

Not Just Surviving, But Thriving: The Lega Nord Back in Government^[1]

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1. From Surviving to Thriving

Reflecting in 2005 upon the four years of the centre-right Casa delle Libertà (CDL – House of Freedoms) in government since 2001, we argued that the regionalist populist Lega Nord (LN – Northern League) had learned to walk the tightrope of coalition participation without slipping by means of a strategy which we termed ‘keeping one foot in and one foot out of government’ (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2005).^[2] Despite the predictions of many commentators (e.g. Tambini, 2001: 148), the party had been able to stay in power in Rome (a byword in Lega discourse for all that is wrong with Italian politics) as a junior member of Silvio Berlusconi’s administration without shedding either its radical identity or losing votes. It had had to swallow the initial bitter pill of simply taking office alongside parties and politicians whom it had long and loudly criticized. It had then had to stomach a series of compromises, statements by allies and government actions which were far from popular with its grassroots. It had seen its leader struck down by serious illness and forced to withdraw from frontline politics for over a year. But it had survived. It had served in government without suffering splits, haemorrhaging support or finding itself in position whereby it felt it had to leave or was forced to leave by the prime minister. And this survival had been far from a foregone conclusion in 2001. After all, its only previous experience in government had been alongside the same parties in 1994 as part of the Berlusconi-led coalition, an extremely turbulent and short-lived administration characterized by almost constant clashes between the Lega and its partners, with the prime minister bearing the brunt of the party’s attacks. Having brought down the government in December of the same year, the Lega had stood alone at elections for the rest of the decade, a strategy which initially proved very successful, but was increasingly less so as time went on (see table 1). Like those of parties such as the Freedom Party (FPÖ) in Austria and the Lijst Pim Fortuyn (LPF) in the Netherlands, the LN’s 1994 experience had thus tallied perfectly with the commonly-held view expressed by Yves Mény and Yves Surel (2002: 18) that ‘populist parties are by nature neither durable nor sustainable parties of government. Their fate is to be integrated into the mainstream, to disappear, or to remain permanently in opposition’.

By contrast, in its second time in government, as we argued in 2005, the Lega had managed to achieve the balancing act of being seen to influence policy on its core issues while maintaining its ‘outsider’ identity through a series of statements and ‘spectacular’ actions. Despite receiving just 3.9 per cent of the vote and its lowest ever number of parliamentary representatives in the 2001 election, the party had thereafter seemed to punch above its weight without losing its soul thanks to (a) a strategy of choosing the right friends (Berlusconi and the Finance Minister, Giulio Tremonti) and enemies (its fellow junior coalition partners); (b) excellent management of party organization and communications (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2005; Albertazzi, McDonnell and

Newell, forthcoming). The results in electoral terms were not spectacular, but in both the 2004 European election and the 2006 general election, it slightly improved its vote share compared to the previous rounds (see table 1).

If its experience in government from 2001 to 2006 can therefore be seen as a period in which the LN survived, the year and a half since its return to office in April 2008 has been one in which the party has unquestionably thrived. Reinforcing its ‘issue ownership’ over the key themes of federal reform and immigration, it has been able to promote policies and quickly introduce legislation which, while debatable in their effects as we will see below, the party has been able to sell to activists, supporters and the general public as ‘Lega Nord successes’ thanks to an extremely effective communications strategy. This has been translated into electoral gains with the party improving on its excellent 2008 general election result and achieving its highest ever share of the national vote, 10.2 per cent, in the 2009 European elections (see table 1). Not only is the LN winning over new voters but it is also attracting new members, bucking the trend of dramatic membership declines that have affected many parties across Western Europe (Mair and van Biezen, 2001). Thus, as Table 2 shows, according to figures from the Segreteria Organizzativa Federale of the party, in 2008 the Lega had 155,478 members – its highest figure since 1994.

Table 1: National Results of the LN and its current main allies, 1994-2009

	G.94	E.94	G.96	E.99	G.01	E. 04	G.06	G.08	E.09
LN	8.36	6.58	10.07	4.50	3.94	4.97	4.58	8.30	10.22
FI	21.01	30.60	20.57	25.18	29.43	20.92	23.72	37.39	35.26
AN	13.47	12.50	15.66	10.31	12.02	11.51	12.34		
Total	42.84	49.68	46.3	39.99	45.39	37.4	40.64	45.69	45.48

Note: General Election results refer to the Camera dei deputati. In 1994, 1996 and 2001, general election results are from the proportional part of the election. FI and AN presented a joint list at the 2008 election under the banner of the PDL, which in 2009 formally became a single party.

Source: Adapted from data provided by the Ministry of the Interior

Table 2: Membership of the Lega Nord, 1992-2008

Year	Members	Year	Members
1993	147,297	2001	124,310
1994	167,650	2002	119,753
1995	123,031	2003	131,423
1996	112,970	2004	122,576
1997	136,503	2005	148,321
1998	121,777	2006	147,982
1999	123,352	2007	148,383
2000	120,897	2008	155,478

Source: Segreteria Organizzativa Federale della Lega Nord

Of course, it would be wrong to claim that the merit for all this is solely attributable to the actions of the Lega. Exogenous factors such as increasing public fears about crime and immigration (with the media playing a key priming role), discontent among FI and AN voters with the merger of their parties and the actions of their politicians, the economic crisis increasing support for federalism in the North and a rise in Eurosceptic attitudes may all have contributed to greater and lesser degrees. As we have argued elsewhere (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008), it is only through acknowledging and understanding the interaction between opportunity structures and agency that we can explain the success or failure of populist parties. However, what we can claim is that, with the hands it has been dealt in recent years, the Lega has played its cards extremely well.

In this paper, we will analyse the reasons for that success. Following a discussion of the 2008 general election results and the LN's place in the new centre-right alliance, we will consider the party's participation in the current government in terms firstly of 'actions', i.e. what it said it would do, what it has actually done and how it has presented this. We will then assess the 'reactions' of party activists and sympathisers. In both sections, we will look particularly at the Lega's two key themes of federalism and immigration. As we will see, while the party's successes have, in some respects, been partial and often more symbolic than concrete, it has nonetheless been able to present itself as leading the way on these fronts. In so doing, it has established a very profitable issue ownership over two areas which are of key importance firstly to its electoral heartlands in the North and, in the case of immigration (and the closely-linked 'law and order'), is one of the most high-profile and keenly-felt topics in contemporary Italian society. Central to the LN's success therefore is the question of communication. To put it simply, while tangible results do of course count, it also often seems to be the case in Italian political competition that 'it ain't what you do, it's the way that you say it'. And, as the election results and our findings from a survey of Lega activists and sympathizers suggest, while the LN has been generally good at doing the right things, it has been even better at saying them.

