemed the most representative example of this phenomenon. Simultaneously as Renzi advanced in his career, his football language evolved and acquired new nuances, until it became a distinctive element of his political rhetoric and profile, perhaps best captured in his phrase "*calcisticamente parlando*" (speaking in football language), which usually precedes a political statement formulated by relying on football jargon. Rhetorically, it is his signature move, which indicates an attempt to frame and set the terms of political debate by resorting to a language that he controls fluently and effortlessly. However, using these kinds of phrases contains the risk that they easily provoke ridicule and mockery among his adversaries, who may imitate them to parody Renzi's rhetoric, style, or political initiatives. Finally, this phrase is not simply a slogan to be thrown out, but illuminates how Renzi's thinking about politics is deeply influenced by notions of playing and game.

Renzi's fascination for football language shows no signs of exhaustion. On the contrary, based on the few glimpses of Renzi's more recent football expressions in Chapter 8, perhaps the most interesting analysis is yet to be written. Future studies might use Renzi as a point of reference to further analyse and elucidate this phenomenon in Italy and beyond.

Notwithstanding the ubiquity of football jargon in politics, the criticisms towards it tend to be continuous and rather unchangeable in terms of content. Here, I wish to address one often ignored point of view. Namely, football language is and remains a language of male politicians, at least in the Italian context. This is no surprise, as football and politics are still predominantly male bastions in Italy. At the time of writing this, approximately 35% of the members of Italian parliament are women.¹⁹⁴ Also, it was not until 2022 that Italy saw its first female prime minister, when Giorgia Meloni (*Fratelli d'Italia*) took office. Party leaders, too, continue to be primarily men. When it comes to football, male football is always the reference point (unlike, for example, in the US, where women's "soccer" has gained a superior status compared to men's soccer). As it was noted previously, the game jargon is also heavily biased in favour of men, as the technical-tactical vocabulary that politicians deploy in their speeches has almost exclusively originated from the men's game and male politicians seldom refer to the women's game.

¹⁹⁴ Statistics regarding the composition of the Italian parliament can be found on the websites of the Chamber of Deputies (<https://www.camera.it/leg18/571>) and of the Senate (<https://www.senato.it/leg/18/BGT/Schede/Statistiche/Composizione/SenatoriPerEta.html#>).

In the light of these facts, the absence of women politicians who rely on football language is not very surprising. This raises further important questions regarding the effects of football language on democracy, political participation, and democratic debate that cannot be treated here with the level of detail they would deserve. The lack of female voices can of course be a deliberate choice of women politicians, who want to engage in and imagine politics in an alternative manner that departs from seeing politics as a “game” or “playing”. A more disquieting prospect is that football language may contribute to reproducing and consolidating the male-dominated character of politics, or that it outrightly contributes to marginalizing certain voices in the political debate. Or, even when women politicians are highly proficient and conversant with football, it remains an open question if the voters appreciate them showing off their sophistication regarding the game as happens with male politicians, or would it rather trigger resistance and ridicule among them. However, the example of Angela Merkel suggests that women politicians may also successfully exploit football for political purposes. During her chancellorship, Merkel was regularly spotted following matches at stadiums and her passion for football was so well-known that also Renzi, on his first visit to Germany, presented Merkel with a signed shirt of Fiorentina’s then German striker, Mario Gomez.

The intertwinement of politics and football has a long-standing tradition in Italy that stretches from the early decades of the past century to this day. This study discussed one of the most prevalent manifestations of these interconnections, the pervasiveness of football-inspired speech in the context of contemporary Italian politics. Renzi’s uses of football language open paths to further consider how politics and football are enmeshed. The demands to keep the two apart have become obsolete, and the interesting questions concern in what ways and how the two are related. The perspective adopted here departed from the institution-centred approaches and focused on the characteristics of the game itself, arguing that football and politics are historically and conceptually intertwined, which allows politicians to form connections between the two activities. Whether Renzi has acknowledged these affinities remains an open question: he never explicitly ponders his uses of football language. However, his effortless and at times imaginative ways to deploy football language suggest that he does not consider politics and football as opposites to be held apart, but as something that share resemblances in more ways than it is usually reckoned. As such, it points to further research possibilities regarding not just politics *and* football, but the politics *of* football, inviting us to consider the often-neglected political dimensions woven into the game.

In the introductory chapter, I argued that Italy can be considered a distinctive example (the “special one”) of a country where the language of football has pervaded the realm of political and public debate. The answer to the question of whether Italy can be considered exceptional—whether in terms of scope or content of this kind of speech—is ambiguous. A definitive answer would require a detailed inquiry into other countries’ politics and football, as well as mastery of their language (and partly distinct football vocabularies) to

fully grasp the ways the language of the game is embedded in their political practices and rhetoric. For better or for worse, Italy might still end up as the most fertile ground to study football as a political language.

Former Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti once asserted, re-formulating his own dictum, that “Football exhausts those who do not have passion for it” (*Il calcio logora chi non lo ama*) (Andreotti 1982, 29–30). This enigmatic remark could perhaps be understood as an acknowledgement of the political potential that displaying interest in football offers, something that has become “a well-nigh necessity” (Markovits and Rensmann 2010, 9) among politicians. Although leading politicians in liberal democracies are probably less and less directly involved in football other than as declared supporters, an interest in football is still considered as something that is expected to bring political prestige and boost a politician’s reputation, and one way of asserting this interest is to deploy the language of the game in political debates. Continuous, albeit sometimes rather slow, transformations of the game ensure that new terms and concepts are perpetually generated, and football will likely continue to stimulate the imagination of politicians at least in the countries with major football following. Changes in the way politicians use football language denote changes in the world and politics.

