‘It ain’t what you do, it’s the way that you say it’?
The Lega Nord back in government

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Abstract

In April 2008 the Italian regionalist populist party Lega Nord entered a governing centre-right coalition led by Silvio Berlusconi for the fourth time. Since then, the party has been able to thrive thanks to its holding of key ministries and its consolidation of ‘issue ownership’ over the key themes of federal reform and immigration/law and order. Moreover, the party’s performance in government has brought electoral rewards, as seen in the 2009 European Parliament elections. This paper analyses the Lega’s apparent success in government by considering the actions of the party (i.e. its rhetoric and the legislation that it has sponsored as part of the governing majority) as well as the reactions of mid-ranking leaders and activists. Based on content analyses and an extensive series of interviews and questionnaires with politicians and activists, the paper argues that, contrary to expectations, populists serving as junior partners in coalition are not necessarily destined either to have to tame their rhetoric, face splits or see their electoral support decline.
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).\(^1\) 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 it had long and loudly criticized. It had then had to stomach a series of compromises and 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 a position whereby it felt it had to leave or was forced to leave. 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 a Berlusconi-led coalition, an extremely turbulent and short-lived administration characterized by almost constant clashes between the LN and its partners, with the prime minister bearing the brunt of the party’s attacks. Having forced Berlusconi to resign 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 in 1996, but increasingly less so as time went on (see table 1). Like those of parties such as the Freiheitlichen Partei Österreichs (FPÖ - Freedom Party) in Austria and the Lijst Pim Fortuyn (LPF - Pim Fortuyn List) in the Netherlands, the LN’s 1994 experience thus tallied 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’.

\(^1\) We consider the LN primarily 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).
By contrast, as we argued in 2005, in its second time in government from 2001, 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 previously (see table 1).

If its experience in government from 2001 to 2006 can be seen therefore 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. It has reinforced its ‘issue ownership’ over the key themes of federal reform and ‘la sicurezza’ (a buzzword literally meaning ‘security’, which in Italian public discourse encompasses both immigration and law-and-order. ‘La sicurezza’ of course also reflects the standard populist claim that the people are unsafe and under threat). This is in large part due to the fact that the party has been able to promote policies and quickly introduce legislation which, while debatable in their effects as we will see below, it has been able to sell to mid-ranking representatives, activists, supporters and the general public as ‘Lega Nord successes’. Electoral gains have ensued, 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). It is also interesting to note that the party is also attracting new members in recent years, bucking the trend of dramatic membership declines that have affected parties across Western Europe (Mair and van Biezen, 2001). Thus, as Table 2 shows, at least according to figures from 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>LN</th>
<th>FI</th>
<th>AN</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>8.36</td>
<td>6.58</td>
<td>10.07</td>
<td>42.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>20.57</td>
<td>15.66</td>
<td>46.30</td>
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<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td>25.18</td>
<td>10.31</td>
<td>45.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>4.97</td>
<td>29.43</td>
<td>12.02</td>
<td>45.39</td>
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<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>4.58</td>
<td>20.92</td>
<td>11.51</td>
<td>40.64</td>
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<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>8.30</td>
<td>23.72</td>
<td>12.34</td>
<td>45.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>10.22</td>
<td>37.39</td>
<td>35.26</td>
<td>45.48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 Alleanza Nazionale (AN – National Alliance) 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, 1993-2008

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

Source: Segreteria Organizzativa Federale della Lega Nord

Of course, it would be wrong to claim that the merit for these successes is solely attributable to the actions of the Lega. Exogenous factors (public fears about crime and immigration, to name but one) have undoubtedly also played a part. Indeed, 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 here is that, with the hands it has been dealt in recent years, the Lega has played its cards extremely well. In this paper we contend that an important reason for its success is the ability of its leaders to put forward a coherent, credible
and convincing narrative about the party’s experiences in government and its achievements to party members and sympathisers. Following a brief 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 its leadership has presented this. We will then assess the ‘reactions’ of party activists and sympathisers. In both sections, we will focus on the Lega’s two key themes of federalism and ‘la sicurezza’. As we will see, while the party’s successes have, in some respects, been partial and at times more symbolic than concrete, it has nonetheless been able to present itself as leading the way on these fronts by holding the ‘right’ ministries (see below), by announcing new policy proposals and by deploying an untamed rhetoric. 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 ‘la sicurezza’, is one of the most high-profile topics in contemporary Italian society. Central to the LN’s success therefore is the question of communication. To put it simply, while tangible policy victories do of course count, it seems to be largely the case in Italian political competition that ‘it ain’t what you do, it’s the way that you say it’. Hence, as our findings from a survey of Lega activists and sympathizers suggest (see below), while the LN has been generally fairly good at doing the right things in government, it has been even better at saying them. By hammering home a narrative – faithfully reproduced by party representatives at all levels and members– that coalition participation is a necessity, that some compromises are inevitable, but that the achievements of the party and its ministers in key policy areas on behalf of the people justify both participation and (minor) compromises, the party has been able to reinforce its image as holding a ‘golden share’ in the current government, both among its own supporters and, if the election results and surveys are an indicator, increasingly also among the wider public.

