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The Giant Under Salvini's Feet: An Analysis of *La Lega*

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Abstract

Matteo Salvini is the former Deputy Prime Minister, and former Minister of the Interior of Italy. Born in Milan, Salvini joined and quickly rose up the ranks of the Young Padanians Movement, a political youth group associated with the newly formed *Lega Nord* political party. Now, Salvini sits on the throne of *La Lega*, as the party's secretary and chairman.ⁱ Not only is Salvini the formal party leader, but he has also shown himself to be extremely popular on social media – using his Twitter account to rabble-rouse, organize, and grandstand. While Salvini's xenophobic and anti-statist rhetoric is certainly worth investigation in its own right, to best understand Salvini's meteoric rise one has to first understand the party he leads. Accordingly, this paper focuses on three overarching aspects of *La Lega*: its history, its ideology, and the effects of globalization on the party.

INTRODUCTION

The *Lega Nord*, as it's today known, emerged onto the political scene in the mid '80s as an unknown party vaguely dedicated to localist policies. In the years that followed, *La Lega* gained an enormous amount of momentum, bringing political scientists and activists into the fold who helped the party articulate a clear ideology, and allowed it to expand its influence from provincial Northern cities to entire regions.ⁱⁱ By the time *La Lega* won its first major electoral victory in the 1992 Italian general election, it was a well-oiled machine that stood for federalism, ethno-regionalism, and neoliberal economics. The party went through one more significant ideological pivot in 2013 – incidentally, when Salvini took over as secretary – to broaden its appeal still further. In examining the history of *La Lega*, I will argue that the party's ideological development was strategically vote maximizing: It was secessionist when it paid

to be secessionist, and it was nationalist when it paid to be nationalist.

This paper furthermore attempts to classify the ideology of *La Lega*. With shifts in platform come corresponding shifts in ideas, and *La Lega* is no exception. But there are certain undercurrents, like anti-statism, ethno-regionalism and welfare chauvinism that remain constant throughout the party's life. *La Lega* began by lofting scathing critiques against the Italian central government, which it argued, was suffocating the Italian regions with high taxes, supporting a welfare state for the South of Italy (the money for which went right into the pockets of the mafia), and engaging in unprecedented racketeering.ⁱⁱⁱ Indeed, in the late '80s, *La Lega* was the only party calling out the Italian government for its corruption – actions that quickly won the party widespread support and gave it a populist edge. But *La Lega* wasn't just the ideological negative of Rome, it also offered prescriptive solutions for Italy. By examining some of their solutions, like

federalism, I will argue that *La Lega* hangs between Roger Eatwell's protest and economic interest theories, and that the party can best be described as radical ethno-regionalist and populist.^{iv}

Finally, this paper will examine how globalization is putting pressure on *La Lega's* ideology. Within Italy, workers are no longer split between Communist and Centrist parties as they were after the Second World War.^v Now, Italian workers are mainly split between small business owners and large corporate industrial workers. The former group advocates for regional isolationism, fearing that globalization will cause them to go out of business. But the latter group argues for a more centralized government to ensure that Italian corporate industries can remain economically competitive in the global market. Both groups are traditional sources of *La Lega* support, and this section argues that the party has ideologically dodged the issue, turning instead to the immigrant threat and anti-EU rhetoric to unify these two constituencies.

HISTORY

In 1985, a new party appeared on local election ballots in the wealthy Northern Italian city, Varese. The group went by *La Lega Autonoma Lombarda*, and it racked in 2.5% of the vote and a provincial council seat to boot.^{vi} *La Lega Lombarda*, to which its name was shortened a year later, became so successful by its ability to invoke a specific catalogue of regional mythology, and by capitalizing on the governmental mismanagement in Rome. When Umberto Bossi founded *La Lega Lombarda*, he envisioned the party as the modern political heir to the 12th century Lombard League, a medieval alliance of Northern Italian city states that banded together in order to protect Italy from the threat of conquest by Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick I.^{vii} Eight centuries later, the geographical appeal of *La Lega* is still largely focused in the North, resembling the territory of the medieval Lombard League. The

invocation of a Northern Italian defensive alliance represents two important seeds of *La Lega's* thought. First, is the point of regionalism. The pact between these Northern Italian city states had nothing to do with the concept of a Nation State. On the contrary, the Lombard League was aimed at self-preservation for their own city states much more than they were aimed at the protection of "Italy," or "Italianicity." In the late '80s, *La Lega* would adopt the same rhetoric of undermining the Nation State, claiming that regional identities were far more important. The second point is that the pact represents the ideal centrality of government. The city states of the Lombard League formed a joint organization to provide collective military defense, and to protect against foreign invaders. All other powers were left to the autonomous city states. Bossi's *Lega* would argue for a similar level of devolution, leaving to the central Italian government only the "indispensable: foreigners, defense, and currency."^{viii}