SUMMARY IN FINNISH

Tässä väitöskirjassa tutkitaan ”jalkapallokieltä” Italian entisen pääministerin Matteo Renzin politiikassa ja retoriikassa. ”Jalkapallokielellä” viitataan sanoihin, käsitteisiin, metaforiin ja puhetapoihin, jotka ammentavat pelistä ja joita käytetään poliittisen toiminnan ja puheen välineinä Italiassa. Nämä puhutavat liittyvät esimerkiksi pelin taktiikoihin, tekniikoihin, sääntöihin, pelaajiin, valmentajiin sekä jalkapalloviheriön tapahtumiin. Tutkimuksen lähtökohtana on havainto siitä, että tuskin missään muussa maassa jalkapallosta lainattua sanastoa käytetään poliittisessa toiminnassa ja puheessa niin runsaasti ja vivahteikkaasti kuin Italiassa. Renzi toimii tutkimuksessa malliesimerkkinä poliitikosta, joka paitsi seuraa jalkapalloa aktiivisesti myös käyttää pelistä tuttua puheenpartta systemaattisesti ja monipuolisesti osana poliittista toimintaansa ja retoriikkaansa. Tutkimuksessa Renzin jalkapallokieltä analysoidaan hänen omien puheidensa ja kirjoitustensa kautta ajanjaksolla, joka ulottuu noin vuodesta 2006 vuoteen 2018.

Jalkapallosta lainaavien puhetapojen yleistyminen Italiassa ajoittuu 1990-luvun alun poliittisen kentän ja kulttuurin muutoksiin. Kylmän sodan päättymisen ja Italiassa paljastunut korruptiovyvyhti järjestytti maan politiikkaa ja sai aikaan sen, että monet poliittiset puolueet ja poliitikot pyrkivät uudistumaan. Kielelliset innovaatiot olivat tärkeä osa tätä uudistumisprosessia. Parhaiten uutta tilannetta tulkitsi ja käytti hyväkseen Silvio Berlusconi, joka nousi pääministeriksi ensimmäisen kerran vuonna 1994 rakentamalla poliittisen puolueensa ja puheensa jalkapallon varaan. Häntä voi pitää ensimmäisenä italialaispoliitikkona, joka suunnitelmallisesti sovelsi jalkapallokieltä ja pelin symboliikkaa politiikassaan.

Jalkapallokielen käyttö ei kuitenkaan ole vain Berlusconiin liittyvä kuriositeetti, vaan etenkin miespoliitikkojen viljelemä puhetapa politiikassa. Tämä tutkimus nostaa valokeilaan Renzin, jolle jalkapallopeuhe on ollut oleellinen osa retoriikkaa, jolla hän perusteli muutosvaatimuksiaan Italian politiikassa. Renzin retoriikkaa tutkimalla väitöskirja pureutuu siihen, millä tavoin ja miksi jalkapallokieltä käytetään politiikasta puhumiseen Italiassa, ja monipuolistaa näin käsitystä siitä, millaisia kielellisiä resursseja, mahdollisuuksia ja rajoituksia tällaiseen puhetapaan sisältyy politiikassa.

Teoreettisesti työ pohjautuu ajatukseen politiikan ja jalkapallon pelimäisestä luonteesta. Kontingenssi, kiistanalaisuus ja *fair play* toimivat käsitteellisinä lähtökohtina jalkapallon ja politiikan yhtäläisyyksien ja erojen eksplikoinnille. Nämä yhtäläisyydet ja erot tarjoavat poliitikoille retorisia mahdollisuuksia tulkita politiikkaa jalkapallon käsitteistön kautta. Metodologisesti työ perustuu ajatukseen, että puhuessaan politiikasta jalkapallostermein Renzi ”kääntää” politiikkaa jalkapallokielelle, mikä vaatii paitsi pelin tuntemusta myös politiikan ja retoriikan tajua. Renzin jalkapallokieltä tutkitaan puhetekoina, joilla otetaan osaa poliittisiin kamppailuihin sekä puolueessa että laajemmin italialaisessa politiikassa. Analyysi nojautuu sitaatteihin Renziltä, jotka asetetaan osaksi Italian viime vuosikymmenten poliittista kehitystä ja poliittisia kiistoja. Analyysissä tarkastellaan, millaisia tavoitteita näihin puhetekoihin sisältyi ja arvioidaan niiden onnistuneisuutta ottaen huomioon puheiden vastaanotto aikalaisten keskuudessa.

Renzi nousi Italian pääministeriksi vuonna 2014 hänen syrjäytettyään puoluetoverinsa Enrico Lettan puolueen sisäisessä valtakamppailussa. Renzin nousu keskustavasemmistolaisessa Demokraattisessa puolueessa (*Partito Democratico*, PD) oli nopea. Renzistä tuli kansallisesti tunnettu poliitikko sen jälkeen, kun hänet valittiin Firenzen pormestariksi vuonna 2009. Tätä ennen hän oli toiminut Firenzen maakunnan presidenttinä (2004–2009). Pormestarina hän tuli tunnetuksi tavoitteestaan toteuttaa sukupolvenvaihdos politiikassa, mitä hän kutsui poleemisesti ”romuttamiseksi” (*rottamazione*). Vuonna 2012 hän haastoi puolueen istuvan puheenjohtajan Pier Luigi Bersanin kilvassa keskustavasemmistokoalition pääministeriehdokkaaksi, mutta hävisi. Vuoden 2013 vaalituloksella keskustavasemmistolle pettymys, mikä johti Bersanin eroon ja avasi tien Renzille puolueen johtajaksi. Hänet valittiin Demokraattisen puolueen puoluesihteeriksi joulukuussa 2013 äänivyöryllä.