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

The 2008 general election saw two more streamlined rival centre-right and centre-left blocks than had been the case in 2006 (Chiaramonte, 2009; Russo and Verzichelli, 2009). On the centre-right, Forza Italia (FI) and Alleanza Nazionale (AN) presented themselves under the
common banner of Il Popolo della Libertà (PDL - People of Freedom) which Berlusconi had created in a sudden and surprise move in November 2008 (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2009a). Given the LN’s loyalty to Berlusconi both during the 2001-2006 period in government and afterwards in opposition, its alliance with the PDL was never in doubt. However, the former Christian Democrats of the Unione dei Democratici Cristiani e Democratici di Centro (UDC – Union of Christian Democrats and Centre Democrats) - the most vociferous opponent of both the LN and Berlusconi within the CDL alliance (Albertazzi, 2009a) - were given the stark choice of either agreeing to merge formally with the PDL or running alone. Their preference for the latter meant that the centre-right block was reduced from four main parties (FI, AN, UDC and LN) to just two (PDL and LN), with the small Sicilian Movimento per le Autonomie (MPA - Autonomy Movement) making up the numbers. Despite the coalition’s reduced size, the 2008 election was a triumph for the centre-right, and for the Lega in particular. The alliance defeated its main 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, the centre-right could again rely on a very clear majority in both Chambers of Parliament. Unlike 2001, however, the Lega is now essential to the survival of the government. Moreover, for the first time since the mid-1990s, the party is making serious inroads into the FI/AN (i.e. PDL) vote in northern regions. By way of example, Table 3 below shows this phenomenon in the case of the economically powerful Veneto region where the advance of the Lega was especially striking in 2008 – a trend confirmed by the party’s maintenance of its regional vote share in the 2009 European elections.2

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>G.01</th>
<th>E. 04</th>
<th>G.06</th>
<th>G. 08</th>
<th>E.09</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LN</td>
<td>10.25</td>
<td>14.13</td>
<td>11.09</td>
<td>27.09</td>
<td>28.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FI +AN</td>
<td>40.47</td>
<td>33.56</td>
<td>35.75</td>
<td>27.35</td>
<td>29.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>50.72</td>
<td>47.69</td>
<td>46.84</td>
<td>54.44</td>
<td>57.71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Elaboration of data from Ministry of the Interior

2 The figures presented in Table 3 (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 recent electoral studies (Demos, 2008; Istituto Cattaneo, 2008), the challenge that each of these two parties poses to each other becomes very obvious.
While attracting approximately only 25 per cent of the votes gained by the PDL nationally, the LN demonstrated considerable ‘formation’ and ‘coalition weight’ in the months leading up to the election and those following it (Bolleyer, 2007: 27). 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 - explicit compromises between government partners being much more effective than implicit ones in preventing conflict (Timmermans, 2006: 269). Moreover, while this weight did not translate into a large number of ministries, it did translate into more useful ministries than in 2001 (i.e. ministries all closely linked to the party’s key themes): (1) Interior: Roberto Maroni; (2) Federal Reform: Umberto Bossi; (3) Agriculture and Forestry: Luca Zaia; (4) Legislative Simplification: Roberto Calderoli. Crucially, the first two offer the Lega the opportunity to be seen to be leading government policy and actions concerning both ‘la sicurezza’ and federal reform. 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 controversial and unpopular question of pension reform), in 2008 its ministries have allowed scope for Lega ministers to claim considerable successes in key areas. As for the LN’s ‘coalition weight’, this became apparent as the governing majority proceeded to approve controversial legislation in the areas favoured by the LN within less than one and a half years from taking office – i.e. very quickly by Italian standards. The next section will consider these legislative initiatives on federalism and ‘la sicurezza’. We will then assess whether, and to what extent, LN 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