2. The 2008 election results and their significance for the LN-PDL alliance

Unlike previous general elections which had seen ever-wider coalitions of centre-right and centre-left line up against one another, the 2008 contest was more fragmented. While still principally disputed by two main centre-right and centre-left blocks, these were both more streamlined than had been the case in 2006 (Chiaromonte, 2009; Russo and Verzichelli, 2009). On the centre-right, Forza Italia (FI) and Alleanza Nazionale (AN) presented themselves under the common banner of the new Popolo della Libertà (People of Freedom, PdL) which Berlusconi had created in a sudden and surprise move in November 2008 (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2009a). Given the LN's proximity to Berlusconi both during the 2001-2006 period in government and afterwards, its alliance with the PDL was never in doubt and was duly renewed. However, the former Christian Democrats of the Unione dei Democratici Cristiani e Democratici di Centro (UDC), which had been the most vociferous opponent of both the LN and Berlusconi within the CDL alliance and had distanced itself considerably from the rest of the centre-right during the two years in opposition, was given the stark choice by Berlusconi of either agreeing to merge formally with the PDL or running alone. Its preference for the latter of those two unenviable options meant that the centre-right block was reduced from four main parties (FI, AN, UDC and LN) in 2001 and 2006 to just two (PDL and LN) in 2008, with the small Sicilian MPA autonomist movement making up the numbers. Meanwhile, on the centre-left, the two largest members of the governing

Unione coalition, the Democratici di Sinistra (DS) and the Margherita, had merged into the Partito Democratico (PD – Democratic Party) and established an electoral with just Antonio di Pietro’s Italia dei Valori (IDV), leaving the parties of the radical left and the greens which had served alongside them in government to form their own electoral alliance, La Sinistra L’Arcobaleno (The Rainbow Left).

The 2008 election was a triumph for the centre-right and the Lega in particular. The alliance defeated its centre-left competitor by almost 10 points (46.8 to 37.5 per cent), with the LN receiving 8.3 per cent of the vote – its best performance since it had stood alone in 1996 (see table 1). As in 2001, it could again rely on a very clear majority in both Chambers of Parliament – an outcome that could not have been taken for granted this time, since the electoral law passed in 2005 assigns majority premiums to winning parties or coalitions in both Chambers on the basis of different principles. A significant difference compared to 2001, however, was that while this majority now consisted of just two main parties as opposed to four, the Lega was now essential to the survival of the government. The growth of the LN poses a number of new problems for Berlusconi and his party and may place added strains on the relationship between the PDL and the Lega, not least because they are in much fiercer competition in northern Italian regions than was previously the case. Providing it can maintain the levels of support it has attracted in recent years, the party will be increasingly important to the centre-right’s prospects in the north – as the example below of the LN’s rise in Veneto clearly demonstrates (see table 3). Indeed, despite many media commentators and the Lega itself perpetuating the myth of the LN having gained a considerable amount of votes from the radical left in 2008, analyses of the vote have shown that this flow was in fact extremely modest (De Sio, 2008: 66). Rather, the LN’s increased vote has mainly come from former FI and AN voters (ibid. 68). As studies published by Demos (2008) have shown, the electoral weight of the LN within the centre-right alliance would have amounted to 38 per cent in 1996 (when it stood alone), a mere 17 per cent between 2001 and 2006, before rising again to 32 per cent in 2008. Whenever the LN has grown in recent years, its allies have suffered and vice versa - an analysis further confirmed by the Istituto Cattaneo (2008). By way of example, Table 3 below shows this phenomenon in the case of the Veneto region where the advance of the Lega and the decline of the PDL were particularly striking in 2008 – a trend confirmed by the LN’s maintenance of this vote share in the region in the 2009 European elections.^[3] These improved results in northern regions have inevitably led to demands by the Lega that its representatives should be given more high-profile candidatures for directly-elected mayoral and regional president elections – an issue which has naturally produced difficulties for the PDL in placating both the LN and its own local elites.

Table 3: FI + AN (combined, now PDL) and LN in Veneto, 2001-2009

	G.01	E. 04	G.06	G. 08	E.09
LN	10.25	14.13	11.09	27.09	28.38
FI +AN	40.47	33.56	35.75	27.35	29.33
Total	50.72	47.69	46.84	54.44	57.71

Source: Elaboration of data from Ministry of the Interior

While attracting approximately only 25 per cent of the votes gained by the PDL, the LN demonstrated considerable ‘formation’ and ‘coalition weight’ in the months leading up to the

election and those following it.^[4] Its ‘formation weight’ was highlighted by the fact that the key themes of the LN’s strategic communication (immigration and federalism) were given prominence in the PDL’s *own* election manifesto, thus furnishing the LN with an important weapon to hold its ally to its promises. As for its ‘coalition weight’, this became apparent as the government was sworn into office and the party proved itself able to use government participation as a resource to pursue its main aims. Moreover, while this coalition weight did not translate into a large number of ministries, it did translate into the right ministries (i.e. those closely linked to the party’s key themes). These were: (1) Federal Reform: Umberto Bossi; (2) Interior: Roberto Maroni; (3) Agriculture and Forestry: Luca Zaia; (4) Legislative Simplification: Roberto Calderoli. Crucially, the first two offer the Lega the opportunity to be seen to leading government policy and actions on federal reform, immigration and the closely-linked issue of law and order. The other ministries are also important as the Agriculture portfolio has allowed Zaia to stand as the defender of northern farmers against EU cuts and interference (the EU being an important target of the LN’s attacks) as well as championing traditional Italian food products, while Calderoli’s ministry of ‘legislative simplification’ appeals to the populist view of politics as being full of arcane rules which get in the way of the expression of the people’s will and has allowed the minister to make frequent announcements of the large numbers of apparently unnecessary regulations and laws he has managed to abolish in record time. Thus, unlike 2001, when apart from Bossi’s appointment as Minister for Reform, the party was given the two poisoned chalices of Justice (where Roberto Castelli became the face of the *ad personam* measures favourable to Berlusconi) and Welfare (where Maroni had to contend with the unpopular question of pension reform), in 2008 all its ministries have allowed scope for Lega ministers to claim considerable successes.