Keskeisen kontekstin analyysille muodostaa Demokraattisen puolueen perustaminen vuonna 2007, mikä loi maaperän Renzin nousulle puolueessa ja Italian politiikassa. Demokraattinen puolue muodostui puolueista, joiden juuret juonsivat pääosin Italian kommunistipuolueeseen (*Partito Comunista Italiano*) ja kristillisdemokraatteihin (*Democrazia Cristiana*). Uusi puolue pyrki uudistumaan avoimempaan ja osallistavampaan suuntaan. Se määritteli itsensä jäsenien ja äänestäjien puolueeksi ja otti käyttöönsä esivaaleiksi (*primarie*) kutsutun proseduurin, jolla se valitsi puoluejohtajansa ja ehdokkaansa julkisiin virkoihin. Nämä muutokset mahdollistivat nopean etenemisen puolueen sisäisessä hierarkiassa, mitä Renzi onnistuneesti hyödynsi noustessaan Firenzen pormestariksi 2009 ja puoluejohtajaksi 2013.

Pääministerinä Renzi aloitti kunnianhimoisen uudistusohjelman, jonka tärkein osa koski Italian perustuslain uudistamista. Tämä koitui lopulta Renzin kohdaloksi, sillä uudistus hylättiin kansanäänestyksessä joulukuussa 2016, ja Renzi erosi pääministerin tehtävästä. Vuoden 2018 parlamenttivaaleissa Demokraattinen puolue koki tappion, ja hieman myöhemmin Renzi erosi myös puoluejohtajan tehtävästä.

Jalkapallokielen käyttäjänä Renzi on kiinnostava, sillä hän tuntee jalkapalloa monista eri näkökulmista ja hänen kielenkäyttönsä ammentaa pelin eri elementeistä. Renzi on firenzeläisen jalkapalloseura Fiorentinan innokas kannattaja, ja hänen paikallispolitiikassa käyttämänsä retoriikka nojasi usein esimerkkeihin ja analogioihin, jotka voi olettaa tutuiksi jalkapalloa seuraavalle firenzeläisyleisölle. Nuoruudessaan Renzi on toiminut jalkapallotuomarina, mitä hän pitää merkittävänä poliitikon tehtävään valmistaneena kokemuksena etenkin päätöksentekoon liittyvissä kysymyksissä. Tuomarikokemuksen voidaan myös tulkita harjoittaneen Renzin retorisia taitoja sekä kykyä analysoida erilaisia poliittisia asetelmia ja niiden sisältämiä toimintamahdollisuuksia. Muista jalkapallokieltä käyttävistä poliitikoista Renzi erottuu siten, että hän käyttää monipuolista ja sävykästä jalkapallotermistöä puhuessaan politiikasta. Renzin roolit kannattajana, tuomarina ja pelin tuntijana yhtäältä tekivät hänen jalkapalloon nojaavasta retoriikastaan uskottavaa ja toisaalta auttoivat häntä luomaan jäljittelemättömän imagon ja puhettavan, jonka avulla tavoitella poliittista muutosta.

Tutkimuksen empiiriset analyysiluvut etenevät löyhän kronologisesti. Niissä analysoidaan Renzin jalkapallokieltä ja siinä tapahtuneita muutoksia hänen uransa merkittävimmässä käänteissä ajanjaksolla, joka kattaa hänen nousunsa Firenzen paikallispolitiikasta Italian pääministeriksi. Tutkimuksen perusteella jalkapallopuhe kytkeytyi oleellisesti Renzin pyrkimykseen tavoitella muutosta Italian politiikassa. Renzin myötä myös muut politiikan toimijat ja kommentaattorit ottivat jalkapallokielen käyttöönsä analysoidessaan politiikkaa. Tämä osoittaa, että Renzi onnistui – joskin varsin lyhyen ajanjakson ajan – määrittelemään politiikan puhetapoja ja agenda Italiassa.

Analyysi osoittaa, että edetessään urallaan Renzi käytti jalkapallosanastoa uusilla tavoilla. Jalkapallokielen avulla Renzi analysoi monipuolisesti poliittiseen kamppailuun liittyviä seikkoja tavalla, joka ei pelkisty ainoastaan politiikan ”tuloksiin” tai yksittäisiin poliittisiin voittoihin tai tappioihin. Hän esimerkiksi käsittelee politiikan strategiaan ja taktiikkaan liittyviä kysymyksiä, analysoi omia ja muiden poliitikkojen taidokkuutta ja tyyliä, havainnollisti ja politisoi sääntöihin liittyviä tulkintoja sekä teki politiikkaa ymmärrettäväksi yleisölleen. Vaikka jalkapallokieli on ollut osa Italian politiikan retoriikkaa 1990-luvun alusta alkaen, Renzi toi tämän puhutavan osaksi Italian keskustavasemmiston retoriikkaa vahvemmin kuin kukaan muu ennen häntä.

Renzin jalkapallokielen omaperäisyys liittyy myös siihen, että hän käytti värikästä jalkapallokieltä, joka sisälsi paitsi pelin erikoissanastoa myös tarkkoja viittauksia peliviheriön tapahtumiin ja pelaajiin. Toisaalta hänen retoriikassaan myös toistuvat tietyt retoriset kuviot ja jalkapallotermit. Erityisesti jalkapallon taktisesta terminologiasta ammentavia puhetapoja voi pitää innovatiivisina tapoina tulkita politiikkaa. Pyrkimys uudistamaan Demokraattista puoluetta Renzi esimerkiksi vertasi puolueen organisaatiota ja politiikkaa *catenaccio*on, jolla viitataan italialaiseen siilipuolustustaktiikkaan. Lisäksi hän analysoi poliitikkoja nojautuen monivivahteisesti jalkapallosta tuttuihin pelaajarooleihin. Retorisesti Renzin jalkapallokieli rakensi usein vastakkainasettelujen varaan, mikä oli myös sen heikkous. Renzin jalkapalloon nojaavat tulkinnat politiikasta olivat toisinaan varsin yksioikoisia, mikä olisi antanut hänen kilpailijoilleen ja kritikoilleen mahdollisuuden haastaa hänen näkemyksensä.