To develop a political program worthy of such a mythology, Bossi brought in a firebrand Professor of Political Science, Gianfranco Miglio, who argued that the modern conception of the Nation State was a throwback to authoritarian absolutist regimes, and was therefore wholly "fictitious," (Miglio 1991, 140). Miglio laid the groundwork for an early comprehensive ideology for the budding party arguing that: "I came to the conclusion that, as far as 'Nations' go, 'large nations' don't exist: the more they want to extend the confines of a presumed ethnic homogeneity, the more they end up distancing themselves from their authentic ethnic roots. If those roots are strong, they necessitate a nation of modest dimensions," (Miglio 1991, 140). The upshot of Miglio's philosophy is that the concept of "Italy," as a modern Nation State was not only arbitrary, but actually ethnically disingenuous. The more "spontaneous (and true)" nations, were those "held together not by grand rulers, or by ideals, but by a tiny net of numerous affinities, and by ritualized daily habits," (Miglio 1991, 141). The key implication here is that the idea of

a state is only legitimate if it caters to its citizens' "authentic ethnic roots." *La Lega* would come to claim that all Italians from the South, and particularly from Sicily, were ethnically different and thus should be part of a different State.^{ix} Of course, *La Lega* never specified what specifically differentiates the ethnicity of a Sicilian from that of a Milanese. Nevertheless, the philosophy that Miglio planted took root, and *La Lega* soon began arguing for the secession of Northern Italy from the rest of the peninsula.

They called their state "La Padania," and it covered all the territory north of the Po river. Bossi had to carefully step around all explicit talk of secession at his rallies to avoid being arrested, but in the early '90s, when Italy's massive crackdown on political corruption known as *Tangentopoli* began, *La Lega* emerged as a country favorite, and Bossi threw caution to the wind. At the culmination of a rally in Venice in 1996, Bossi declared that Padania was seceding from the rest of Italy: "the Italian state has constrained, by deceit, the people of Padania to succumb to systematic exploitation of their economic resources, finances, and products of their everyday work only to squander it all on welfare programs, clientelism, and the mafia of the south," (Bossi 1996, 1). Padania didn't end up seceding, but the political crisis that followed Bossi's declaration led to a watershed moment in Italian politics: for all its xenophobic rhetoric, *La Lega* was giving voice to a real anger that regular Italians had.

According to a poll in 2010 (fourteen years after Bossi's declaration of secession), 35% of Italians favored secession (61% of Northern Italians did), and 58% of Italians favored federalism.^x *La Lega* adapted to this change. Instead of pushing for secession, Bossi began pushing more strongly for federalist reforms, getting the Bassani laws passed as a result. But as *La Lega* saw less and less of the national vote in the early

21st century, it ultimately became time to pivot ideologically to stay afloat. Shifts in radical party ideology typically occur in response to a period of party entrenchment. As *La Lega* politicians got more experience governing in parliament, they had to make concessions to establishment parties – like Silvio Berlusconi's *Fratelli d'Italia* – in order to remain respected as serious parliamentary players. These concessions may have helped *La Lega* govern, but they directly contradicted the populist rhetoric the party was feeding its voters: that the elites in Rome were untrustworthy and out of touch with the needs of "real" Italians. This phenomenon is called *inclusion-moderation*, and it stipulates that once elected, right-wing populist parties temper their radicalism since, "cooperation with [mainstream] parties is their most likely ticket into" a coalition (Akkerman et al. 2016, 4). The paradox radical-right wing parties generally face is that their electoral appeal is directly proportional to their anti-establishment bent, but the more anti-establishment parties are, the less effectively they can enter government and broker with other political factions to deliver on their promises. This problem isn't unique to *La Lega*, either. Parties like France's *Front National*, Germany's *Alternative für Deutschland*, and the Netherlands' *Party for Freedom*, are all faced with competing incentives: To radicalize, and thus maximize votes, or to compromise, and thus maximize policy influence.

Nevertheless, once *La Lega* signaled that it was open to compromise with mainstream parties, its secession narrative went out of vogue. And so, when Salvini took over as chairman of the party in 2013, he formally abandoned all appeals to the mythical Padania, and gave up secession, too. Instead, he substituted federalism for anti-immigrant rhetoric, and turned *La Lega*'s appeal from localism into nationalism. *La Lega* had always asserted that the unique Padanian ethnicity merited

"For all its xenophobic rhetoric, La Lega was giving voice to a real anger that regular Italians had."

separation from the South of Italy. But with increased globalization, and refugee influxes, *La Lega* had to change its in-group. Under Salvini, *La Lega* asserted that the Italian Nation State, and “Italian-ness” had to be protected from foreigners. The strategy paid off because in the 2019 European Parliament election, *La Lega* won 34% of the national vote – a landslide.^{xi} The upshot is that *La Lega* went where the votes were. When it was politically expedient to be secessionist, they were, and when they had to embrace the protection of the Italian Nation State in order to appeal to more people, they did so as well. In such a sense, *La Lega* is a vote maximizing party that is ideologically flexible if there is enough electoral clout at stake.