Another significant difference compared to the 2001-2006 period is that, at least so far, the LN has modified the way it deals with the opposition, particularly the PD, by insisting on the necessity of cross-party ‘dialogue’ on constitutional reform. We can identify two possible reasons for this: (a) while in the 2001-2006 period the LN had, following the ‘one foot in and one foot out’ strategy, remained very close to the PM while constantly clashing with its supposedly pro-Southern junior coalition allies (the UDC in particular) (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2005), now that the party only has one partner (which, moreover, has displayed increasingly negligible regard for the opposition) one of the ways through which it could distinguish itself was by taking on the role of the ‘broker’ between Left and Right; (b) perhaps more importantly, the party appears to have accepted that the only way to achieve federal reform is by securing bipartisan consensus. The next section will consider the legislative initiatives on the key issues for the LN, i.e. federalism and immigration. We will then assess whether, and to what extent, its activists and supporters approve of the party’s behaviour in government and have accepted the interpretations of the LN’s actions and achievements offered by the party.

3. Actions: legislative initiatives

Entering a dialogue with the PD was not only a way for the LN to distinguish itself from the PDL by taking on the unlikely role of ‘broker’ between centre-right and centre-left, but was also, as we have suggested above, a consequence of the fact that the party believed it needed bipartisan consensus in order to pursue its main goal of federalism.^[5] The key event in understanding this change in strategy lies in the result of the 2006 referendum when, having been passed by

parliament in 2005 (amidst much grumbling from AN, the UDC and sections of FI), a LN-sponsored Constitutional Reform introducing the devolution of some powers to the regions was approved by residents of the party's two main strongholds (the Lombard and Veneto regions), but defeated across Italy as a whole. The logic underpinning the LN's actions on this front since it has returned to government therefore seems to be that if legislation can be introduced with help (or at least a lack of active opposition) from the PD, it is less likely that a referendum will be organised to strike down any new law and even if it were, such a referendum would obviously stand less chance of success if the opposition did not actively support it (as had been the case in 2006). Furthermore, the PD can delay the passage through parliament of any reform and so, again, consensus and dialogue can serve to avert the type of long-drawn out passage through parliament which devolution endured and allow the LN the possibility of a quick success to present to supporters. In the case of federal reform, so far the PD has played a very constructive role in the Parliamentary commissions and abstained in both the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies when it came to voting on it. As the leader of the LN Umberto Bossi said, thanking the PD after the reform was passed in the Senate on 22 January 2008, 'without the Left we could not have done anything. Federalism would still be before a commission'.^[6]

Obviously this more conciliatory approach by the PD does not guarantee that federal reforms ('fiscal federalism' at this stage, apparently to be complemented in the coming years by 'institutional' or 'constitutional' federalism^[7]) will be seen as a victory by all members of the LN and its supporters. Indeed, a comparison between the Lega's stated objectives and what it has achieved so far shows that the glass of fiscal federalism is still very much half empty. This is for a variety of reasons:

a) The reform falls far short of objectives stated in the LN's programme for the April 2008 general elections, i.e. the 'Resolutions' its 'Parliament of the North' approved in March 2008. On this occasion, the party had called for northern regions to be allowed to keep 90 per cent of the tax raised within their borders for ten years, so that they would be able to complete a series of necessary and costly infrastructural projects (Parlamento del Nord, 2008). After this period had passed, it was proposed, regions could still administer the same percentage of the tax revenue, provided that they were willing to take responsibility for a share of the state's public debt. Leaving aside the objection that the proposal is patently unconstitutional, the fact remains that the law now passed by Parliament falls well short of the party's requests. While it does introduce 'autonomy of taxation', at all subnational levels (i.e. city councils, provinces, metropolitan cities and regions) - to be achieved through the attribution of autonomous resources to subnational administrations (according to their competences), the levying of their own taxes and a share of the proceeds from revenue taxes (Art. 2) - this is a vastly different prospect to regions being allowed to keep almost all taxes raised within their borders. Indeed, implementing such a proposal would inevitably provoke the collapse of the state, given the huge differences between average income and levels of development in the various parts of Italy. On the contrary, the introduction of a *fondo perequativo* (equalising fund) puts to rest the idea that the North can be left to its own devices. Little is known at this stage (Autumn 2009) about this fund and how it will work. To date, the Finance Minister Giulio Tremonti has refused to make available those detailed studies that would allow us to assess 'the effects of the bill once it has been implemented as regards the financial flows between the state and the various regional communities' (Vitali, 2009: 8). The law, however, does envisage a specific set of rules and regulations for the attribution of supplementary resources and special aid

to regions ‘in which the regional tax revenue per inhabitant... is less than the average national tax revenue per inhabitant’ (Art. 9) – i.e. the *Mezzogiorno*. As the law says, these regions ‘participate in the distribution of the equalizing fund, which is bolstered by a quota of the taxes raised in other regions, in order to reduce the inter-regional differences of tax revenue per inhabitant’ (ibid).

b) One reason why the PD did not obstruct the approval of fiscal federalism is that this could well be called ‘the reform of the centre-left’ rather than of the LN, since, as article 1 of the new law clearly states, it implements the reform of the Constitution that the centre-left government had passed (without the support of the centre-right and the Lega) just before the 2001 general election. Since, at the time, that reform was dismissed as ‘false federalism’ by the LN (e.g. Paietta, 2001), it would be rather embarrassing for the party to be seen as merely implementing it were this to be common knowledge.