Tutkimuksessa myös arvioidaan, millaisena poliitikkona Renzi näyttäytyy hänen käyttämänsä jalkapallokielen valossa. Analyysin perusteella Renzi tulkitsee politiikkaa pelinä, jonka paradigmaattisena esikuvana toimii jalkapallo. Hän näyttäytyy poliitikkona, joka ei kaihda uhkarohkeitakaan peliliikkeitä. Tämä yhtäältä vauhditti hänen poliittista nousuaan ja toisaalta johti virhearvioihin esimerkiksi silloin, kun hän satoi vuoden 2016 kansanäänestyksen tuloksen omaan poliittiseen kohtaloonsa. Max Weberin termin Renzi on ”politiikalle elävä” poliitikko, jolle politiikka itsessään tarjoaa merkitystä elämälle poliitikon uraan vääjäämättä kuuluvista tappioista ja epäonnistumisista huolimatta.

Väitöskirja kontribuoi tieteellisiin keskusteluihin koskien politiikan kieltä ja retoriikkaa erityisesti italialaisessa kontekstissa. Samalla tutkimus tarkastelee Italian nykypolitiikkaa erityisesti Renzin politiikan ja retoriikan näkökulmista sekä analysoi jalkapallokielen merkitystä Renzille poliitikkona. Lisäksi tutkimus

pureutuu politiikan ja jalkapallon suhteisiin liberaaleissa demokratioissa. Kiinnostuksen ja perehtyneisyyden osoittaminen jalkapalloa kohtaan nähdään edelleen keinona, jonka avulla on mahdollista saavuttaa poliittista valtaa ainakin peliä laajasti seuraavissa maissa. Jalkapallon toisinaan hidas mutta kuitenkin jatkuva kehitys takaa sen, että uutta sanastoa ja uusia käsitteitä kehitetään ja keksitään alinomaa analysoimaan pelin innovaatioita. Tämä kehitys tarjoaa myös poliitikoille retorisia mahdollisuuksia tulkita politiikkaa uusilla ja omaperäisillä tavoilla.

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APPENDIX

Renzi's football language

The list below contains a summary in a chronological order of Renzi's utterances that I have analysed in the study (including the source but not the translations that can be found in the footnotes of the study). The utterances from 2019 until 2021 work as representative anecdotes of Renzi's more recent football language, but since that period was excluded from the empirical analysis, the list is far from comprehensive.

2006–2008

Nel 1982 l'Italia calcistica *mundial* in Spagna vinse la finale facendo giocare titolare anche Beppe Bergomi, che tutti chiamavano "lo zio" perché aveva i baffi. Ma era un ragazzo di diciotto anni. Oggi il più giovane convocato dell'Italia ai mondiali tedeschi è un centrocampista di ventitré anni. Il Paese invecchia anche nel calcio? Una delle poche colpe non imputabili al clan delle intercettazioni telefoniche... (Renzi 2006, 5)

L'Internazionale evoca il nerazzurro del calcio e non un futuro socialista e rivoluzionario. (Renzi 2006, 9)

Le squadre di calcio che funzionano sono quelle che fanno crescere un bel settore giovanile. Lo chiamano vivaio, E i movimenti politici giovanili dovrebbero essere un vivaio. Solo che, spesso, sono solo un mortorio. Quei pochi, volenterosi, ragazzi che frequentano le stanze dei partiti nascondono con cura e dedizione ogni traccia di dinamismo e fantasia dietro le maschere del conformismo. (Renzi 2006, 12)

Per me fare l'arbitro di calcio a 16 anni ha significato, prima ancora che un gesto d'amore verso questo sport ed un modo per mettersi in gioco, essenzialmente essere capace di imparare a studiare, ad approfondire, a prendere delle decisioni, ad avere rispetto. (Renzi 2008, 9)

Quando tocca a me, parlo delle tre parole che dovrebbero per me segnare il Partito Democratico: sogno, speranza, fantasia. E dico che nel mio pantheon ci metterei volentieri la capacità di stupire e di cambiare passo di Cristiano Ronaldo più che tanti slogan del passato. (Renzi 2008, 124)

Per me il vero costo della politica – l'ho detto più volte – è quando il politico non fa il proprio mestiere. Che è quello di decidere. Fare. Realizzare. Costruire. Sognare e far sognare ma sempre con il pragmatismo di chi gioca a metà campo e mette in mezzo palle-gol per gli altri. Il politico è una mezzala: non il mediano delle canzoni di Ligabue, non il centravanti che pensa solo a fare gol. Il politico è uno che in campo sarebbe sceso col numero 8 (prima che la foga del *marketing* ci strappasse per sempre il gusto di vedere scendere in campo gente con la maglia dall'1 all'11 e senza nomi sopra). (Renzi 2008, 135, italics original)

Ma chi sta dentro un gioco di squadra è pronto a fare quello che il Mister, la squadra, i tifosi chiedono. (Renzi 2008, 229)

Io mi sento come Martin Jorgensen [sic]: dove lo mettono, lui gioca. L'importante è giocare bene (cosa che Jorgensen fa e che io spero di fare). (Renzi 2008, 229)

Però vi devo dire che se c'è una cosa che mi ha insegnato a decidere e assumermi le mie responsabilità (oltre allo scoutismo), questa è stata proprio l'arbitraggio. ... [Q]uasi quasi a chi vuol fare politica imporrei l'arbitraggio di almeno cinque partite di seconda categoria in Garfagnana... (Renzi 2008, 303)