IDEOLOGY

The protest thesis in Roger Eatwell’s *Ten Theories of the Extreme Right*, explains parties that are a “negative attack on the political establishment,” “lack any serious ideology,” and are, “vehicles for expressing discontent with the mainstream parties,” (Eatwell 2003, 48). Although *La Lega* certainly began with significant protest rhetoric, it also offered concrete policy prescriptions and reforms which move it beyond an exclusively protest category. While Eatwell’s protest thesis defines parties as non-ideological, Bossi describes *La Lega* as “post-ideological,” that is, not confined by traditional partisan doctrines.^{xiii} But even as the party has evolved, *La Lega* has always been anti-statist. This anti-statism explains both why *La Lega* rose to the political scene so strongly in the early ’90s, and how *La Lega* has been able to sustain itself in more recent years.

The *Tangentopoli* scandal in 1992 ideologically validated *La Lega*.^{xiii} As historian Paul Ginsborg notes, “by 1985, the Italian public debt reached 84.6% of the country’s GDP... historic inefficiency and waste in the public sector had joined with increased spending on welfare... to produce a spiraling deficit,” (Ginsborg 2003, 409). Italian voters, particularly in the Northern industrial powerhouse region of

Lombardy, were deeply discontented with Rome’s fiscal management and wanted to clean house. That discontent at governmental corruption, as well as a healthy prejudice against Italy’s *Mezzogiorno* region, provided fertile ground for *La Lega*’s populist ideology to take root. *La Lega* had risen to the scene fashioning itself as “the scourge of the degenerative practices of the political élite,” (Bull & Gilbert 2001, 18). And now, with the indictment of so many politicians, *La Lega*’s charges of rampant clientelism and irresponsible spending were brought to bear. *La Lega* seized on its electoral surge of 1996 to join a coalition government with Silvio Berlusconi, and push unrelentingly for federalism. Bossi’s party wanted what Miglio described as the “authentic,” “small,” states that had more fiscal autonomy and would be able to make their own regional laws. But this ideological commitment to federalism was really a smoke screen over the deeper distaste with the fact that the North ended up footing the bill for the South’s welfare assistance – a distaste much more in line with Eatwell’s economic interest thesis.^{xiv} Eugenio Scalfari, the founder of the Italian newspaper, *La Repubblica*, described just this when he said that the ““desire for autonomy”” comes from this sentiment: ““we’re rich because of our merits, hence we want to govern ourselves alone,”” (Villone 2019, 10). Thus, *La Lega*’s ideology, if nominally committed to federalism, was really coded with a deep ethno-regionalism that fueled resentment against the Central Italian State. That resentment is best summed up by *La Lega*’s nickname for Rome: Roma Ladrona (Rome, the monstrous thief).

The protest element was “clearly important in the initial rise of *La Lega*, [but it] does not explain the party’s continued success,” (Zasove 2011, 41). Although ethno-regionalist by design, *La Lega* sustained itself by a populist anti-statism that capitalized on a “hostility to the welfare state and to a multicultural society,” (Bull & Gilbert 2001, 47). The difference now, as before, is one of scale. *La Lega* was against the Italian Nation State when it was predominantly a protest party, but in

the 21st century, *La Lega* has expanded its notion of “the State” to include supranational organizations like the European Union. Indeed, since the Dublin Agreement – which said, among other things, that refugees had to be kept at their ports of entry – Brussels has been the perfect scapegoat for *La Lega*. *La Lega* has strategically weaponized the “insecurity,” and “displacement,” of Italians and turned the massive influx of refugees into a narrative of EU-sanctioned invasion.^{xv}

In both cases, *La Lega* is characterized by an anti-statism resulting from economic anger at subsidizing the South, and anger at the European Union for saddling Italy with hundreds of thousands of refugees. In such a sense, *La Lega* falls between Eatwell's protest and economic interest theories. To this model, I argue that the labels “ethno-regionalist” and “populist” should be added because of the party's hatred of the South, and because of its anti-immigrant xenophobia.

GLOBALIZATION

I have argued that *La Lega* is essentially vote maximizing. It adapts its ideology if it is politically expedient to do so, and it keeps its ideology if it is not. But the forces of globalization are placing enormous pressure on *La Lega*'s ideologically adaptive strategy. Here, I argue that *La Lega* dodges the problem of economic globalization, opting instead, to unite its voting base along a class-cutting cleavage: the immigrant threat.