Given the party’s constant commitment to some form of northern autonomy (whether federalism, secession, devolution etc), the main policy achievement of the party to date in government has been the passing of a fiscal federalism reform (30 April 2009) which has been hailed by the LN as an enormous success, albeit one which will require time to implement and which will have to be accompanied by other federal reforms. A comparison between the Lega’s stated objectives on federalism and what it has achieved so far shows, however, that the glass remains very much half empty. First and foremost, the fiscal federalism reform in reality 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 that 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 be able to 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 proposals. 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) in the fiscal federalism bill puts to rest the idea that the North can be left to its own devices. Little is known at this stage about this fund and how it will work as, to date, the Finance Minister Giulio
Tremonti has refused to make available any detailed studies explaining ‘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). This information should be made available before the end of 2010. 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).

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’ 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. That said, it is interesting to note that one of the first acts of the new government was to remove the municipal ICI property levy - partly replacing it with a central subsidy - and it has debated abolishing the IRAP regional tax on businesses. 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, subnational administrations which squander resources will now face repercussions for using their available funds badly and institutions 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 potentially double-edged sword as far as strategic communication is concerned, the other key theme for the Lega since its return to government - ‘la sicurezza’ - offers a series of more immediate opportunities for straightforward and spectacular (albeit at times symbolic) gains. Since returning to government, the party has championed a barrage of
hard-line measures on immigration such as the *respingimenti* (‘rejections’ of boatloads of mainly African migrants in the run-up to the 2009 EP elections), the census and fingerprinting of some members of the Romany community, making immigrants pay large fees for residence permits and citizenship requests and, finally, the ‘ronde’ (local patrols regarded by many as legalized vigilante groups). In addition to these initiatives, the party has also made proposals that have yet to be approved, such as the introduction of special classes in schools for immigrant children, local referendums on the construction of mosques and the establishment of nomad camps and a halt to all immigration for two years. Finally, it has launched headline grabbing campaigns that have attracted the attention of both the national and international press– the most notorious of which recently has been the anti-illegal immigrant ‘White Christmas’ campaign in the town of Coccaglio (Hooper, 2009). While many proposals may prove to be unconstitutional or in conflict with EU law, the key aspect in our view 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 issue, AN, has now dissolved into the PDL and its former leader Gianfranco Fini has adopted an increasingly moderate stance on immigration and multiculturalism. In other words, the LN has fully occupied a space which it had previously shared and contested with AN.

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. The main legislative output on this issue so far 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 media 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 potentially fostering security through improved relations between the various communities - is conspicuous and, to this extent, the decree can be said to be essentially 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 2009 ‘security package’ was also accompanied by an amnesty, which the LN Minister of the Interior Maroni envisaged would legalize the presence of even more migrants than the previous one, i.e. about 750,000 people (Anonymous, 2009) (something that, presumably, would not go down too well with leghisti supporters). 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 again particularly 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 local referendums;
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.

3 In the end, however, only 294,000 applications for regularisation were received (Pasquinelli, 2009).
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 perform 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 its allies of the PDL should stick religiously to their manifesto commitments (especially on immigration and federalism), and that the party only agreed to govern with the PDL on 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 (although not terminally so) 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.⁴ 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 interesting to note that, according to the monthly surveys conducted by IPR Marketing for the newspaper La Repubblica from May 2008 to December 2009, the LN Minister for the Interior Roberto Maroni – who has presided over the introduction of the ‘security package’ and taken various other initiatives on immigration, such as the ones cited above - is the only minister in whom over 60 per cent of respondents in every single month of the past year and a half have said they have ‘sufficient’ or ‘a lot of’ faith’.⁵ Of course, the link between immigration and criminality is well established among the Italian electorate, especially given the treatment of these topics by the media. In addition, those who believe immigration and criminality are the most pressing issues

⁴ Seeking the approval of purely symbolic measures is common among Western European populist parties – see the case of the FPÖ in Carinthia (Heinisch, 2003: 121).

a government should tackle overwhelmingly support either the LN itself or, even more importantly, its closest electoral competitors, i.e. the parties of the centre-right (Cavazza, Corbetta and Roccato 2008: 167-172). It is thus specifically from the PDL, as we have argued above, that the LN can realistically hope to keep ‘stealing’ the majority of its fresh votes in the near future.