Se avessi deciso di non correre, di non provarci, sarebbe stato un atto di finto amore per Firenze, come quello di Roberto Baggio che nel 1991 si rifiutò, lui appena passato alla Juventus, di tirare un rigore contro la Fiorentina. Quella fu solo vigliaccheria. Ho giurato a me stesso che, nella vita e in campo, avrei sempre avuto il coraggio di tirare quel rigore. Annuncio così che mi candido a sindaco di Firenze. ("Renzi: Mi candido perché c'è bisogno di coraggio," *La Nazione*, September 30, 2008. Available at https://www.lanazione.it/firenze/2008/09/30/121795-renzi_candido_perche_bisogno_coraggio.shtml. Accessed April 6, 2022)

2010-2013

Qualcuno mi dice che abbiamo giocato troppo all'attacco in questo primo anno. Secondo me si è fatto troppo catenaccio. Il secondo anno sarà molto più calcio totale. (L'intervista con Renzi di Paolo Ermini "Guerra alla stazione Foster. 'Farò di tutto per fermarla'," *Corriere Fiorentino*, June 16, 2010)

Calcisticamente parlando: catenaccio contro calcio champagne. Solo che nella storia del calcio hanno vinto quasi sempre i catenacciari. (Renzi 2011, 27-28)

Mi sentivo scartato e buttato a terra come un difensore ubriacato da un dribbling del miglior Messi. (Renzi 2011, 31)

[L]e primarie esigono e richiedono libertà. Non si prende più la linea dal segretario del partito, come accadeva in passato. ... Quando le primarie sono vere, infatti, non importano i padrini altolocati o le indicazioni dei dirigenti. Si gioca liberi, in campo aperto. E si rischia, si corre, si studia, si lotta. (Renzi 2011, 33)

[N]on si scappa, anche se le regole te le hanno cambiate in modo incredibile. Non si scappa perché, se si deve perdere, e nella vita si può perdere, si perde sul campo, mai a tavolino. (Renzi 2011, 38)

La vittoria sorprese anche i media nazionali incuriositi dal fatto che in una delle storiche capitali del centrosinistra il vincitore fosse un outsider che si era tirato fuori dal derby ormai pluridecennale tra dalemiani e veltroniani. (Renzi 2011, 52)

Quando parli con le persone, ti rendi conto che il tema della casta a sinistra è forte, fortissimo. Forse quelli che da tanti anni stanno in parlamento non se ne sono accorti. Ma l'indignazione profonda verso la classe dirigente monta soprattutto nel nostro campo. Non accorgersene rischia di essere un clamoroso autogol. (Renzi 2011, 65)

Avrei giocato all'attacco, incalzando il ministro e contestandole le parti in cui le è mancato il coraggio, non sarei restato sulla difensiva. (Renzi 2011, 99)

Immagino di suscitare un sorriso ironico, ma confesso volentieri che per me è stata fondamentale l'esperienza come arbitro di calcio per quattro anni, giovanissimo, nelle categorie dilettantistiche. (Renzi 2011, 107)

[Q]uando ti ritrovi ad arbitrare a diciotto anni un derby di seconda categoria in Maremma, poi non hai paura di affrontare le ire di qualsiasi comitato. Quando sei solo e devi in un attimo di secondo prendere una decisione, impari a farlo anche se vorresti indugiare. Perché se non fischi è comunque una decisione. Non è che puoi fermare il gioco e formare una commissione che rifletta attentamente se sia il caso di assegnare il calcio di rigore o discutere pacatamente ma anche serenamente se quello era o non era fuorigioco. (Renzi 2011, 107-108)

Durante la partita per un arbitro è sempre una ghiotta occasione quando un giocatore commette un fallo così evidente e clamoroso da meritarsi un cartellino giallo di ammonizione. Sono circostanze in cui nessuno ti può dire nulla, non c'è dubbio interpretativo: hai fatto la cosa giusta e tutti, anche in tribuna, sono costretti a riconoscerlo. Si tratta di piccole occasioni che fanno svoltare una partita perché acquisti autorevolezza in campo e credibilità fuori. Mi domando spesso: esiste nella politica qualche occasione concreta, visibile e ineccepibile su cui la classe dirigente potrebbe recuperare autorevolezza e credibilità? (Renzi 2011, 115-116)

E i cittadini hanno qualche occasione in più per mettere in discussione la nostra autorevolezza, la nostra credibilità, proprio come fanno i tifosi quando un rigore netto viene negato o non viene fischiato un plateale fallo di mani. (Renzi 2011, 117)

Non dimentichiamo che se c'è una parte dell'Italia che continua a guardarci con sospetto è anche perché in questo campo giochiamo di rimessa, siamo spesso impauriti, e di conseguenza poco convincenti. (Renzi 2011, 126)

Si tratta di un concetto nobile ma anche di un evidente autogol politico. (Renzi 2011, 134)

Non c'è dubbio che Silvio Berlusconi sia un'anomalia nella politica europea. Il suo ingresso in scena, il suo comportamento, le sue vittorie e le sue sconfitte ne fanno un pezzo unico. Per fortuna, aggiungo io. Ma chi lo attacca in modo forsennato non si rende conto di rafforzarlo nella pancia del Paese. Crescono le urla delle due tifoserie in curva, ma il clima da derby è quello nel quale lui riesce meglio. (Renzi 2011, 138)

E nemmeno si può pensare di relegare la fede a un fatto privato. Farlo significa compiere un errore culturale straordinario. Quando ciò accade si offre un terribile assist alla destra conservatrice [...]. (Renzi 2011, 156)

Fa piacere, è come quei gol nelle partite europee fatti in trasferta, valgono doppio. ("A Silvio strappo voti in casa," *Corriere della Sera*, December 22, 2010)