Despite its considerable shortcomings compared to the LN’s stated aims, however, the current reform can be presented as a first, significant step towards some sort of more ‘complete’ form of federalism. Firstly, by introducing *some* autonomy of taxation, through the levying of ‘own’ taxes by regional and local administrations, it explicitly links local tax revenues to the benefits received by citizens (benefits which voters can, in theory, verify at ground level). This appears to be a significant development for Italy and could potentially lead to a considerable ‘responsibilization’ of local administrations. Secondly, the law stipulates that pre-defined standard costs and standard requirements are to be used in place of the ‘historic expenditure’ (*spesa storica*) as the criteria for funding essential services. Consequently, administrations which squander resources will now face repercussions for having used their available funds badly and public administrations will, in theory, be forced to achieve better efficiency rates. While it seems excessively ambitious to claim, as the LN has done, that the new law will necessarily mean a reduction in taxation (given that local administrations may decide to use any savings generated by their increased efficiency to deliver better services), the reform should facilitate efforts to reduce waste.

If the realization of fully fledged ‘constitutional’ federalism therefore remains a long-term, complex goal and a difficult issue to handle as far as strategic communication is concerned, the other key theme for the Lega since its return to government ‘immigration’ (and the close-linked buzzword of ‘security’ encompassing both immigration and law and order), offers a series of more immediate opportunities for straightforward and spectacular (albeit often merely symbolic) gains. In recent months, the party has proposed a barrage of hard-line measures, one after the other, from headline-grabbing measures and initiatives such as the *respingimenti* (‘rejections’, particularly of boatloads of African migrants in the run-up to the European elections), the census and fingerprinting of members of the Romany community, restricted access for illegal immigrants to social services, proposals to make immigrants pay large fees for residence permits and citizenship requests, the introduction of special classes in schools for immigrant children, local referendums on the construction of mosques and the establishment of nomad camps, the ‘ronde’ (local patrols regarded by many as vigilante groups), a halt to all immigration for two years, the right of doctors to report illegal immigrants to the police and a long series of other repressive proposals and intimidating statements by Lega representatives.^[8] While many of these may prove to be unconstitutional or in conflict with EU law, the key aspect for the LN is not actually their introduction; rather, through these continuous

announcements, the party is seen to be constantly leading the battle against immigration – something which appears particularly valuable in electoral terms given that its main competitor over the past fifteen years on this topic, AN, has now dissolved into the PDL and its former leader Gianfranco Fini has adopted an increasingly moderate stance on immigration and multiculturalism. This is not the place for a debate about the actual effectiveness of these measures in creating safer cities and combating illegal immigration (see Ambrosini, 2009); rather, we will limit ourselves to comparing what has been done with what had been promised to Lega's supporters by the party, as we did above when considering federal reform. The main legislative output on this theme has been the 'security package', approved in July 2009. This is a complex and heterogeneous document covering a wide variety of themes and crimes, some of the most important measures of which are the following:

- a) Heavier punishments for a series of offences (ranging from graffiti to insulting public officials to organized crime);
- b) The legalization of 'ronde' – i.e. associations of volunteers who conduct patrols in cities and towns. In the international and sections of the national press, these have widely been branded as 'vigilante groups';
- c) The introduction of the 'crime of illegal immigration', meaning that those without valid residence permits are now given prison sentences. Overall, the life of migrants is being made harder, as the state is now allowed to keep immigrants and would-be asylum seekers in detention centres for longer while their cases are being processed. Similarly, in keeping with the overall tone of policy, foreigners are to be charged higher fees to gain Italian citizenship and residence permits.

The absence of any measures aimed at favouring better integration of foreigners into Italian society – thus fostering security through improved relations between the various communities - is conspicuous and, to this extent, the decree can be said to be straightforwardly punitive (Ambrosini, 2009). However, just as the Bossi-Fini immigration law passed by the CDL in 2002 was soon followed by the second largest amnesty of illegal immigrants in history (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2005), the security package was also accompanied by an amnesty, which the LN Minister of the Interior Maroni expects will legalize the presence of more care workers and domestic helpers than the previous one (i.e. about 750,000 people).^[9] Moreover, notwithstanding the undeniable toughness of the decree, the law still falls short of what the party was proposing in its 'Resolutions' of March 2008 on 'law and order' and 'immigration'. What is perhaps most interesting about this document is the sheer amount of proposals which are, quite simply, impossible to introduce, since they contravene both the Italian Constitution and EU legislation on human rights. These include the following suggested measures:

- a) Making it compulsory for Muslims to hold religious gatherings and celebrate rites in Italian (presumably to facilitate the work of the secret services as they eavesdrop on such events);
- b) Granting permits for the construction (or enlargement) of mosques only following referendums to be held among the local population;
- c) Banning the construction of Roma Traveller camps, even when these are not on illegal sites;
- d) Granting mayors the power to deport illegal immigrants.

This brief study of the proposals put forward by the LN on its core issues leads us to the conclusion that the party's manifestos do not fulfil the function that one normally would expect (i.e. that of listing measures which at least have a chance of being introduced, in order to give voters the opportunity to 'know what they are buying' and thereafter assess what a party has achieved in government). That this is at odds with the party's repeated claims that the coalition as a whole should stick religiously to its manifesto commitments, and that the party only agreed to govern with the PDL on the condition that such commitments were present is the theme for another paper. In this context, it remains to be explained what function the LN manifestos *do* fulfil for the party. Our suggestion is that, rather than providing a blueprint for government action, the Lega's manifestos offer, alongside realistic (or at least partially realistic) proposals, a 'wish-list' for the re-establishment (on an imaginary level) of allegedly weakened, however still attainable, free, homogeneous and fully 'knowable' communities (Albertazzi and Fremeaux, 2002). In short, we concur with Anna Cento Bull who has recently argued that the LN conducts 'a form of symbolic (or better, simulative) politics, offering a vision of a return to an idealised communitarian society which is both crime-free and (almost) immigrant-free' (2009: 143). This appears to be one of the key functions of both the party's manifestos and rhetoric. In addition, by occupying a political space on issues of law and order and immigration that is far to the Right of all but the most extreme groups, the party is seen to be constantly leading the battle on themes that are regularly listed by voters as among those most important to them. On this point, it is worth remembering: a) that the link between immigration and criminality is well established among the Italian electorate, especially given the treatment of these topics by the media (especially national television and the provincial press) and, crucially b) that those who believe immigration and criminality are the most pressing issues a government should tackle overwhelmingly support the parties of the centre-right (Cavazza, Corbetta and Roccato 2008: 167-172).