The first year and a half in government has not simply 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 massive government bailouts for the City Councils of Rome, Catania and Palermo (i.e. the hated ‘capital’ and two southern cities), the acceptance by northern regions of rubbish from Naples, the controversy surrounding the future of the Milan Malpensa airport 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 representatives and supporters that they are achieving important results in government despite the compromises, in the next section we will discuss both the portrayals by national elites of the LN’s first year in power and the reactions of the grassroots to these. We will argue that, despite there being only a partial correspondence between what the party promises and what it actually achieves in its alliance with Berlusconi, the evidence we have collected so far suggests that the party ranks are generally very satisfied with recent events and believe that the Lega is achieving important results.

4. Party Communications and 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 mid-ranking representatives, activists and supporters that the party’s presence in the executive is bringing results. If a party does not have sufficient media visibility, it is immediately handicapped in this sense and here the long-standing LN strategy of (a) ‘keeping one foot out’ of government through statements and actions (however symbolic) which attract attention and (b) establishing issue ownership over key themes so that they are immediately associated by
both the media and voters with that issue 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 firmly at the centre of its communication strategies. This emerges clearly by performing a thematic content analysis of front-page headlines in its newspaper, *La Padania*. 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, followed by federalism with 28.2% (44). Trailing far behind in third with 5.8% (9) were those about the future of the Milanese airport of Malpensa and the crisis of Alitalia (an issue on which the LN has been in disagreement with its governing partners) and (again with 5.8%) those concerning the protests generated by the school reform introduced by the government. 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. The logic behind this twin predominance of federalism and immigration seems fairly straightforward: especially given that the LN controls the two relevant ministries, these are the issues which currently offer the best opportunities for the Lega to present its participation in government as a success story to its activists, supporters and the general public. This concentration on two themes is also reflected in the party’s wall posters (which are crucial to the LN communication strategy and, according to party officials, still devised by Bossi): of the 21 posters published by the party in 2008 and 2009, one third concern immigration, over a third illustrate the various advantages that would result from the achievement of more autonomy ‘from Rome’ (i.e. federalism), while the remaining ones cover a variety of themes (such as simply advertising party events).

In our research to date, the narrative put forward by the party national elites - 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 fully on board both by the party’s representatives at local and regional levels and, to a large extent, by its activists. In the case of the bailouts for Catania, Palermo and Rome, the vice-president of the LN group in the Chamber of Deputies, Manuela dal Lago told us ‘our explanation to the activists was fairly obvious…within a majority coalition there is give-and-

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take, and in the end, what we have got is far more than what we have given’. This account is repeated right down the party ranks. When asked about such bailouts, the LN Piedmont regional councillor, Claudio Dutto, said: ‘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’. Likewise, the Lega Nord leader in the 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’. Finally, at the very lowest subnational institutional level – the borough – one of the LN representatives in Turin, Roberto Zenga, told us that the average activist ‘takes a bit of time to absorb’ these unpleasant episodes, but then he/she realizes that ‘to get federalism, we had to accept [the money for] Catania. To get the measures on immigration, we had to accept Malpensa…we are in politics and politics is mediation’. This vision of the Lega’s participation in government is mirrored at grassroots levels among activists who accept being in coalition in Rome as essential to the achievement of the party’s goals. As ‘activist a’ in Piedmont comments: ‘it is obvious that if you stay out of government, you cannot do anything. I mean, you’ll end up like Rifondazione Comunista or other oddballs’. In Veneto, ‘activist c’ summed up the prevailing logic on the issue of a local branch focus group by saying ‘the Lega has realised that if you want to be up there (i.e. in office) you have to be with someone else. And, to be with someone else, you have to give up something. Not everything, but something…if you are in opposition, you cannot do anything, you’re closed off and you die’.

As regards the reactions of the membership to the specific fact of being in coalition with Berlusconi (who, as mentioned earlier, was the target of ferocious attacks by the Lega in the 1990s), the former deputy and current President of the Province of Udine, Pietro Fontanini, says that ‘some do not trust Berlusconi much. They have the impression that he is a little too preoccupied with his own affairs’. The message from the national elite downwards, however, is

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7 We are grateful to the Lega Nord representatives who agreed to be interviewed for this paper. Interviews were held between March and May 2009 in Rome with Federico Bricolo, Manuela Dal Lago and Pietro Fontanini, in Trieste with Danilo Narduzzi and Federico Razzini, and in Turin with Mario Carossa, Claudio Dutto and Roberto Zenga.