Noi a Firenze vogliamo vincere, altro che partecipare. Ma sappiamo da molto tempo, per esperienza diretta, che è meglio secondi che ladri. (Renzi 2011, 181)

Firenze è nel cuore di un'Italia ferma, bloccata, impaurita. Di un'Italia che spreca i calci di rigore per la paura di provarci e che nasconde i tanti talenti dietro la rassegnazione e la monotonia di una politica deprimente. (Renzi 2011, 182)

Rispetto agli altri Paesi cambiamo la classe dirigente con i tempi della moviola [...] (Renzi 2011, 201)

Lunghi anni di sfegatato tifo per la Fiorentina, che non mollerò mai, e numerose sconfitte elettorali nazionali, che spero prima o poi di interrompere, non mi hanno ancora vaccinato a quel gigantesco luogo comune per il quale l'importante è partecipare. Idea olimpica, certo, che però sembra anche essere divenuto il vero slogan di una certa sinistra. Con tutto il rispetto per De Coubertin – non molto sincero perché mi è sempre rimasto piuttosto antipatico – io vorrei vincere, non partecipare. (Renzi 2011, 207)

Io ammiro profondamente lo spirito del navigatore, anche oggi. Non ci sono caravelle, non ci sono bussole, non ci sono nuovi mondi. Ma il bisogno di rimettersi in gioco, sempre. Penso, tra i tanti personaggi straordinari che ho avuto la fortuna di incontrare, a uno sportivo. L'allenatore del Barcellona, Pep Guardiola. Uno che ha vinto tutto e ha costruito una squadra impressionante, capace di giocare un calcio tra i migliori della storia. Guardiola viene spesso a Firenze, perché innamorato di questa terra. È una volta, a pranzo, mi disse: "Per il tuo lavoro devi rischiare tutto ogni giorno, ma anche per me è fondamentale. Non voglio contratti pluriennali: dipendesse da me rinnoverei il contratto ogni sei mesi per far capire ai giocatori che il primo che rischia tutto è il loro allenatore". Che spettacolo! In un mondo dove tutti chiedono il rinnovo per anni e anni, dove tutti vivono alla disperata ricerca di garanzie su garanzie, lui che in virtù dei suoi successi potrebbe chiedere qualunque cosa si rimette in gioco. Qualcuno penserà: lui lo può fare perché è Guardiola. Mi piace pensare: è diventato Guardiola perché l'ha sempre pensata così. (Renzi 2012, 150)

È ovvio che da una parte c'è una squadra abituata alla Champions League, e dall'altra una neopromossa. Noi però ci siamo allenati, e se ci va tutto bene, ce la giochiamo. ("Renzi: 'Big uniti solo contro di me ma se vinco io vanno tutti a casa',", *La Repubblica*, August 30, 2012. Available at https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2012/08/30/news/intervista_renzi-41693970/)

Se noi non ci chiudiamo in difesa, se noi giochiamo all'attacco, il centrosinistra può persino correre il rischio di vincere e di stupire. Può persino correre il rischio di andare a mettere in campo una squadra di amministratori più giovani anche di quella che io rappresento. (Renzi 2012b)

Se si perde, non ci si inventa l'ennesima formancionzina politica di Serie Z, se si perde si da una mano a chi ha vinto perché la sconfitta fa parte del gioco e la vera sconfitta è non provarci. Se noi perdiamo saremo in prima fila a dare una mano a chi ha vinto. (Renzi 2012b)

Quando il centrosinistra rifiuta la logica del catenaccio, quando non si chiude nel proprio campo impaurito, e prova a giocare all'attacco, rischia di farcela, e se ce la fa, allora è una grande chance che è quella di imporre il futuro alla politica italiana. (Renzi 2012b)

Nella vita di tutti noi arriva il momento in cui il vero rischio è non tirare il calcio di rigore, non sbagliarlo. Il vero rischio è restare in panchina. (Renzi 2012b)

Agli elettori dico che c'è un allenatore che fa il catenaccio e l'allenatore che fa il calcio totale. Io non ce la faccio a dire "noi" e mettere Bindi e D'Alema, perché io li metterei in panchina, se non in tribuna. Qualcun altro invece li convoca e li fa giocare titolari. Non sono due squadre diverse. La squadra è la stessa. Ma voglio dire agli elettori di centrosinistra di scegliere l'allenatore. Se sceglierete Bersani, io continuerò a fare il tifo per questa squadra, senza cambiarla. Però fino all'ultimo giorno farò di tutto per cambiare l'allenatore, perché per vincere la partita bisognerà giocare un po' di più sul possesso di palla che sulla difesa. (Quoted in Galimberti 2015, 53)

Ci divide l'idea di futuro. Bersani è favorito, ma con lui allenatore giocano in campo le vecchie glorie. ("Bersani: politica non solo per ricchi. Renzi: il centrosinistra ha fallito," *l'Unità*, November 29, 2012)

Certo che c'è un noi e un loro. Noi pensiamo che debba essere cambiato allenatore, modulo di gioco e squadra. Ma se perdiamo staremo nella squadra di chi ha vinto senza chiedere nessun premio. Siamo leali. ("Mi attaccano ma sarà un boomerang," *l'Unità*, November 30, 2012)

I primi mesi del 2013 ci hanno tolto molte certezze. ... [P]er chi ama il calcio, è sinceramente complicato non avvertire il vuoto pensando che uno dei più grandi allenatori di sempre, sir Alex Ferguson, lasci dopo ventisette anni la panchina e la guida del Manchester United.