The anxiety of an increasingly globalized world affects the many cross sections of *La Lega*'s voting base differently. Broadly speaking, *La Lega*'s supporters are either petit bourgeoisie – small business owners in northern Alpine cities – or corporate industrialists – business tycoons and leaders of international firms. These two classes have distinct responses to globalization: the small business owners fear that international corporations will price gauge, driving them out of business, while the corporate tycoons welcome the challenge of

globalization, and want to compete on the international scene. Because of these different reactions to globalization, both classes have distinct views of the role of the State. The small business owner, “demands more fiscal and political autonomy,” while larger corporate leaders are, “looking for a more central, statist approach to contending with other European powers. One is parochial, the other is globalized,” (Bull & Gilbert 2001, 149). In the midst of this crossfire, *La Lega* has to carry out a delicate balancing act if it wants to hold on to as many of its supporters as possible. The central dilemma of *La Lega*'s position in the globalized world is that, for the first time, it cannot pivot exclusively to either the global defense or to the regional defense. The paradox can best be summed up by: “Today [*La Lega*] seems reduced to defending the local against both the national and the global,” (Bull & Gilbert 2001, 148).

Instead of addressing the issue head on, *La Lega* has turned to the immigrant threat to unite both the small business owner and the corporate business man. By closing the Italian ports to African migrant ships last summer, for example, Salvini redirected the economic anxieties that both business classes feel onto the foreign “other.” This out-group scapegoating is a particularly effective strategy from the radical right playbook, and allows *La Lega* to avoid addressing the logical inconsistencies inherent in its localist ideology.

CONCLUSION

By examining the history of *La Lega*, I argue that the party was motivated by a mix of discontent with the political establishment of Rome, and by the economic frustration of having to fund a welfare state for the South of Italy. Those frustrations and discontents have morphed over the years, and the party's platform has followed suit. Indeed, the party of Bossi advocated for secession of the mythical Padania from the rest of Italy, and now the party of Salvini has floated the idea of “Italexit,” from the EU. The upshot is that for all of *La Lega*'s

political adaptations, there has been a persistent undercurrent of anti-statism, ethno-regionalism, and neoliberal economics.

Furthermore, globalization has placed tremendous pressure on *La Lega* in terms of placating a deeply divided electoral base. *La Lega* established itself as a formidable ideological opponent on the Italian political scene in the '80s, and has since lost the moral high ground. Primarily concerned with maximizing votes, *La Lega* has turned to anti-EU sentiment and anti-immigrant rhetoric to unite its voting base.

ENDNOTES

- ⁱ Villone, Massimo. 2019. *Italia, Divisa e Diseguale*. Napoli, Editoriale Scientifica.
- ⁱⁱ Bull, Anna Cento, and Gilbert, Mark. 2001. *The Lega Nord and the Northern Question in Italian Politics*. Hampshire, Palgrave.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Zaslove, Andrej. 2011. *The Reinvention of the European Radical Right*. Quebec, McGill-Queen's University Press.
- ^{iv} Eatwell, Roger. 2003. *Ten Theories of the Extreme Right*. In P. Merkl, & L. Weinberg (Eds.), *Right-Wing Extremism in the Twenty-first Century* (pp. 45-70). London, U. K.: Frank Cass.
- ^v Ginsborg, Paul. 2003. *A History of Contemporary Italy*. New York, St. Martin's Griffin.
- ^{vi} Bull & Gilbert 2001, pg. 9.
- ^{vii} *Ibid.*, pg. 10.
- ^{viii} Villone 2019, pg. 10.
- ^{ix} "Speroni Infiamma il Senato 'Brusca È Siciliano'. 'E Tu Razzista.'" *La Repubblica*, May 24, 1996. <https://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/1996/05/24/speroni-infiamma-il-senato-brusca.html>
- ^x "Gli Italiani non Credono Nella Padania. Ma al Nord Prevale il Sì alla Secessione." *Affaritaliani*, June 28, 2010. https://www.affaritaliani.it/politica/padania_sondaggio_swg_secessione250610.html?refresh_ce
- ^{xi} "National Results Italy: 2019 Election Results: 2019 European Election Results: European Parliament." 2019 European election results. The European Union, July 4, 2019. <https://europarl.europa.eu/election-results-2019/en/national-results/italy/2019-2024/>.
- ^{xii} Zaslove 2011, pg. 84.
- ^{xiii} *Ibid.*, pg. 10.
- ^{xiv} Eatwell 2003, pg. 53.
- ^{xv} Bull & Gilbert 2001, 47.