8 Interviews and focus groups were conducted with Lega Nord activists in Piedmont and Veneto in May 2009. Names of interviewees and of specific party branches are omitted in order to preserve anonymity.
not to be overly concerned by this as (a) Berlusconi has been a faithful ally and, in any case, the PDL is ‘the only show in town’ if the LN is to achieve its aims; (b) the LN leader Umberto Bossi has an excellent personal relationship with Berlusconi and, due to his superior vision of political machinations, Bossi is expertly equipped to manage the Lega’s alliance strategy. As the president of the LN group in the Senate, Federico Bricolo, told us, the PDL ‘are the only ones who accept our manifesto aims, the only ones who support them in the end… any problems get resolved eventually, in the same way as they always have: in the end, our Federal Secretary, Umberto Bossi, has always been able to find the right path, the right mediation’. Dal Lago adds that ‘Berlusconi has respected our agreements and so, as long as he sticks to the accords, we will continue with him’. Again, this view of the alliance is repeated right down the representative chain. The LN leader in the Friuli-Venezia Giulia Regional Chamber, Danilo Narduzzi says that Berlusconi ‘has generally always kept his word’, while his fellow regional councillor and party colleague Federico Razzini adds that ‘the relationship with the PDL is, on the whole, one of constructive and loyal collaboration’. Not only is the relationship constructive, but the party in its internal and external propaganda promotes the idea that it has a form of ‘golden share’ in the government. We can see this notion quite clearly in the comment by the LN Turin city councillor, Mario Carossa, that ‘now we are stronger, now we have the most important ministries, now we are driving the government – in the end, a few issues aside, the main discussions centre on ideas and projects sponsored by the Lega Nord’. At all levels, we are told that the ‘guarantor’ of the alliance with Berlusconi is Bossi and his rapport with the prime minister. As Zenga affirms: ‘I think Bossi and Berlusconi speak to each other on the phone at least a couple of times a day. They have a relationship based on mutual collaboration and mutual trust’. If this relationship is the same as that which we described in this journal five years ago, what has changed therefore in the interim is the perception both of it and of the party’s position in government among LN activists. According to Carossa, this was far more negative in the 2001-2006 period than now, since ‘at that time, there were a lot of people asking “but why are we remaining in this government when we are getting nothing?”’. That mood has disappeared’. Again, although he is not necessarily well-liked, we find broad acceptance of Berlusconi as a coalition partner among LN activists for the reasons cited above by representatives. In Veneto, ‘activist d’ says that Berlusconi ‘offers the greatest guarantees, in terms of programmatic commitments and government cohesion’. ‘Activist c’ states that ‘I don’t
like him as a person… and he is showing his true colours: he’s a megalomaniac and wants to hog the limelight. This is not democracy’. However, he agrees with his fellow activists that ‘there is no better alternative’. Finally, in the same region, ‘activist e’ repeats the idea of the bond of trust between Bossi and Berlusconi, saying ‘we have a very tight relationship with Berlusconi and he knows that the Lega is not like some parts of his own party who will stab him in the back if they get a chance. We stick to our word’. Similarly, in Piedmont, ‘activist b’ affirms ‘I know there is a strong personal relationship between Bossi and Berlusconi: they talk, they always find a solution…sure, it’s not the greatest (i.e. being in coalition with Berlusconi), but if we exclude the Veltroni9 option, the only alternative was to stand alone, and standing alone means losing. So, we made this decision and that means swallowing a few bitter pills’.

While this may be the most widespread view, 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 in the first three months of 2009 - i.e. a period immediately after the bailouts for Rome, Catania and Palermo, but before the approval of the fiscal federalism bill - on Lega internet forums such as that of the party’s official radio station Radio Padania Libera shows how animated discussions were 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 unpleasant it may sometimes be.10 On the basis of this evidence, for example, 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 most 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 favourite expressions against him). However, there are also

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9 Walter Veltroni was leader at the 2008 general election of the main centre-left party, the Partito Democratico (PD – Democratic Party).
10 See http://www.radio-padania.com/rpl/default.asp (accessed 1 April 2009). Radio Padania is one of the official mouthpieces of the Lega Nord, hosted in its Milanese national centre alongside the party’s offices and official paper La Padania, its television channel, and the offices of the influential regional branch Lega Lombarda.
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 the familiarity with the internet and the frequency of its use by the Italian population varies considerably, according to the three main variables of gender, age and place of residence (ISTAT 2009: 214-5; 234-5), 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.