Ci sono tutti gli elementi, dunque, per perdere la bussola. Ma qualche certezza resta intatta. Fortunatamente o sfortunatamente, sia chiaro. Per esempio, la certezza che la sinistra italiana riesca a perdere le elezioni, anche quando sembrerebbe impossibile di farlo. (Renzi 2013, 7)

La Bossi-Fini parla all'Italia della politica autoreferenziale, mentre la coppia d'attacco della Nazionale è composta da Balotelli e el Shaarawy, senza che nessuno si scandalizzi. ... Per la politica, la coppia d'attacco è Bossi-Fini, non Balotelli - El Shaarawy. (Renzi 2013, 21)

Fare il tifo per l'Italia impone oggi di fare il tifo per Letta. (Renzi 2013, 39)

E se adesso il governo è nelle mani di Letta, facciamo il tifo per lui e diamogli una mano. (Renzi 2013, 39)

Ma è addirittura dannoso tifare per il caos solo per una presunta esigenza personale. (Renzi 2013, 39-40)

Noi vogliamo che l'Italia cambi, dunque non facciamo il tifo perché tutto salti. (Renzi 2013, 40)

Basta con il derby dei personalismi [...]. (Renzi 2013, 42)

La palla ce l'hanno loro. (Renzi 2013, 42)

[C]ome abbiamo fatto a sprecare un calcio di rigore come quello della campagna elettorale del 2013? (Renzi 2013, 50)

Ma qui c'era in ballo l'Italia, una partita troppo grossa per la nostra tenace allegria e per il nostro giovanile entusiasmo. (Renzi 2013, 57)

E, aggravante, averlo fatto solo in occasione del derby Bersani-Renzi. (Renzi 2013, 58)

Mi sembra quattro le caratteristiche fondamentali per il Partito Democratico, oggi. Il Pd deve suscitare una speranza, offrire un'apertura, riuscire a essere leader. E non deve pensare all'avversario ma partire da sé.

Dicevamo della speranza. Il Pd deve uscire dalla paura. Non è possibile assistere al catenaccio di una sinistra rassegnata, impaurita, rannicchiata. La sinistra vera, in tutto il mondo, non ha paura. (Renzi 2013, 67)

[I] centrosinistra ha oggettivamente vinto e arrivo a dire che è andata molto bene. Però dal punto di vista del risultato è una squadra che vince 1-0 giocando con il catenaccio, per dire, e lo ripeto con forza, che conta anche il bel gioco. (M5S, ora lavoriamo insieme. Il governo non tiri a campare," *Il Messaggero*, May 29, 2013)

Ci siamo sfiancati nella rincorsa del pallone, quando invece il pallone avremmo dovuto sempre tenerlo tra i piedi noi. (Renzi 2013c)

Qualcuno tra noi ritiene che la parola leader sia una parolaccia. Ogni squadra ha un capitano. Se gioca bene il capitano, gioca meglio la squadra; se gioca bene la squadra, è più semplice il lavoro del capitano. La foga con cui una parte del nostro mondo cerca di distruggere i propri capitani è incomprensibile e dannosa: non abbiamo perso perché avevamo leader troppo forti, ma perché gli italiani non hanno considerato sufficientemente forti i nostri leader. (Renzi 2013b, 7)

Il Pd deve affermarsi come partito che rifiuta il catenaccio e gioca all'attacco, socialmente ed elettoralmente. (Renzi 2013c)

Il riformismo non è melina. (Renzi 2013c)

Sogno un governo che si dia obiettivi numerici chiari e verificabili. I dati sono purtroppo ballerini, ma possiamo affermare che la Francia accoglie ogni anno 80 milioni di turisti, la Spagna 57, noi meno di 50. In un mondo che viaggia sempre di più, un Paese serio è in grado di darsi un obiettivo decennale che comporti il raddoppio dei turisti, l'aumento almeno il 50 per cento degli occupati nel settore e il ritorno dell'Italia fra i primi tre Paesi al mondo per numero di visitatori (oggi siamo scesi al quinto posto, fuori dalla zona Champions). ... Io sono certo che su questo tema il governo Letta giocherà una partita molto più seria di quanto si pensi. (Renzi 2013, 98)

Quando c'è un buon giocatore, il primo compito di un allenatore è insegnarli a evitare il superfluo. Il tocco in più, il virtuosismo che lo frega. Giocala semplice. (Renzi 2013, 82)

L'Europa. La vera partita si gioca lì, per tanti motivi. (Renzi 2013, 111)

Tu mandaci Messi che poi una maglia si trova. ("Mancano i simboli pd: il caso della convention 'no logo'," *Corriere della Sera*, October 27, 2013)

La mia vittoria non è la fine della sinistra. Stiamo solo cambiando i giocatori. ("Renzi stravince: scardinare il sistema," *Corriere della Sera*, December 9, 2013)

Sarò il capitano della nuova squadra. ("Renzi stravince: scardinare il sistema," *Corriere della Sera*, December 9, 2013)

C'è uno della mia squadra, Enrico Letta, che è solo davanti al portiere, non è in fuorigioco e io sono con il pallone a centrocampo. Io che faccio? Se voglio vincere la classifica dei cannonieri faccio un'azione personale, ma se voglio vincere il campionato do volentieri il pallone a Letta. (Quoted in Ferrarese and Ognibene 2013, 157)

La prima ammonizione è fondamentale. Va data intorno al ventesimo minuto per far capire ai giocatori che ci sei. (Intervista a Matteo Renzi: "Con me segretario del Pd Letta sarà più forte," *La Stampa*, October 6, 2013)

2014–2018

La sinistra cara a Bobbio, quella socialdemocratica e anticomunista, ha insomma vinto la sua partita. Ma oggi ne stiamo giocando un'altra. Quei blocchi sociali che prima rendevano tutto più semplice non ci sono più. Gli stessi confini nazionali che erano il perimetro entro cui si giocava la partita dell'innovazione e del welfare sono ormai messi in discussione. Più che con blocchi sociologicamente definiti entro Stati nazionali storicamente determinati, oggi la nuova partita svolge con attori e campi da gioco inediti. Quei blocchi sono stati sostituiti da dinamiche sociali irrequiete. I confini nazionali non delimitano più gli spazi entro i quali le nuove dinamiche giocano la loro partita. (Renzi 2014, 166)

[S]e avessimo ancora lo stesso governo Grillo sarebbe inarrestabile. Lo abbiamo fermato. E se dobbiamo frenare ancora la sua espansione 'je faccio er cucchiaio' ... ("Renzi incassa il risultato: li ho fermati, ora altre mosse," *Corriere della Sera*, May 26, 2014)

Calcisticamente parlando, qualcuno pensa che io sia un fantasista, cioè quello che inventa il colpo a sorpresa, o il portiere fortunato, che para i rigori perché provoca l'avversario. Non hanno capito che, dal punto di vista amministrativo, io sono un mediano (o in termini calcistici, anche a chi non si interessa di pallone, un mulo), che su tutti i palloni si mette lì ... ("Renzi: la mia agenda dei mille giorni," *Corriere della Sera*, July 13, 2014)

Io ho avuto la possibilità di tirare un calcio di rigore il 4 dicembre. Me l'hanno parato... Anzi 41 a 59 significa che l'ho tirato male, malissimo. E adesso è cominciata una fase politica diversa. ("Il 4 dicembre era un rigore e l'ho tirato malissimo. Posso non fare il premier," *Corriere della Sera*, February 3, 2017)

Adottiamo lo schema Bearzot. Ripartiamo da fondocampo, giochiamo di rimessa, lasciamo andare avanti gli altri, per poi andare in contropiede. ("Il leader cambia tattica e rispolvera il caminetto con tutti i big," *Corriere della Sera*, February 3, 2017)

La nostra credibilità internazionale sembra più debole dopo tre anni vissuti giocando all'attacco: chi può ne approfitta. (Renzi 2017, 21)

"Siete come una bella squadra, ma sbagliate troppi passaggi, alcuni facili," mi dice un commentatore di lungo corso della politica romana. Può darsi che abbia ragione, in fin dei conti. Ma sbagliamo qualche passaggio di troppo perché giochiamo all'attacco dopo che per anni altri hanno fatto sempre e solo catenaccio. (Renzi 2017, 33)

Roberto Giachetti, deputato coraggioso e appassionato, inizia uno sciopero della fame contro la vergognosa melina sulla legge elettorale. (Renzi 2017, 50)

Peccato che questo accada a spese di uno dei momenti che per definizione devono essere giocati all'insegna del fair play, sempre. (Renzi 2017, 55–56)

Aver detto no per timore degli scandali o delle difficoltà è stata una sconfitta, insopportabile per chi crede che il futuro dell'Italia sia andare all'attacco anziché vivere nel catenaccio della rinuncia. (Renzi 2017, 99)

Sono due populismi che si parlano, certo. Che si contendono lo stesso campo di gioco, in alcune battaglie. Ma in fondo hanno un unico avversario: il Pd. (Renzi 2017, 172)

Ci siamo innamorati dell'idea di giocare con il falso nueve ("L'ennesimo rinvio nel partito che non sa scegliere il futuro," *Corriere della Sera*, July 8, 2018)

Vogliamo giocare all'attacco, non col catenaccio: più sul modello del profeta Arrigo Sacchi che su quello del pur grandissimo Nereo Rocco. Sapendo che giocando all'attacco qualche volta si prende qualche gol. Ma sapendo anche che un grande paese come l'Italia non può permettersi di vivere di solo catenaccio. ("Il 4 Marzo è un match point contro Grillo. Il voto a FI è un voto a Salvini". Parla Renzi," *Il Foglio Quotidiano*, January 30, 2018. Available at <https://www.ilfoglio.it/politica/2018/01/30/news/matteo-renzi-intervista-4-marzo-match-point-contro-m5s-175826/>. Accessed April 6, 2022)

2019–2021

Si vince giocando all'attacco, con il catenaccio un gol si prende sempre. E se lì davanti non hai chi segna, la partita la perdi. (Renzi 2019, 54)

Se l'agenda la subisci, perché spero solo in un'azione di contropiede, prima o poi un gol lo incassi. La difesa passiva a oltranza in politica non porta a nulla. (Renzi 2019, 80–81)

I cicli si aprono e si chiudono. Vale per le squadre di calcio, vale per i grandi allenatori, vale anche per la politica. ("Renzi: 'Alle politiche un nuovo centrosinistra'," *Quotidiano Nazionale*, May 22, 2019. Available at <https://www.quotidiano.net/politica/renzi-europee-2019-1.4604425>. Accessed May 31, 2022)

In questo momento sono un numero 8 o un numero 4. Sono un mediano di spinta. Sto in mezzo al campo e tiro qualche pedata, cercando però di impostare il gioco. C'è stato un tempo, quando ero premier, che giocavo per fare il goleador. Poi ho fatto il portiere quando ero segretario del Pd e cercavo di parere [sic] tutto. Ora voglio solo che vinca la squadra. ("Puntare solo sull'assistenzialismo è un messaggio sbagliato," *Agi*, May 4, 2020. Available at <https://www.agi.it/politica/news/2020-05-04/fase-2-coronavirus-renzi-8517039/>. Accessed April 6, 2022)

Ero il centroavanti fantasista? Sì. Era il mio ruolo preferito? Sì. Io volevo un calcio che giocasse all'attacco, un calcio spettacolo. Ma dopo la vittoria del 'no' al referendum, vanno più di moda i mediani che interrompono il gioco altrui, alcuni dei quali sono bravi anche a costruire le azioni di gioco degli altri. ("Il talento di Mr Renzi," *Il Foglio Quotidiano*, September 6, 2021)