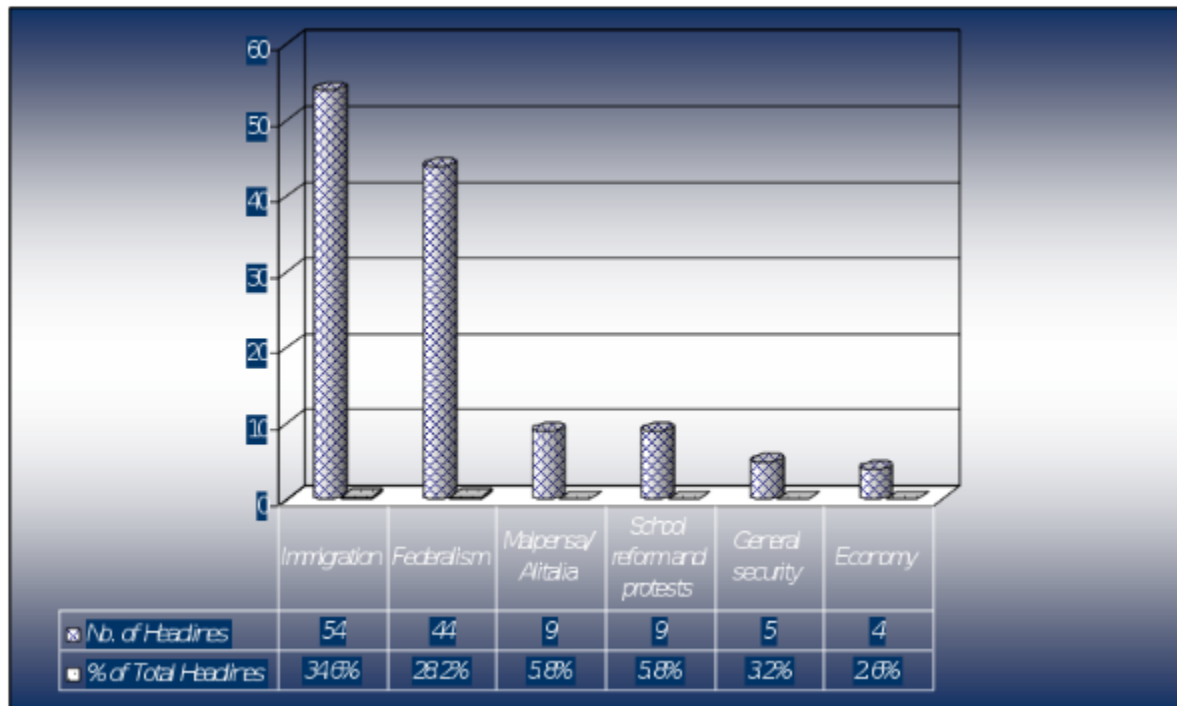
The first year and half in government has not just been a constant success story, however. During this time, but consistent with its narrative to supporters that the party must 'suffer' in order to achieve its main goals, the LN has also had to swallow a number of bitter pills, such as the massive bailouts for the City Councils of Rome, Catania and Palermo, the acceptance of rubbish from Naples by northern regions and, most recently, the controversy surrounding the future of the Milanese airport of Malpensa and the deal between Alitalia and Air France (rather than the Lega's preferred partner, Lufthansa, which offered better prospects for Malpensa than the French company). Given that one of our key interests is how parties such as the Lega manage to successfully convey the message to mid-ranking leaders and supporters that they are achieving important results in government despite the compromises, in the next section we will discuss the activists' reactions to the LN's first year in power. We will argue that, despite the only partial correspondence between what the party promises to its electorate and what the government actually does, the evidence we have collected so far suggests that supporters are generally very satisfied with recent events and believe that the party is achieving important results.

4. Party Communications and Supporter Reactions

When in power, smaller parties in particular are faced with the uphill task of (a) communicating their actions in government and (b) doing so in a way that will satisfy activists and supporters that the party's presence in government is bringing results. If a party does not have sufficient media visibility, it is immediately handicapped in this sense and here the strategy of (a) 'keeping

one foot out' through statements and actions (however symbolic) which attract attention and (b) establishing issue ownership over key themes so that they are sought they are immediately associated by both the media and voters with that theme can be crucial. In the case of the Lega, while, as we have seen, there is a discrepancy between party manifestos and its actions in government regarding the topics discussed in the preceding section, what cannot be doubted is that it puts them at the centre of its communication strategies. This emerges clearly by performing a basic thematic content analysis of front-page headlines in its newspaper, *La Padania*. As we can see from Figure 1 below, if we look at the period from 1 July to 31 December 2008, immediately after the party's entrance into government, we find that immigration accounted for 34.6% (54) of the 156 headlines. This was followed by federalism with 28.2% (44). Trailing far behind in third with 5.8% (9) were those about Malpensa and/or Alitalia (an issue on which the LN has been in disagreement with its governing partners) and those concerning the Gelmini schools reform and the related protests. What is striking is that, despite our chosen period including the eruption of the global economic crisis in the autumn of 2008, only 4 out of 156 headlines, just 2.6%, concerned the economy. Inside the paper, when the party has talked about the crisis, it has been principally to say that 'we warned about the problems of globalization before anyone else'. The logic behind this seems fairly straightforward: since the LN controls the two relevant ministries, immigration and federalism are the issues which currently offer the best potential to present the Lega's participation in government as a success story to its activists, supporters and the general public. By contrast, a greater focus on the economic crisis might see the party being more closely identified with the very unwelcome responsibility for its resolution. This concentration on immigration and federalism is also reflected in the party's wall posters: of the 21 posters published by the party in 2008 and 2009, again exactly one third concerns immigration, while a third illustrates the various advantages that would result from the achievement of more autonomy 'from Rome' (i.e. read 'federalism').[\[10\]](#)

Figure 1: Thematic content analysis of *La Padania* headlines, 1 July-31 December 2008



In our research to date, the narrative put forward by the party - whereby being ‘in Rome’ is challenging, avoiding falling into traps requires considerable skill and the odd compromise, however, despite the difficulties, the party is achieving its main goals - seems to have been taken on board both by the party’s representatives at local and regional levels and, to a large extent, its activists. Thus, when asked about compromises such as the bailouts for Catania and Rome, the Lega Nord leader in Turin City Council, Mario Carossa, replied: ‘if we have to swallow bitter pills which lead to the outcome (i.e. federalism) we really want, then we will swallow them willingly. It is the price we have to pay’.[11] Similarly, the Piedmont regional councillor, Claudio Dutto, told us: ‘the reasoning behind it is that this is the price to be paid in order to obtain federalism. Because, in any case, we can count for far more and we can achieve far more by being in government than in opposition. If the Lega were to leave the government, we would have to swallow the same bitter pills...and there would be no federalism’.[12]

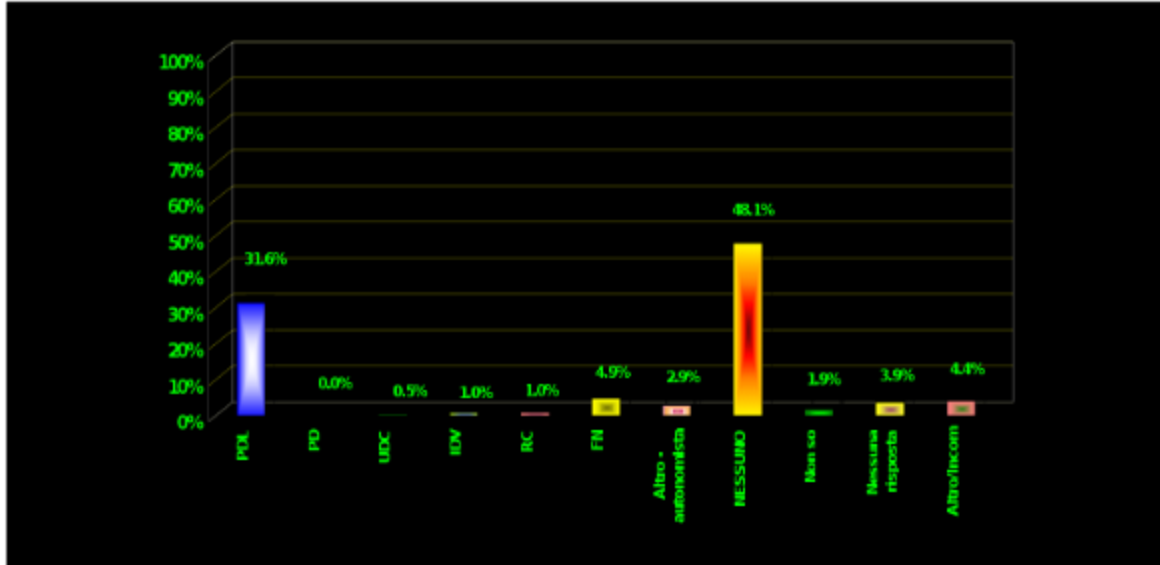
As regards the reactions of the party’s grassroots membership and voters, the first thing to note is that these groups have undergone considerable transformation as a result of the party’s recent success, with the LN electorate doubling in 2008 and its membership rising to levels not seen since the early 1990s, as we saw in Tables 1 and 2. While the arrival of new members and voters of course is largely a positive development for a party, it can also bring difficulties. Older members may be suspicious of the recently-joined, especially as these may have different priorities and values. Moreover, those who have been members for a long time may view the party as paying too much attention to the newcomers. In the case of the Lega over the last year, Claudio Dutto acknowledges that ‘there are problems with managing the membership. These are mostly with the older members because, in responding to the demands coming from grassroots level and

those from the new members and the new voters, the old core membership is not forgotten, but it represents a smaller part of the total, and sometimes it does not understand exactly what we are doing. So there are some problems within the movement between old and new members... there is a bit of suspicion and rancour'.^[13] As regards the reactions of the membership to the party's participation in government, according to Mario Carossa, this was far more negative in the 2001-2006 period than now. He claims that 'at that time, there were a lot of people asking "but why do we remain in this government when we are getting nothing". That mood has disappeared'.^[14]

While this may generally be the case, there is still a debate, at least within a section of the party's hard-core, on whether the compromises of coalition are outweighed by the benefits. Our own survey of comments posted since January 2009 on Lega internet forums such as that of Radio Padania Libera shows how animated these discussions have been between, on the one hand, those who are unsatisfied with the compromises that the alliance with the PDL entails and, on the other, those who have accepted the party narrative that government participation is essential, however unpalatable it may sometimes be.^[15] On the basis of this evidence, it appears that the LN is finding it problematic to ensure that the 'revolutionary' potential of the recently approved 'fiscal federalism' is fully accepted by the hard-core element among its activists/sympathizers. A considerable number of posts by Lega supporters (or those at least claiming to be Lega supporters) in fact argue that, by reaffirming the principle that the richest regions must support the poorest, the new law represents no change at all. Some of these activists/sympathisers claim that the party is now misleading its electorate and even commit the ultimate sacrilege of accusing the leader Umberto Bossi of having become part of the 'Roman swamp' (thus using one of Bossi's own expressions). However, there are also those (a minority in this context) who feel that, despite the many bitter pills the LN has had to swallow so far, its strategy overall seems to be working (see Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2009b).

While very interesting, insofar as they give us an opportunity to see the different arguments and opinions among the hardcore at grassroots level, internet forums and chat-rooms cannot of course be considered representative of the bulk of Lega activists and sympathizers. Besides the obvious fact that not all strata of the Italian population are equally familiar with the opportunities for debate offered by the internet, the 'comments' section of websites, as well as internet forums, are more likely to be visited by those who seek to voice their anger and frustration, and take a pot-shot at this or that politician, rather than those who simply want to register their satisfaction. To gain a more complete picture of the views of LN activists and supporters, therefore, we distributed a questionnaire among a random sample of 206 LN activists and sympathisers at the important annual party rally in Pontida, held on 14 June 2009. These responses suggest that the great majority of activists and sympathisers (at least of the kind who are committed enough to take part in events of this nature) have fully accepted and embraced the party's narrative concerning its place in government and what it is achieving. Figure 2 helps assess how strongly respondents identify with the party. Although the slide shows that the PDL could attract some LN supporters, almost half of all respondents claim they would not even consider voting for anyone else if the Lega did not exist.

Figure 2: 'If the LN did not exist, which party (if any) would you vote for?'



We know from other sections of the questionnaire that many of these respondents have voted for (and some have been members of) other parties in the past, particularly during the First Republic. However, these parties or their descendants seem to exercise little attraction on Lega activists/sympathizers now. The next answer to be considered in this context concerns the reasons why Pontida attendees support the LN. Here, while topics regarding issues of identity, such as 'dialect' and 'the family' are also mentioned (see Figure 3), when asked for the three main reasons why they vote for the Lega, the vast majority of respondents list immigration and federalism as two of these. In other words, there is clear and direct correspondence between what the party stresses in its communications and what respondents say attracted them to the LN.[\[16\]](#) Particularly relevant to our discussion in this paper, a very similar picture emerges when respondents are asked to identify the areas in which they believe the party has achieved success in the last year in government (see Figure 4). Here the answers mirror very closely those provided in Figure 3.[\[17\]](#)

Figure 3: 'What led you to vote for the LN? Indicate the three most important concerns'

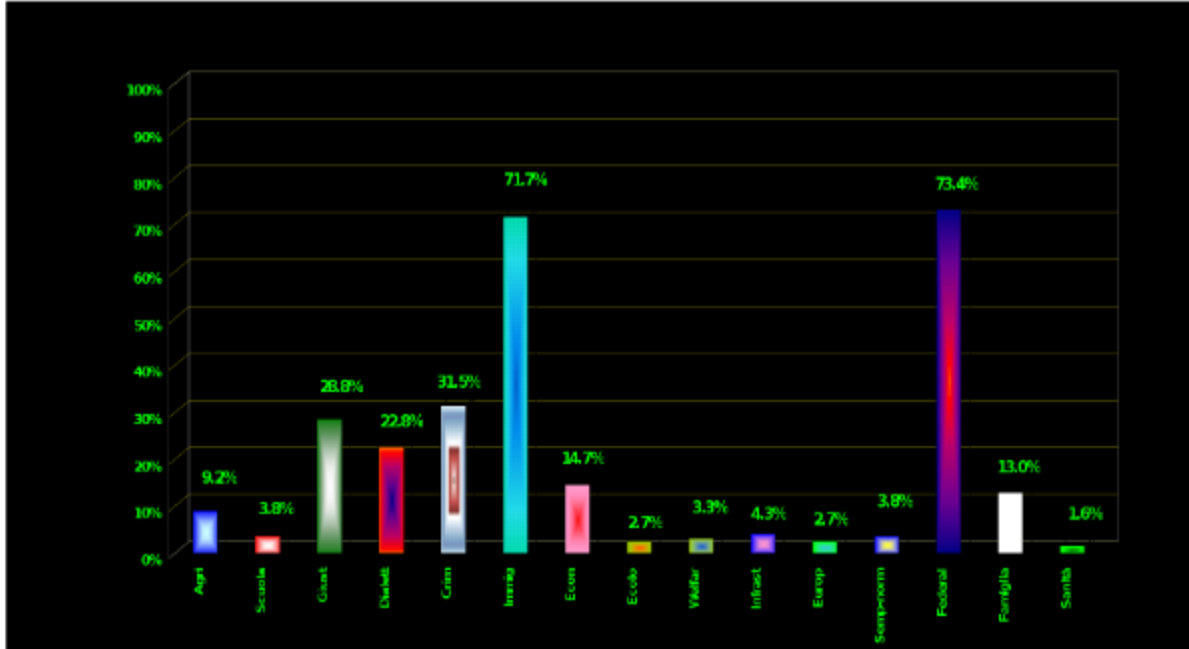
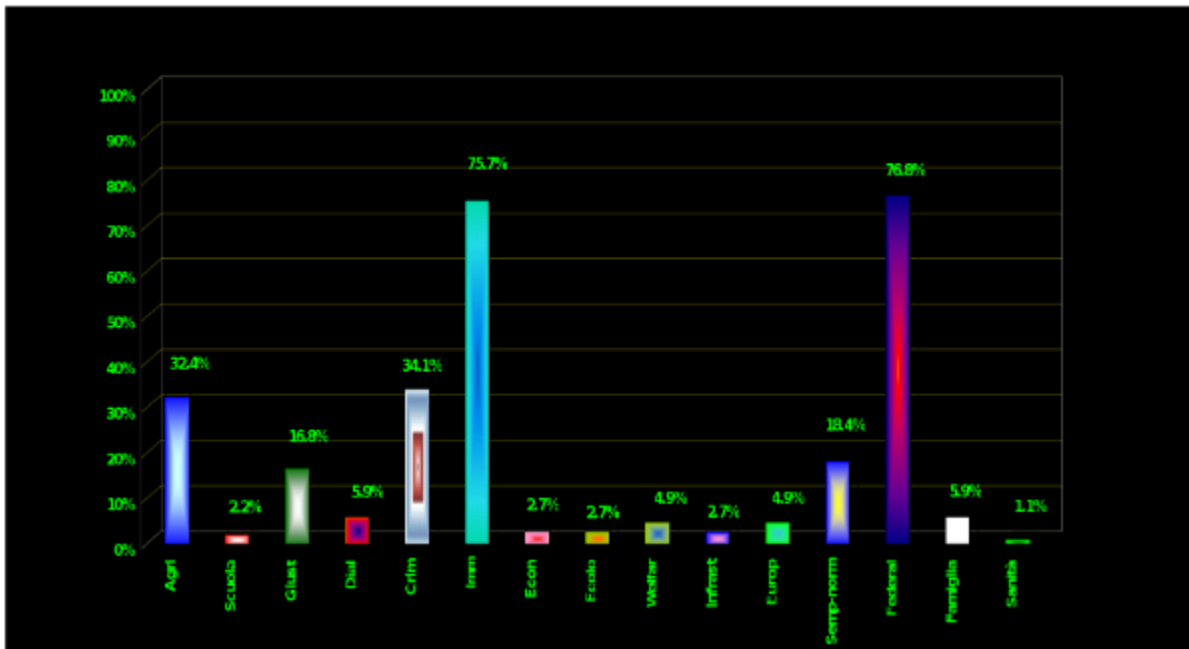


Figure 4: ‘In what areas do you think the LN has achieved important successes in the last year? Indicate the three most important’



It is true of course that the charged atmosphere of Pontida - this being a gathering that has always played a fundamental role in fostering the identity and future political direction of the party - to a large extent invites positive answers. If the chat room is the ideal environment in which to express criticism (protected by anonymity and the safety of one’s home or office), by the same token a mass event such as Pontida (attended this year by circa 40,000-50,000 people) can be expected to elicit opinions that are in line with what the leadership says. Furthermore, as we said above, not

all activists are necessarily willing or able to take part in these events. Keeping all these caveats in mind, however, we regard the results as significant for the reasons outlined in footnote 16. Supporters say that they are choosing the party for the 'right' reasons. They cite the themes the party cares about and are 'repaid' for their loyalty with 'perceived' success in these very areas. Asked whether they were satisfied with the performance of the LN in government in the last year, 95 per cent of our respondents stated that they were either 'fairly' or 'very' satisfied and only a tiny minority replied that they were not. This is despite the fact that 62 per cent of them believed the party had had to make painful compromises as a member of the Berlusconi government – again reflecting the narrative offered by the party of the governing experience that there is no gain without pain. In short, the evidence we have collected so far points to a party that is managing its communications strategy extremely well.

5. Conclusions

Smaller parties tend to 'specialize' in a couple of key areas. This is especially true when they are in power, given the need to make their impact on government as visible as possible (Bolloyer, 2007). In the case of the LN, as we have seen, these themes are easily identifiable and consistent with the party's propaganda: greater northern autonomy (expressed under a series of terms over time) and immigration (usually included under the broader banner of 'la sicurezza' along with law and order). While other issues such as protectionism and Europe have also been stressed at times by the party, it is these two which have been the constant pillars of Lega discourse. Through the combination therefore of policies and communication, it has been able to establish a large degree of 'issue ownership' over federalism and immigration which has served it well at the ballot box. As we have seen, following on from its 2008 general election performance, the Lega Nord secured the best ever national result in its history in the 2009 European elections and its membership numbers continue to grow. Despite its successes having been, in reality, only partial, through its communications strategy directed both at activists/sympathizers and the general public, it has been able to appear as a party which 'gets things done'. As we explained in the introduction, success in government is by no means guaranteed for populist parties. But, if the experience of the Lega in 2001-2006 showed that it was possible to survive, its time in power since 2008 shows that it can also thrive. The current position of the Lega is one which few would have bet on ten years ago when the party stood alone and suffered the consequences. At that time, it seemed not only to have proved the claims regarding populist government participation of Mény and Surel (2002) and many others, but also looked like it might be on its way to proving that of Paul Taggart (2004: 270), according to whom 'populist politicians, movements or parties emerge and grow quickly and gain attention, but find it difficult to sustain that momentum and therefore will usually fade fast'. In the light of the experiences of the Lega in power during the current decade, it appears time to reassess these gloomy prognoses. While things may change and the future after Berlusconi for the LN will inevitably pose all sorts of new problems, what we can say now is that if election results and membership levels are indicative of the health of a political party, then that of the Lega seems more robust than ever.

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22

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[2] We view the LN as a 'regionalist populist party' (McDonnell, 2006) and define populism as 'an ideology which pits a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous 'others' who are together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice' (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008: 3).

[3] These figures (and similar ones available for other northern Italian provinces), while striking, do not provide us with definite proof that the flow of votes exiting the PDL necessarily goes to the Lega and viceversa. However, when read against the backdrop of the electoral studies we have just mentioned, the challenge that each of these two parties poses to each other becomes very obvious.

[4] 'Formation weight is defined as the impact that a party is able to exert during coalition formation', while 'coalition weight refers to the influence that an actor possesses when intracoalitional conflicts emerge' (Bolloyer, 2007: 27).

[5] R. Sala (2008) 'Napolitano è un uomo saggio proporrò io una mediazione al Pd', *La Repubblica*, 14 December, p. 6.

[6] G. Casadio (2009) 'Sì al federalismo, il Pd si astiene Bossi lo ringrazia, Berlusconi attacca', *La Repubblica*, 23 January, p. 6.

[7] See 'Dopo il Federalismo fiscale tocca a quello istituzionale', *La Padania*, 15 September, p. 5; See also I. Iezzi (2008) 'Il 2009 apre con il sì al FEDERALISMO', *La Padania*, 31 December, p. 2-3

[8] The Mayor of Varallo in Piedmont, for instance, has recently been at the forefront of a campaign to banish the burqa, allegedly on 'security grounds'. A full list of the initiatives proposed and/or introduced by local LN administrators (and of the statements they have made) against foreign street sellers, Roma travellers, Islamic centres and homosexuals would run into several pages.

[9] Anonymous (2009) 'Immigrazione, sanatoria al via per le colf e le badanti', *Il Corriere della Sera* on line, http://www.corriere.it/cronache/09_agosto_21/badanti_sanatoria_8f74bb84-8e34-11de-ba00-00144f02aabc.shtml, accessed 21 August 2009.

[10] See: <http://www.leganord.org/ilmovimento/manifesti2009.asp>, accessed 23 August 2009.

[11] Interview with Mario Carossa, Lega Nord leader in the Turin City Council, 23 March 2009.

[12] Interview with Claudio Dutto, Lega Nord Piedmont regional councillor, 24 March 2009.

[13] Interview with Claudio Dutto, Lega Nord Piedmont regional councillor, 24 March 2009.

[14] Interview with Mario Carossa, Lega Nord leader in the Turin City Council, 23 March 2009.

[15] See <http://www.radio-padania.com/rpl/default.asp>. Radio Padania is one of the official mouthpieces of the Lega Nord, hosted in its Milanese centre alongside the party's paper *La Padania* and the party's television channel.

[16] Of course voters might not be aware of the reasons why they support a party, and some of these respondents have most probably given us the answer they felt was 'right', especially in the context of a gathering that has always attracted huge crowds of 'hard-core' believers. However, we see this as a feature, rather than a weakness, of this part of our research. In short, there is no attempt on our part to try and 'get to the truth' of what respondents 'really think'. What we are interested in is the *narrative* these people put forward. When asked to explain why they vote for their party, LN activists/sympathizers cannot but dig into the repertoire that is available to them, and what they come up with is precisely what the party has been providing for them on a silver plate: 'immigration and federalism'.

[17] It is important to note that these two questions do not follow each other on the questionnaire.