As we can see from Figure 1 below, 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.11 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 2).12

11 Of course voters might not be aware of the reasons why they support a party, and some of these respondents have 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’.

12 It is important to note that these two questions do not follow each other on the questionnaire.
Figure 1: ‘What led you to vote for the LN? Indicate the three most important concerns’

Note: Respondents were asked to indicate up to three main concerns. Only those categories which at least 5% of respondents indicated as being one of their three main concerns are listed. Total valid responses out of 206: 184.
Figure 2: ‘In what areas do you think the LN has achieved important successes in the last year? Indicate the three most important’

Note: Respondents were asked to indicate up to three main areas. Only those categories which at least 5% of respondents indicated as being one of the three main areas are listed. Total valid responses out of 206: 185.

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 10. 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, 68 per cent of our respondents stated that they were ‘very satisfied’ and a further 27 per cent that they were ‘fairly satisfied’. This is despite the fact that 63 per cent of them believe the party has 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. On this point, it is also interesting to note that when we asked them about their views on the previous period in government (i.e. between 2001 and 2006), only 50 per cent believed that the party had achieved important successes then, and only 24 per cent said they were ‘very satisfied’ with the party in government during those years.

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 (Bolleyer, 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 by a series of terms over time) and ‘la sicurezza’. While other issues such as economic 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. By pushing certain policies and by establishing a large degree of ‘issue ownership’ over them thanks to intelligent communication strategies, the LN has enjoyed electoral success in recent years and has seen its membership grow to its highest level. Despite its successes having been, in reality, only partial, through its consistent, coherent and often repeated explanations of recent events directed both at activists/sympathizers and the general public, it has been able to appear as a party which ‘gets things done’. It thus seems that, for the LN elites, it is not so much what they do in concrete policy terms, but how they say it, that gets results. This contradicts previous research arguing that, unless the degree of compromises on policies a party has to accept for staying in government is small ‘overall utility will be enhanced by staying out of government’ (Warwick, 2000: 56). Interestingly, the success of the LN in government focuses our attention on how policies are packaged and sold to supporters and the electorate at large. Furthermore, it also shows that it is not always the case
that, as the former German Green Secretary Joschka Fischer observed, the long march through the institutions changes the marchers far more than the institutions (cited in Deschouwer, 2008: xiii). Although the success of the LN, as far as the policies eventually passed by the governing majority, may be partial: a) the party has not stopped proposing radical measures due to its participation in government (i.e. it has not been ‘tamed’); b) its rhetoric remains very radical and the party is still engaged in ‘role play’ with the PM Silvio Berlusconi, who on various themes has been keen to be seen as ‘moderate’ and ‘responsible’ (his gaffes on the international stage notwithstanding), while giving free reign to the legisti on issues such as law and order and immigration (Albertazzi, 2009b). While this strategy suits the LN well, it is a risky one for its allies of the PDL. As we mentioned above, with the former fascists of AN having now merged into the PDL, and their most respected leader Gianfranco Fini having considerably changed his tone on issues such as criminality and immigration, the LN has established itself as the only party of any importance that remains tough on crime and unapologetically anti-immigrant (especially in the case of Muslims). Moreover, on these themes, the LN is in tune with the values and beliefs of many centre-right voters.

As we explained in the introduction, success in government is by no means guaranteed for populist parties – particularly those serving as junior coalition partners. However, if the experience of the Lega Nord in 2001-2006 showed that it is possible for these parties to survive, its time in power since 2008 shows, so far, that they can also thrive. Writing in this journal in 2005 we wondered whether the LN could continue to be a ‘highly relevant force within government’ (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2005: 958). We now know that it can, and the current position of the Lega is one which few scholars or commentators 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 and the continuing success of populist parties in other European countries such as Austria, Denmark and Switzerland, it appears time to reassess such 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 as the current Italian government approaches its second anniversary in office is that if election results and membership levels are indicative of the health of a political party, then that of the Lega seems at present more robust than ever.

References:


