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Cultural and political transformation in local
party organisations: a qualitative study inside
Lega Salvini Premier

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1. The new League: a study of culture and change in political organisations.

What is this thesis about?

This thesis is an attempt to study the link between culture and political practices in processes of organisational change, taking the transformation of the Lega Nord in Lega Salvini Premier as a case study. I will consider the period between 2012 to 2023, relying on secondary data for the first period and interviews and fieldwork from 2021 to 2023. Dynamics of change are frequent in political organisations, and party change has long been an object of scholarly attention, especially in the field of party politics (Michels 1966; Janda 1990; Harmel and Janda 1994; Katz and Mair 1995; Harmel 2002; Gauja 2016). Nevertheless, attention to cultural structures and the link between culture and political practices is not typical in studies of parties or party change, which are primarily concerned with changes in formal rules that organise parties. For reasons linked to the development of the discipline, in political science –the discipline that primarily engaged with the study of parties— the focus has been on individualistic and rational choice modes of analysis (see Mudge and Chen 2014). With notable exceptions, the field has been often times scarcely interested in cultural and symbolic aspects: the topic of culture, when it emerges, is usually treated separately from organisational dynamics, as culture is considered only at the micro level of individual experiences of politics or at the macro level of general representations and ideology,

but rarely enters the meso level of group interaction. The attention is primarily devoted to formal aspects of change at the expense of patterns of action and actors' understanding of organisational processes and processes of meaning-making. On the other side, sociology –the discipline that, together with anthropology, has been more devoted to studying culture in action— largely devolved the study of parties to political scientists (De Leon 2014; De Leon, Desai, and Tuğal 2009). Before the 1960s, sociologists were consistently interested in studying political parties and their relationship with society and the state. During the 1970s and 1980s, social movements gained more attention as a research subject, while political parties were viewed as less relevant. In the 1990s, a new wave of sociological studies of parties emerged, partly building on classics, with a renewed interest in state-party relations and new questions on representativity. Moreover, a new focus emerged in this period on the cultural, performative, and symbolic aspects of party politics, which is the premise for studying parties as a "full-fledged sociological object"(Mudge and Chen 2014:307). Among the contemporary contributions, together with recent attempts to reconnect the study of party, movements, and the state (Amenta et al. 2010; Goldstone 2003; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001), another tendency is the re-emersion of the Gramscian topic of articulation, which points to the active role of the organisation to "integrate disparate interests and identities into coherent sociopolitical blocs" (De Leon et al. 2009:195) conferring to organisation themselves an active role in creating social blocs, in

opposition to the idea of the party as representative of a pre-existing cleavage (Lipset 1960).¹

This thesis starts from this premise: parties are similar to other forms of political organisations and worthy of being studied with sociological lenses using the tools that cultural sociology, interactionism, and movement studies use to analyse other forms of political action. In this sense, this thesis has three scopes that have been equally relevant during this research. The first is (1) studying the case of the League, as a party of the family of the populist-radical right that moved from regionalism to nationalism and enlarged its territorial presence to non-traditional zones with partial success. This research will describe its trajectory of change, with particular attention to sub-national dynamics, in its rapid growth and decline trajectory. The second one is (2) studying party change as a process, with a sociological eye, adding elements of analysis not frequently considered by party politics scholarship. The third is (3) to contribute to the sociological study of the link between culture and political action beyond the League's specific case, delving into the topic of transformation of patterns of action.

A study of the League

The League is a radical-right party² that changed profoundly during a particularly florid period for radical-right organisations in Europe, the US, and beyond. The party tried to

¹ This will be particularly relevant for chapter 3

² There is a consistent debate over classification and terminology to use for this typology of parties; see Carter (2000) for a discussion of the origins and the contemporary uses of the terms neo-fascism, extreme right, radical right, and populist radical right. English-speaking scholars increasingly use the

combine their traditional regionalist topics with nationalism and with contemporary ideological positions in international far-right areas. They obtained this objective only partially through differentiated processes in different parts of the country.

The Northern League was founded in 1989 as a federation of autonomist regional parties contesting the central government that, in their vision, was favouring the parasitic southern regions at the expense of the productive North. Over the years, this claim has been pursued through various strategies with different degrees of radicalism, ranging from separatism tout-court to fiscal federalism. The league was initially conceived as a union of ethno-regionalist parties, or to use their language, ethno-nationalist, as every region had to be considered an independent nation. Regionalism is proposed as a radical way to oppose the corruption of traditional political parties and state bureaucracy through separation from the central state.

The process of unifying separate leagues was lengthy and riddled with internal divisions, fractures, and expulsions. Initially, these groups lacked stable financial resources and relied heavily on personal connections to recruit members. Their early

terms "extreme" and "radical" right. The former refers to organisations that exhibit anti-systemic tendencies, while the latter applies to groups that operate within the boundaries of liberal democracy and its formal procedures but are against pluralism and the protection of minorities. In many cases radical-right organisations also detain characteristics associated with populism (see Mudde 2007, 2016). The populist radical right shares a core ideology that combines (at least) three features: nativism, authoritarianism, and populism (Mudde 2007). Although some organisations that fall under this definition may also hold secondary elements such as welfare chauvinism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and anti-LGBTQI positions, not all groups share these beliefs. The Northern League and Salvini's Leagues are typically classified as populist radical right or radical right based on this definition. In this dissertation, we will use the term "populist radical right" to refer to the specific typology of the League, and "far-right" as an umbrella term to refer to the field that includes studies of both extreme and radical right organisations. The use of an umbrella term poses several conceptual advantages. Firstly, the right, extreme, or radical organisations are increasingly becoming more tied to each other in light of the general growth in consensus and an increase in collaborations and exchange between the two, thus making the distinction more blurred. Secondly, the use of an umbrella term allows us to avoid definitional barriers that would not allow us to see the commonalities between the two phenomena (Pirro 2023).

strategy involved participating in local elections whenever possible, even though they were aware that their electoral outcomes would be unsatisfactory, in order to gain visibility. Even though they didn't gain much electoral support at first, they gradually managed to increase their name recognition among voters in the northern regions (Biorcio 1997). The Northern League party was founded in 1989, and its first federal congress was held in 1991. Since its early stages, the political party based its demands for economic independence on anti-southern tropes, capturing and alimending diffused racism towards southern migrants that were (and are still) very numerous, as internal migration from south to north is particularly frequent. In their electoral program of 1983, the Lega Lombarda argued that taxes collected in Lombardy should stay within the region, Lombardians should receive priority in social housing allocation, and the state was wasting resources by providing pensions to "falsi invalidi" (fake disabled) in the southern regions. The inefficiency of public services in their discourses was attributed to the growing number of southern workers employed in public services in the north, who were seen as parasitic, combining hatred for Southerners with the idea that public infrastructures were inefficient and corrupted. These elements of the racialisation of Southerners remained in the political culture of the Northern League, which played on this element until at least 2012. If, during the 1980s, the regional leagues that were previously separated had remained small, with the foundation of a unified party, Lega Nord, in the national elections of 1992, the party gained more than 17% of the votes in the northern region. In the 1994 European elections, it gained 12.7% of the votes in Northern Italy (see Table 2).

Their voters came mainly, but not exclusively, from voters of the Democrazia Cristiana and the Partito Socialista Italiano (Corbetta 1993:250), who found a new option to vote

after the so-called *tangentopoli crisis*, a political scandal that involved most of the parties that dominated the political scene from 1945 until then (see Giglioli 2008). The party was able to collect votes, particularly among the small bourgeoisie in the north (Mannheimer 1993:256), who saw public infrastructures as unable to respond to the new economic needs of areas outside the cities that quickly became richer in the '80s but did not have political representation. In the north, the political scenery had remained stable from the after-war to the '80. Three homogeneous zones could be identified clearly: a catholic zone that has been identified as a "white subculture" that involved the north-east of Italy and peripheral provinces in Lombardy where the dominant party was the Democrazia Cristiana; a "red subculture" in Emilia-Romagna, where the communist party was predominant; The "industrial zone," which includes the areas of Milan, Turin, and Genoa, who was characterised by the presence of large industries in the social organisation. Although the majority of voters leaned towards the Democratic Christian party, the Communist Party held significant influence in areas where labour movements were organised. The Northern League started its expansion in the white zones and gradually became involved in the bigger cities' government in the industrial zone (Biorcio 1999:81).

The party has played a significant role in the Second Republic. In 1994, two other political actors emerged in the centre-right in Italy: Forza Italia, Silvio Berlusconi's newly founded party, and Alleanza Nazionale, a post-fascist formation coming from the Movimento Sociale Italiano. These three parties represented a novelty in the political panorama. Italy did not have a strong right-wing representation in parliament until that moment, as it was largely dominated by the Christian Democrats. The Northern League, which initially did not collocate themselves explicitly in the centre-right, started

doing so. While the Northern League was gaining ground in the North, Alleanza Nazionale did the same in the South: both played widespread anti-party sentiment to present themselves as an alternative to traditional parties. However, they were ideologically too distant to become allies. The nationalism of AN and the regionalism of the Lega were not reconcilable. Bossi declared himself openly anti-fascist and was not open to the possibility of a collaboration with a party that derived directly from the MSI and pushed for economic centralism. Due to their ideological differences, the two parties have always maintained a relationship of friendship and rivalry. However, this rivalry was mitigated by the fact that they were not competing directly in the same regions of the country. This allowed Forza Italia to mediate between the two parties and form separate electoral alliances with one party or the other in different parts of Italy when needed. Together, the three parties constituted the right-wing coalition in the last decades, participating in four governments led by Silvio Berlusconi from 1994 to 2011.

From 1995 onwards, the Northern League realised that allying itself with the other centre-right formations represented a risk to the party's growth because they could be crushed by the growth of Forza Italia. Berlusconi and his allies were, therefore, demonised by the League, which called them centralists and fascists and avoided any alliance with them, even at the local level. Some of the slogans of that period were “who votes polo³ votes mafia, that is, welfare culture in the south” or “Milan Fascist never”. Opposition to AN is not a repositioning to the left but is, according to Bossi, the

³ Name of the electoral alliance between Forza Italia and Alleanza Nazionale.

“natural positioning” of a party that wants more independence from the centralist state, the free market and less public intervention in the economy.

During the second period of expansion of the Northern League, an invention of tradition called Padania emerged. Padania, the valley of the Po’ river, is the land where the people of the north will live free from the centralised power of the state, without the burden of the southerners and deciding on their own economic destiny. Initially, Bossi claimed to be "a son of the north." Later, a more complex mythology was created by re-contextualising historical facts, especially of the Risorgimento. This included the invention of a Celtic descent of the peoples of the north, the creation of pagan-sounding rituals, a hymn, and a wide repertoire of new symbols, including the "sole delle alpi" (Sun of the Alps) that is used as the flag of the imagined nation of Padania, the mythical figure of Alberto da Giussano, as well as an emphasis on regional myths, such as the idea of Veneto as an independent nation under the regional flag of the San Marco Lion. During this period, a series of public rituals linked to the concept of Padania were performed for the first time. In addition to the Pontida Rally, which still remains the main event of the year, the "Feast of the Peoples of Padania" was celebrated in Venice, a ritual during which an ampoule of water from the Po River, drawn at the source, is used to baptise the faithful to the cause and is emptied at the mouth of the river. During this period, the party emphasised its messianic characteristics, portraying the party as a mere tool to reach the promised land of Padania, a mythical place where all the industrious people in the northern region would live free from Rome's domination.

During this period, the Northern League party strongly advocated for separatism, which helped them gain popularity in the north of Italy, especially in Veneto, where they

experienced a significant increase in support of almost 10 percentage points in one of the two regional constituencies. Although this extreme stance initially helped the party attract new members and supporters and build new branches, their isolation from both the centre-left and centre-right proved to be a disadvantage during various local elections in which they were excluded from coalitions. As a result, the party eventually shifted back to the right-wing coalition in the 1999 and 2000 elections.

Between 2000 and 2006, the Northern League was part of a coalition with other centre-right parties for the Berlusconi II and Berlusconi III governments. During this time, Umberto Bossi served as the minister for 'institutional reforms and devolution', which was later taken over by Calderoli in 2005 due to Bossi's health problems. The Northern League claimed that the renewed alliance with the centre-right served the strategic purpose of achieving 'devolution', which is the decentralisation of public services from the states to the regions. In this period the discourses against migration, previously mainly directed towards "terrone" ⁴, increasingly moved towards migrants from other countries. The party's leaders increasingly used racist rhetoric against 'extra-communitarians', 'clandestines', and 'immigrants' in their public statements. In 2002, parliament passed the Bossi-Fini law on immigration, which harshened the dispositions against illegal migration. During this period, the League's electoral results were very low, the party was obscured by Berlusconi's positions and lost visibility and credibility among its voters. In March 2004, Umberto Bossi suffered a heart attack and stroke and was in a coma for a long time. The centrality of Bossi, the absolute leader of the

⁴ A derogatory term used in northern dialects to refer to southerners.

movement, is witnessed by the reaction of the militants to this event: collective prayer vigils were organised in the church of Pontida, many party members made public statements of support for Bossi claiming that his illness was due to his personal sacrifice for the party and the Padanian homeland, the newspaper *la Padania* made daily reports on his state of health portraying him as a martyr. This is just one of the examples of the sacralisation of Umberto Bossi that Pedro Zúquete pointed out in his book *Missionary Politics in Contemporary Europe* (Zúquete 2007). This sacralisation posed several problems related to the classic dilemma of the succession of charisma when succession became urgent in 2012. Following a brief period of centre-left government from 2006 to 2008, the Northern League returned to power as part of the centre-right coalition. Strong anti-immigrant rhetoric once again characterised their 2008 election campaign. During this period, the demonisation of southerners has been replaced by the demonisation of migrants, particularly Muslim migrants. They are portrayed as inherently criminal, a threat to employment, and a cultural threat to Catholic traditions and religion. Catholicism has become a symbolic weapon against migrants and Islamophobia. The most extremist members of the leadership, such as Borghezio, even evoke "a new crusade against Muslims" that is a threat to European Judeo-Christian origins.

Although the Northern League has never been the main electoral force in the coalition, they have managed to leverage its influence over time, positioning itself as the minority within the majority in the centre-right, playing on its specificity as a regionalist party and on the charismatic figure of its leader, Umberto Bossi. In addition, a well-structured local presence that grew over the years allowed them to govern many northern municipalities and gain representation in regional councils until they managed to elect

regional presidents in Veneto, Lombardia, and Friuli. This allowed them to claim for themselves the title of true representatives of the North. At a local level, their presence remained confined to the north at least until 2010. We will see this aspect in detail in Chapter 3.

An economic scandal in 2012 closed this period, defining the political death of Bossi, who was already weakened by his prolonged physical illness. The party elected a new secretary, Roberto Maroni, for a brief period and finally elected the current secretary, Matteo Salvini, in 2013. Under Salvini's guidance, the party undertook a gradual “nationalisation” project. He conducted a pressing campaign in southern Italy to enlarge the party’s territorial presence through a parallel party called Noi con Salvini (Us with Salvini), which lacked any symbolic references to the Northern League. The party finally changed its name from Lega Nord to Lega Salvini Premier in 2017. Between 2018 and 2019, the party achieved significant electoral success in both national and European elections.

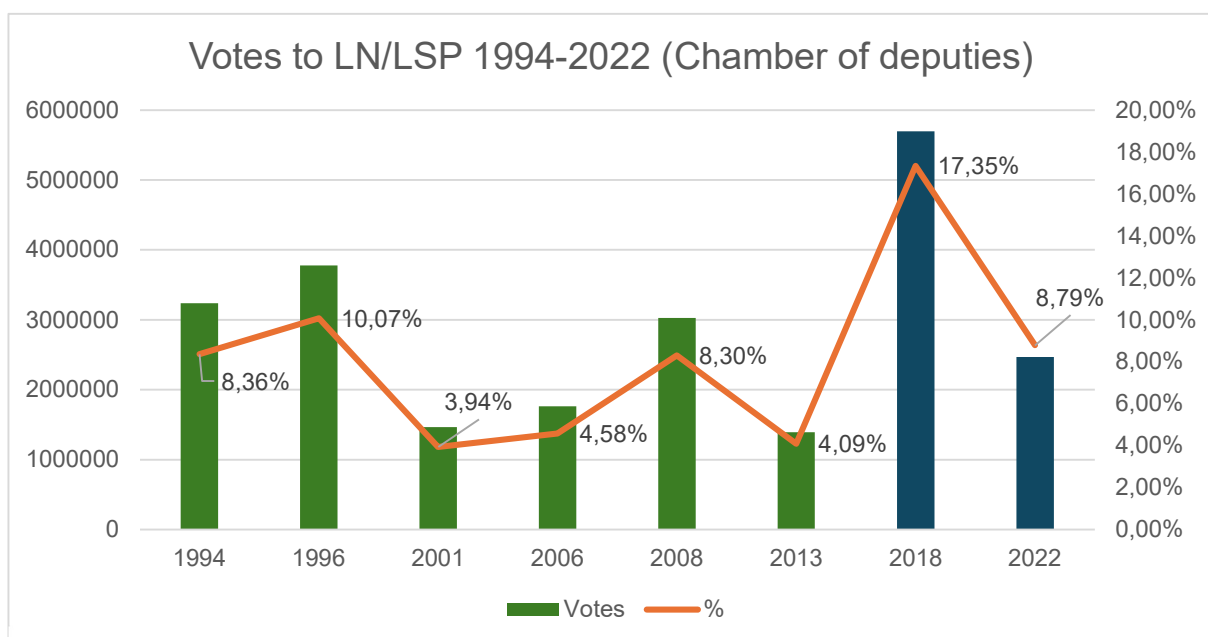


Figure 1 : Votes to LN/LSP 1994-2022 (Chamber of deputies)

*Table 1: Weight of LN/LSP in comparison to other Centre-Right parties
(political election 1994-2022, chamber of deputies, %)*

	1994	1996	2001	2006	2008	2013	2018	2022
<i>Alleanza Nazionale – Fratelli d'Italia</i>	31,4	33,8	22,5	30,4	81,8	7,1	12,2	60,8
<i>Forza Italia - PDL</i>	49,1	44,4	55,0	58,3		78,1	39,2	18,9
<i>Lega Nord- Lega Salvini Premier</i>	19,5	21,8	22,5	11,3	18,2	14,8	48,6	20,5

*Data: national results, Valle d'Aosta and Estero are excluded
Source: Passarelli e Tuorto 2018; 2022 added by the author.*

As we can see in Figure 1, the party had remained in parliament since 1994 with fluctuating results, ranging from 10,1% in 1996 to 3,94% in 2001. In 2018, the party reached its peak in political elections, obtaining 17,35% and becoming the third largest party in Italy. Thirty years after its foundation, the Northern League surpassed Forza Italia, becoming the largest party on the centre-right, with 48.6% of the total votes achieved by the centre-right (Table 1). In the European elections of 2019, they achieved their highest result in history, with 34.3% of the votes at the national level. This sudden surge in popularity is noteworthy, considering their previous results were only 6.2% in European elections, and their votes were primarily located in the north.

Table 2 Percentages of vote for the regional Leagues, the Northern League, and Lega Salvini Premier in the north and Italy in European Elections

	Leghe Regionali*			Lega Nord					Lega Salvini Premier	
	1979	1984	1989	1994	1999	2004	2009	2014	2019	2024
North	0,7	0,8	3,7	12,7	9,0	10,0	19,2	11,0	40,8	11,2
Other	-	0,1	0,1	0,8	0,2	0,4	1,5	1,4	27,5	6,8
Zones										
Italia	0,5	0,5	1,8	6,6	4,5	5,0	10,2	6,2	34,3	9,0

* Sometimes in coalition with other regionalists

As we can see in Table 2, until 2019, the party had remained under 2% in zones other than the north, where in 2019, they managed to reach 27.5%. The party also experienced a significant increase in the North, rising to 40.8% compared to the previous election's 11.0%.

	Voto nel 2018											Giovani Totale	
	Pap	Leu	Pd	+Europa	M5s	FI	Lega	FdI	Altri	Non voto			
Voto nel 2022													
Avs	0,1	0,7	0,4	0,1	0,4	0,1			0,1	0,1		0,2	2,2
Pd	0,1	0,7	7,3	0,2	1,6	0,2	0,1		0,1	0,9		0,4	11,6
+Europa	0,1	0,1	0,2	0,5	0,3			0,1		0,3		0,2	1,7
Impegno civico		0,1								0,1		0,1	0,4
M5s		0,3	0,3		7,2	0,3	0,1		0,1	0,8		0,3	9,4
Azione-Iv			1,7	0,4	0,3	0,3	0,2		0,9	0,4		0,4	4,8
Italexit					0,4	0,1	0,2	0,1	0,2	0,1			1,2
Nm			0,1	0,1	0,1	0,1	0,1		0,1				0,6
FI					0,5	3,9	0,3			0,1		0,1	5,0
Lega			0,1		0,5	0,7	3,4		0,3	0,3		0,1	5,3
FdI	0,1	0,1	0,3		2,9	2,1	5,6	2,5	0,5	1,3		0,5	15,9
Altri	0,3	0,1	0,1	0,1	1,3		0,2	0,1	0,3	0,6			3,0
Non voto	0,1	0,3	2,5	0,3	7,5	2,3	2,1	0,2	1,4	21,2		1,2	39,0
Totale	0,8	2,4	13,1	1,8	23,0	9,9	12,3	3,1	4,0	26,3		3,5	100,0

TAB. 4.2. Matrice complessiva dei flussi elettorali fra elezioni politiche 2018 e 2022 (% su elettori 2022)

Note: Pap = Potere al popolo; Nm = Noi moderati.

Figure 2 matrice flussi elettorali 2018-2022 (source De Sio and Paparo 2023)

Initially, it was unclear whether the expansion to the south would be an electoral strategy (Brunazzo and Gilbert 2017) or an attempt to build a territorial presence. Whatever the initial intention, the investments in building a stable presence in the south have proved only partly successful so far. The party has founded some branches in the southern regions and elected several representatives in local administrations. This can be seen as a success for the party, which before the 2018 elections was almost non-existent in the south. On the other hand, many newly involved militants have not remained long, and some elected officials have already left the party. In the 2022 political elections, the electoral consensus declined. Over 40% of 2018's League voters in 2022 voted for Fratelli d'Italia, while one over six didn't vote at all (De Sio and Paparo 2023:67), denoting a profound crisis of consensus.

Although there is a vast literature on the Northern League⁵, as the League's transformation is recent, there is still a limited body of publications on the new League. In the following lines, I will summarise the main findings of articles from 2013 to 2023, dividing between publications that directly address the topic of change and publications that focus on Salvini's League without a comparison with the past. The first will help us frame the change process, and the second will help us select relevant themes and positions connected to the League in the last years, such as euroskepticism, anti-migration and anti-minorities campaigns and strategies of online communication of the party.

In political science, some scholars wrote about the League's change, often adopting a comparative strategy in which the characteristics of the Northern League are compared to Salvini's League. Davide Vampa, in 2017, underlined as central for the party change that the party was abandoning the idea of the mass party – also because of falling membership and a decrease in public subsidies. Moreover, since the party in the south was created anew, Salvini had the opportunity to develop a structure that was highly dependent on his leadership (Vampa 2017). Zulianello instead underline the persistence of the mass party model, at least in traditional zones (Zulianello 2021)

Marco Brunazzo and Mark Gilbert (2017) instead identify euroskepticism as the main turning point in the new League. In fact, according to the authors, the enlargement to southern regions was a change in communicative strategy and not a turn in political

⁵ see Albertazzi 2002, 2013; Albertazzi and McDonnell 2010, 2015; Biorcio 1997, 1997; Cento Bull 2010; Cento Bull and Gilbert 2001; Diamanti 1993, 1996, 2010; McDonnell 2006

goals tout-court⁶, and we cannot talk about a populist turn since both Bossi's League and Salvini's League can be considered populist. On the same line, Albertazzi, Giovannini, and Seddone (2018) underlined that the demonisation of the EU has substituted the demonisation of the centralistic government of Rome with a shift of referent. They talk about "an empty form of nativist nationalism" to refer to the new line of the party. Combining content analysis of online communication with some interviews with regional leaders, they also addressed the topic of conflicts between the levels of the organisation, hypothesising "latent fractures" between the leader and the regional structures of the party –fractures that become not at all latent during the period of my research.

Passarelli and Tuorto, in one of the most extended works on Salvini's League titled *La Lega di Salvini, l'estrema destra al governo* (2018), focused extensively on the territorial distribution of the consensus for the party, underlining that, notwithstanding the change in discourses, the consensus of the party is still mainly located in the north and the electoral growth happened mostly in former red-zones and only marginally in the south. Another publication by the same authors in 2022 underlines that the party moved its regionalist claims towards a more clearly far-right, nationalistic and anti-EU position, even building a territorial presence in the south, but only becoming "a nationalist party, without ever quite becoming a national party." (Passarelli and Tuorto 2022:4). Mazzoleni e Ruzza (2018) noticed that the new league never completely abandoned regionalism. The new line combines nationalism and regionalism since the

⁶ When the article was written, the League still had a limited presence in the South, Lega Nord and Noi con Salvini still were two separate organisations.

two, even if apparently incompatible, are co-present in the League positioning. This is possible because the party perceives EU policies as more threatening than the national state to regional interests. On the same line, Criscitiello and De Rosa (2022) underline that regionalism and localism are still very much present in the League's communication, even after the switch to nationalism.

Only a small group of scholars considered the local dimension of this transformation: Mancosu and Ladini (2020) focus on the neo-fascist legacy of the consensus for Salvini's league in central and southern regions, showing that the individual propensities to vote for the Lega in 2019 are associated with consensus for MSI in 1976 in those same zones. An article by the same authors from 2020 focuses on Tuscany, Umbria, and Marche at the municipality level to show similar results. This confirms the idea of an extreme-right minority found in Lega, a new representative only after the change in political discourse under Salvini's guide. Brancaccio, Mete, Scaglione and Tuorto (Brancaccio et al. 2021) focus on the local presence of the party in the south and differences in consensus and organisation between southern regions; Matteo Zulianello (2021) wrote about the change in the organisational model of the new League through interviews with local members in different areas. In this article, he focuses on the continuity between the digital and physical activism of the League and on the strategies adopted to export the mass-party structure in non-traditional regions. We can also include as an example of studies on the local League, the research on Emilia-Romagna by Passarelli and Tuorto (2012) in this category. The presence of the League in some areas of Emilia can be seen as a first attempt of the party to include new territories, even though the party was still in his regionalist period.

Among the scholars who did not engage directly with the process of transformation, we can find Silvia Modena (2018), who insists on Salvini's construction of a discursive opposition between "la gente" (the people) and "i clandestini" (the illegal migrants) in the construction of a new identity for the nationalised Lega. This topic of othering and construction of an enemy has been studied by several scholars who focused on online anti-migrant campaigns (Cervi, Tejedor, and Alencar Dornelles 2020; Combei et al. 2020; Lucchesi 2021; Padovani 2018; Sensales, Di Cicco, and Baldner 2021), islamophobia (Cervi 2020), campaigns against the NGOs involved in sea-rescuing of migrants (Berti 2021) and discourses and policies against the Roma people (Gargiulo 2018), the LGBTQ+ community (Donà 2020, 2021). Even religious discourses play a role in these processes of othering. We can find an analysis of the instrumental uses of religious symbols in Salvini's communication in an article by Marchetti, Righetti, Pagiotti and Stanziano (Marchetti et al., 2022).

Online communication is one of the most frequent topics in recent literature about the League: the use of emotional communication on social media (Bobba 2019; Rowinski 2021), visual communication (Mazzoni and Mincigrucci 2022), in different platforms (Albertazzi and Bonansinga 2023) and adopting various techniques of communication such as "Character Assassination" (Berti and Loner 2023). Some authors noticed the leader's use of an informal and ordinary profile online (Barile and Vagni 2019) and in gossip magazines (Mazzoni and Mincigrucci 2021) and the strategic use of "good morning selfies" to build a perception of intimacy with his public (Starita and Trillò 2022). Some scholars focused on the role of food and the construction of this popular image through the association with culinary tradition and "Italianness" (Garcia Santamaria 2020; Stagi, Benasso, and Guzzetti 2022) and gastropopulism (Demuru

2021). This topic is also examined in combination with discourses around the connection between migrations, agriculture, and food production (Iocco, Cascio, and Perrotta 2020).

Additionally, some studies focused on the intersection between the body, gender, and the representation of the leader: after the publication of a photographic book entitled *// corpo del Capitano* (Santese and Valli 2020), some scholars discussed the topic of political leadership and the body (Brizzi, Manzoli, and Solaroli 2021); Others addressed the issue of construction of masculinity in Salvini's communication (Di Silvestro and Venuti 2021; Ferrante 2021) and the strategic use of look, uniforms, and slogan t-shirt in his public appearances (Proni 2021).

Some researchers conducted ethnographic works inside the Northern League in the past, such as Elisa Bellè (2015; 2014) - on gender and activism in two different branches of the party-, Martina Avanza(2007) – on the construction of Padanian national identity-, Lynda Dematteo (2010) – on the figure of “idiot”, Bossi's leadership and the use of a jokes tones as a political strategy and Marzano (1998) –on political participation in four sections of the Northern League in Piedmont. However, the authors conducted their fieldwork before the adoption of a nationalist frame occurred, so they did not specifically address the topic of change.

The case of the League is particularly suitable for studying intra-party change for several reasons. The League undertook a profound transformation process during a relatively brief period from 2013 onwards. This makes the change recognisable compared to cases where a change occurred over a longer timespan with more graduality. An entrance of new members accompanied this change, as the party initially

gained momentum very quickly, becoming attractive for neophytes and party switchers and adding a layer of complexity to the militainment of symbolic and material control over the party from previous local and national leadership. Moreover, we will see that the ideological change, even if almost always accepted by the militants, was almost exclusively top-down, accentuating the feeling of distance between different levels of the party that competed during this change process. This emphasised the destructiveness of this change. Last, the regional variability of the presence of the party makes it a very interesting case to observe how the national political culture of the party interplayed with different local cultures because the diversity of situations and ideological positions among cases is particularly deep. All these elements make this case particularly suitable for observing different micro-dynamics at the sub-national level, as some elements that can be interesting to observe in other organisations are extremised by the characteristics of the party and its history.

Local, Internal, and Non-Exceptional

In the conviction that the local level is as important as the national and the transnational one when discussing political action, this study focuses on local levels. The topic is rarely considered in studies of party change as most party literature suffers from *methodological nationalism* (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). This is particularly true for populist and radical-right parties. According to Castelli Gattinara (2020:320), most of the literature on the far right “observes far-right politics at the national level, based on the assumption that mobilisation is largely shaped by the national political context” and does not engage with the local levels.

Some authors, such as Bolin, Lidén, and Nyhlén (2014), Castelli Gattinara (2016), and Paxton(2019, 2022), looked at patterns of action of the parties in local administrations – particularly in local policy-making on migration. Chou Moffit and Busbridge (2022) point to a recent ‘local turn’ in populism studies, a signal of a new interest in subnational dynamics in this field. Local government has recently become an object of study for normalisation and mainstreaming, as “subnational arenas are often assumed to play a role in the mainstreaming process of radical parties” (Paxton and Peace 2021:2). On one hand, the sphere of administration is closely tied with everyday pragmatic necessities, on the other it remains unnoticed as it is less publicly scrutinised and can, for this reason, hide particularly extreme positions and acts. Moreover, the prevalence of a pragmatic dimension in local politics does not necessarily mean a de-ideologization or de-radicalisation. Contrarily, it might imply a “distinct articulation of parties’ ideological frameworks compared to national politics.” (Bellè and Fauray 2024). In line with this consideration of distinct articulations of ideology in different locales, this study tries to apply the same logic to internal issues. Scholars studying the Golden Dawn (Dinas et al. 2016; Ellinas and Lamprianou 2017) considered the local dynamics of organisational development of the Greek party Golden Dawn, while Loxbo and Bolin (2016) considered the role of sub-national candidates in the electoral growth of Sweden Democrats. This study will primarily focus on mechanisms of change at the local level, adopting an internalist approach.

Extremism and the far-right have been traditionally studied using internet data, diaries, and secondary sources (Harris, Simi, and Ligon 2016). This has, in part to be attributed to the gradual integration of the subfield of far-right studies in the broader political science literature, which favours comparative studies based on pre-existing databases

(Castelli Gattinara 2020:323), and in part to the difficulties in accessing the field that I will discuss in deep in the following chapter. Since many far-right parties and movements are now becoming more visible and mainstream, they are also becoming more open to the intrusion of researchers. This offers an opportunity for internalist research (Goodwin 2006), which is suitable for studying the internal dynamics of organisations. Adopting an internalist perspective allows for observing political interaction and meso dynamics, giving space to small group interaction in political mobilisation, in far-right studies as in studies of political action in general (e.g. Blee 2012; Fine 2021; Lichterman 2021).

According to Veugelers (2020), studying local politics could serve multiple purposes, including Isolating specificities that favoured local success, activity, and failure; showing different paths to a shared outcome and verifying the direction of correlation among variables; stimulating the development of new theoretical questions; specification of causal mechanisms (e.g. Gross 2009, 2018) or historical narratives (Sewell 1996) that could help us in entering black boxes of causality. Moreover, an *emic*⁷ (Avanza 2018) approach allows us to examine intra-party divisions at various levels, as we often see conservative movements and organisations as homogeneous and undivided.

According to Martina Avanza, using an emic approach is also a way to avoid the exceptional treatment of “ugly movements”: they are movements like any other (ibid.,

⁷ The term usually refers to the contraposition between categories and meanings attributed by actors themselves (emic) and meanings attributed by scholars (etic) (Harris 1976; Pike 1967). Martina Avanza uses the term emic to intend an approach focused on internal differences in groups rather than differences between movements and their countermovement.

p.120). Far-right studies contribute to the general literature on movements or, for this thesis, to the general literature on party organisations and do not constitute an exception. The choice of pursuing ethnographic research in a right-wing party can offer a non-canonical case –see Monika Krause (2021) on canonical research objects— on a series of themes around transformation, internal dynamics, and political interaction that are frequently studied only for progressive movements (see Blee 2019 on the link between field relations and theorising). As said, the literature on the far-right is increasingly integrating with the literature on other parties as these parties gain more overt public support. It is the same for studies of white Supremacism and social movement research, which are increasingly borrowing from one another (Blee 2017). This is especially relevant when the same organisations engage in institutional politics and street protests as “movement parties” (Kitschelt 2006; Pirro and Gattinara 2018) or largely interact. This separation among fields between party studies and movement studies interferes with the advancement of knowledge, and the problem, as Gattinara and Pirro (Gattinara and Pirro 2019:8) would put it, become not only a matter of “pluralist and interdisciplinary persuasion” but a stringent problem of empirical analysis.

For this dissertation, I will combine literature from different traditions, believing that a consistent part of what happens inside organisations is similar regardless of their specific forms. Thus, it is interesting to try to engage in the analysis with different tools from different traditions to explain different dynamics at play. Studies of party membership, social movements, civic action, and cultural sociology will be combined to solve different puzzles in each chapter of this thesis.

A study of party change

The field of party politics considered party change from different angles, including changes in organisational structure, policy direction, and political strategy (Bale 2012; Harmel, Heo, et al. 1995; Harmel and Janda 1994; Harmel, Janda, and Tan 1995). According to Anika Gauja (2016:6), three main methodological approaches dominate the existing literature: those who search for a generalisable theory, sometimes through variable-based research, focusing on conditions that can inhibit or favour change (i.e. Appleton and Ward 1997; Harmel et al. 1995; Harmel and Janda 1994; Krouwel 2012; Panebianco 1988); case studies or comparisons between a few cases through historical analysis and thick description (i.e. Bale 2012; Müller 1997; Quinn 2004; Russell 2005); and works on distinct functions or aspects of the organisation that have changed over time (i.e. Barnea and Rahat 2007; Cross and Blais 2012; Gauja 2013; Hazan and Rahat 2010).

According to Harmel (2002), we can distinguish between three concurring theories of explaining party change: (1) Life cycle theories in which party change is considered in terms of phases of evolution. In Michels's law of oligarchy (Michels 1966), for example, parties generally tend to become oligarchic over time. (2) Theories of systemic tendencies, such as the study of Katz and Mair (1995) on cartel parties, where the main idea is that external trends create the circumstances for change, favouring the emergence of new organisational forms. Parties gradually adapt to survive in the new external conditions. (3) A third strain is what Harmel (2002) calls theories of discontinuous change, in which scholars consider that change is gradual and does not necessarily need to be abrupt. Parties can also change only in one or more of their

characteristics and gradually change. They may change programs (e.g. Abou-Chadi 2016), leadership (e.g. Pedersen and Schumacher 2015) or organisational features (e.g. Cross and Katz 2013; Ignazi 2020). This third group of studies is particularly interested in the idea that parties do not “evolve” in a predetermined fashion but can change and develop in different directions instead. The agency of leaders and members is also considered relevant, and change is attributed to a combination of internal and external factors (Harmel and Janda 1994). Harmel and Janda proposed “an integrated theory of party goals and party change” (ibid.) where change is the result of the interplay of internal and external factors. They point to five key factors of party reforms: electoral defeats, change of leader and governmental status, membership decline, and political scandals and crises. These factors constitute moments of crisis that enhance the possibility for organisational reforms. Jasmien Luypaert and Thomas Legein suggest that although those factors may not be individually relevant for change, as their causality is not confirmed consistently in the literature –as an example, electoral defeat is sometimes seen as a key factor (e.g. Cross and Blais 2012; Janda 1990), sometimes as partially relevant (e.g. Harmel and Janda 1994; Paczeński, Bachryj-Krzywaźnia, and Kaczorowska 2020) and sometimes even victories is considered equally important (e.g. Wauters 2014)— moving from the idea of a single cause to the idea of a combination of causes of reform can be beneficial, and thus searched for path dependency. This, again, points to the idea that change, rather than being an “evolution”, as early scholars thought with a deterministic lens, is rather a process that may differ from one case to another and may involve more than one cause at different levels. Finally, Gauja (2016) distinguishes between party reform, a publicly announced change, and party change, an incremental process. Her contribution points

TABLE 2.1 *A multi-level framework for analysing party reform*

	Party level	Party system	Political system
Scope and objects of analysis	Interactions and relationship between individuals and groups within a particular party	Interactions (largely premised on the basis of competition) between unitary parties in a party system	Norms, conventions, and existing patterns of democratic practice. These norms and practices are situated within the general cultural, social, and political environment
Potential drivers for reform	Enacting changes to the balance of power within a party, through: • leadership change • a party merger or split • weakening/shifting factional influence • increasing participation	Enhancing electoral competitiveness, through: • remedying failure or damage to reputation • proactively creating advantage • contagion effects	Changes to the norms and conventions of 'good' democratic practice, through: • changes to public expectations • legitimacy concerns • democratization • personalization • 'Americanization'

Source: Adapted from Barnea and Rahat (2007: 378) and Gauja (2012).

Figure 3 source Gauja 2016

specifically at the theme of meaning construction, marking a turn towards constructionist approaches: it's not the social conditions per se, but the party's perception of external conditions that shape reform agendas. The author examines comparatively 6 cases, 3 in Australia and 3 in the UK, looking at reform initiatives such as the introduction of primaries, the changing meaning of party membership, and the implementation of the digital tools of participation for policy development. According to her multilevel framework to analyse party change, we should look at the party level, at the party system level, and at the political system level. Change is possible because of a combination of interlinked dynamics occurring at the three levels at the same time. The author suggests that change can start at any of the levels, but it is more likely to be persistent and to have greater resonance if the three levels simultaneously provide an opportunity for change (Gauja 2016:12). At the party level of this model, the object of analysis is the "interactions and relationships between individuals and groups within

a particular party”; at the party system level the “interactions between unitary parties in a party system”; and at the political system level the “norms, conventions and existing patterns of democratic practice [...] situated in the general cultural, social and political environment” (Gauja 2016:12). Even if the model substantially moves from previous accounts of party change in considering the meaning attributed by members to the process, this conceptualisation does not overcome a general problem of party literature, that of considering culture as a set of values and norms detached from the ways in which members act and interpret the process in their daily activities. In fact, the author does not problematise how they enter into the interaction between members of the party or what happens to culture during the process of change, as the cultural questions remain at the most abstract level—that of the political system—the most distant from concrete actors and action.

Moreover, the author studies change through an analysis of public speeches and ethnographic observation during conferences. According to Gauja, conferences serve as the primary formal decision-making bodies of many political parties and are, therefore, the natural spaces for internal reform debates. This makes them a valuable source for studying official changes. In sociology, starting from the 1980s and 1990s, many authors have taken up the Durkheimian problem of ritual as an identity moment of a community, among them Geertz (Geertz 1980) on political rituals as texts that reveal the symbolic meanings of a particular culture. Political ritual and public ceremonies and their importance in creating a political identity are at the centre of numerous studies (Alexander 2004; Berezin 1997, 1998; Cossu 2004; Kertzer 1974, 1992, 1996; Navarini 1998, 1999). However, empirical research has rarely dealt with the symbolic dimension in relation to political crises (Cossu 2004). In addition to Cossu,

among the authors who have done so we can mention Kertzer (1996), in his book on the Bolognina turn and the transformation of the PCI into the PDS, Alexander (1988) on the Watergate scandal, Wagner-Pacifici (1986) on the kidnapping of Moro as a social drama. In party research, these events are more likely to be treated as windows from which a researcher can see internal discussions that are particularly visible from the outside during congress periods. For this reason, congresses are considered the privileged source to study factions. Often the emotional and symbolic aspects, very relevant for sociologists, are not considered in the picture. However, if we consider only conferences, we miss what happens once the vote has happened and once the changes decided in conferences become operative. Public events offer researchers a window to peek inside and see internal discussions that are more visible to the outside during congress periods, but do not allow for the observation of how the discussions enter in political action in everyday life of the organisations. An announcement of change can be met with scepticism, and a written decision can also not be applied by members. While party conferences are indeed interesting and symbolically charged moments that might mark turning points in the life of organisations, they remain, above all, public events, performances of internal discussion and belonging. As such, they are official and crafted for audiences, internal or external. Everyday lives of organisations remain private and informal and, for this reason, invisible to researchers. Only when internal documents become public, is it possible to study backstage activities on documents with historical methods. According to Blee (2012), activism is often studied during peak periods and public manifestations, such as demonstrations, events, and press conferences. However, most of the life of organisations consists of daily interactions within small groups. In this sense, close observation of the everyday

life of groups allows us to grasp the cultural dynamics through which actors give meaning to their environment, themselves, and political activities and interpret certain events as fundamental and others as secondary. Moreover, as already mentioned in the previous section, party research is usually concerned with parties at the national level. For the same reason, internal drivers of party change are only studied at the national level, portraying the organisation as uniform and undivided in its local branches. While factions may sometimes be considered, the vertical divisions of different levels of the party organisation are not frequently examined. This makes again internalist approaches the most suitable for studying change while it is still happening.

In this research I tried to avoid comparative strategies, comparing the party before and after the change, trying to see *how* changes developed over time in local sections. What happens *inside* a party when a reform is announced? How do local groups change to meet the new organisational requirements? Are relations among levels relevant during processes of change? Do sections experience change similarly, do they change at the same pace? What are the motives that emerge in conflicts? We will see in the next chapters that treating the organisation as a full sociological object, and focusing on internal interaction and culture, can help us see all the mechanism of change and how it developed in different locales over time.

A sociological study on change

The third aim of this dissertation is to contribute to the sociological study of the link between culture and political action during change processes beyond the League's

specific case. In this sense, the party is a case for the larger problem of how symbols and political practices relate when there is a drastic change in an organisation.

As already mentioned, Blee (*ibid.*) points out that activism is often studied during peak periods and public manifestations, such as demonstrations, events, and press conferences. However, most of an organisation's life consists of daily interactions within small groups. Eliasoph and Lo (2017), on the same line, suggest that cultural sociology could be useful to address not only moments of crisis, ceremonies, and peak performances but also the ways in which actors coordinate their everyday activities. Gary Alan Fine (2010), in his work "The Sociology of the Local: Action and its Publics," discusses how sociological theory is divided when it comes to the question of whether social action is shaped by structures, or whether it emerges from the specific situations in which it occurs. Meaning is negotiated in concrete local situations, but it is never negotiated from scratch, it is negotiated on the basis of shared understandings (Strauss 1978). In line with Giddens's (1984) structuration theory, structure emerges from repeated action over time. According to the author, "the interactionist tradition in sociology has downplayed the importance of history and collective understandings in favour of emphasising that order can be constructed anew" (Fine 2010). The issue of the tension between the meaning that arises from specific contexts and the continuity of collective memory and understanding is a central topic of discussion in various theoretical traditions. These traditions are based on the idea that social action is both habitual and creative, leading to a series of conceptual difficulties when it comes to understanding how habitual action changes.

As opposed to most literature on party politics, sociological models to understand political action usually share the presupposition that actors are not rationally motivated by the maximisation of means to ends. In constructivist approaches to party politics, even when culture is considered as a variable –as in modern takes on rational-action theories—actors still act rationally, considering their values or beliefs as one of the elements of their calculation. Indeed, many contemporary social theorists believe that action is more likely to be motivated by habits (Camic 1986). The logical coherence of beliefs is the exception rather than the norm (Swidler 2001) since most actions are rationalised post hoc. For the topic of this dissertation, this means that members of organisations do not change their way of acting simply by calculating what is more advantageous to them but rely on understandings and beliefs about themselves, their organisations and the situations in which they act. Change happens in the tension between their habitual way of acting and the necessities they encounter in interaction in their everyday activities.

In practice-oriented traditions, social action is a creative enactment (see Dalton 2004; Joas 1996) of practices (Archer 2000; Bourdieu 1990; De Certeau 1985; Giddens 1984; Swidler 1986), patterns of acting that are based on shared and often tacit presuppositions, are linked to specific groups, can have an embodied or material quality, and are situated within the history of groups. Even when action is strategic, as it happens more often than the ordinary in political action, actors are continuously embedded in webs of meanings that shape their ways of thinking about the context of their action, their goals, and the adequate means to act. Rationality is a local outcome, and not a general premise, of multiple strands of interpretation, as it is justificatory more than motivational. It's only when something needs to be explained that actors

build a retrospective justification for their actions, appealing to higher-order concepts of justice and universalism. When controversies arise, those involved in litigation enter a regime of justification, where reciprocal responsibilities must be addressed, reciprocal positions justified, and a new agreement established through the establishment of equivalence (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999). In this kind of situations, actors retrospectively look at actions and find a post-hoc rationality to their acts, producing a story in which acts and words of the past are selected and ordered to make sense and to express reasons for their current position(ibid).

The conceptualisation of political action as habitual is not common in the context of party studies. A similar concept could be the idea of the *routinisation* of organisations, a dimension of party *institutionalisation* together with “*value infusion*”⁸ (Huntington 1968; Levitsky 1998; Panebianco 1988; Randall and Svåsand 2003). In party politics, routinisation occurs “when rules, procedures, roles, or other patterns of behaviour are institutionalised” in formal and informal ways and “come to be repeated and taken for granted, and stable sets of expectations form around them” (Levitsky 1998:81). More routinised organisations have clearer procedures for membership, candidatures, and the solution of conflicts than newly founded ones. Except for those following Levitsky’s line, this term is more likely to be used in studies on the crystallisation of practices into

⁸ The term “value” in the context of sociology may refer to Parsonian’s idea that a value is an “element of a shared symbolic system which serves as a criterion or standard for selection among the alternatives of orientation which are intrinsically open in a situation.”(Parsons 1951:11–12) that is completely rejected by Swidler(1986) in culture orients actors not by providing the values but rather shaping a “tool kit” of habits, skills and styles. However, in Party Politics the term is used to refer to a completely different debate. “Value infusion” is the process by which an organisation is ‘changed from an expendable tool into a valued source of personal satisfaction’ (Selznick 1957:17–21) or similarly when an organisation is ‘valued for itself’ (Huntington 1968:12–15). As organisations become more institutionalised , their members tend to prioritize preserving the organisation over the original goals.

formal norms rather than the routinisation of action per se, because studies mainly focus on formal aspects.

Contrarily, the idea of patterns, repetition, and habitual action is prevalent in studies about social movements, political sociology, and civic action, and therefore, it has been applied to a varied range of non-party political actors. In movement's literature, many authors follow Charles Tilly's idea of *repertoires of contention* (Tilly 1993), which are defined as "a limited set of routines that are learned, shared, and acted through a relatively deliberate process of choice" (p. 264) and transmitted over time through practice. According to Tilly, "claim-making usually more resembles jazz and commedia dell'arte than the ritual reading of scripture" (Tilly 2006:35), meaning that actors draw from the repertoires they know to creatively act in the situations they are in, on the edge between repetition and creativity. According to Gross's (Gross 2010) interpretation, Tilly's repertoires are "scripts for political performances that become institutionalised, sedimented in actors' expectations and in the structure of institutions and intergroup relations". In the introduction of *Roads from past to Future* (Tilly 1997), the author proposes the idea that "social interaction vary in the extent to which they follow explicit models known to the parties" –*Scripting*—“and they also vary in the extent to which the parties deploy shared *Local knowledge*”, meaning that the extent to which action is scripted or improvised can vary according to the typology of action, but always a degree of repetition and one of improvisation (see fig. 4).

When we are talking about a mechanism of change in a party through sociological lenses, we are not only talking about a change in formal characteristics but also about a rupture with past political repertoires, with habitual ways in which the organisation

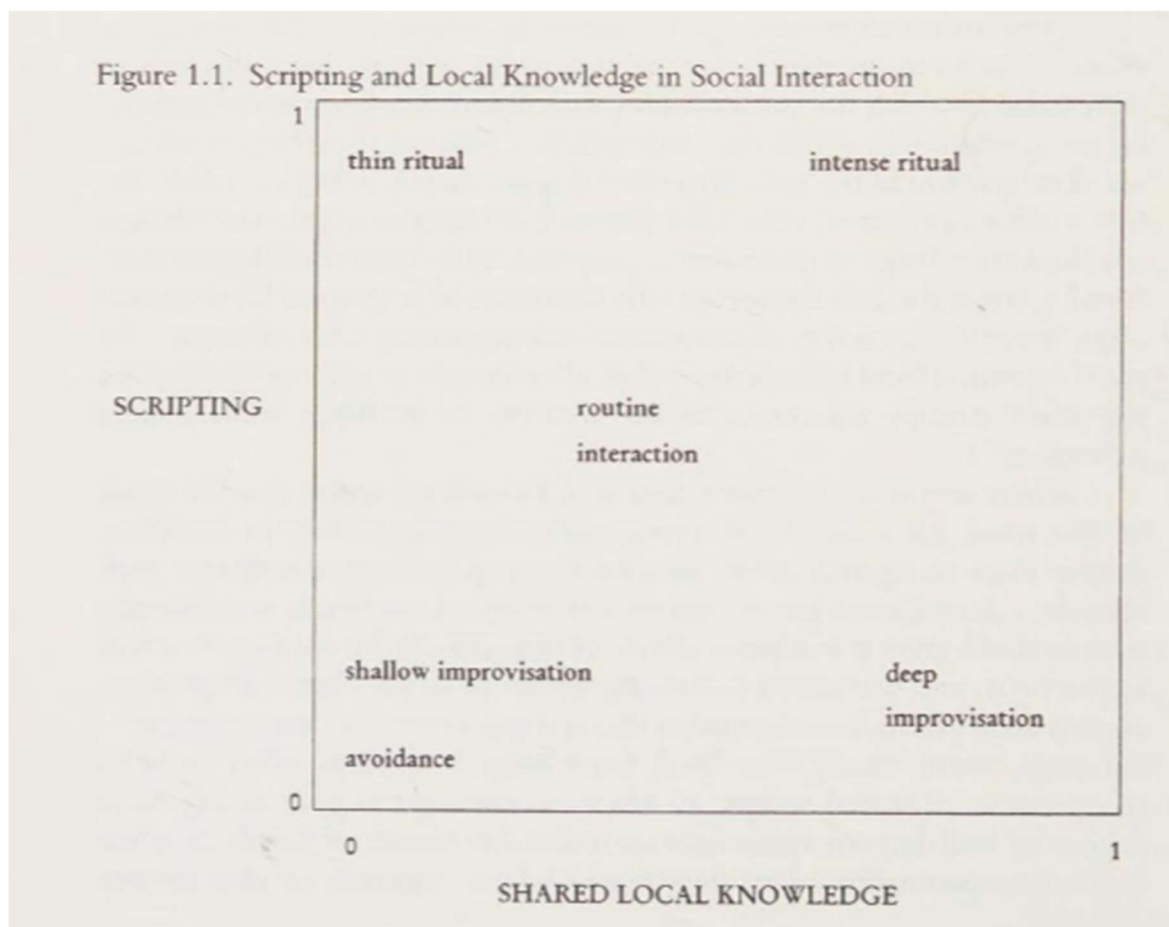


Figure 4 Tilly 1997

works externally and internally. According to Tilly, “the appearance of new forms [of action] results from deliberate innovation and strenuous bargaining [...] over the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable forms” (Tilly 1993:265). Meaning assigned to repertoires is not only shared but also contested, a product of concurring interpretations and concurring efforts to find common ground or prevail in the definition of what is a legitimate way to act. Moreover, political actors “clung to the same few forms of collective expression and modify those forms only slowly,” or “bit by bit,” rather than abruptly (Tilly 2006: XIII).

The topic of repetitiveness and change in repertoires has been particularly debated in recent years. According to Gold (2022), the metaphor of a musical repertoire has been

particularly successful because it conveys that collective action is ritualised and repetitive while simultaneously being creatively changed by actors. Most studies use the term repertoire to signal “the simultaneous existence of a publicly available set of cultural resources and its enactment by individuals who draw on these resources to construct different lines of action” (Silber 2003) but engage more with the topic of repetitiveness and continuity than with change and creativity. At the end of his career, Tilly was uncomfortable using the term since it hindered the understanding of the process of repertoire change (Gross 2010). This discussion has been tackled by scholars working in different areas of sociology (Gross 2009, 2010; Jansen 2016, 2017; Jasper 2004; Said 2022; Steinberg 1999; Taylor, Rupp, and Gamson 2004; Traugott 1993; Walder 2009), and still is a debated topic.

According to Gold (2022), several authors treat repertoires of contention as a set of available instruments, drawing parallels between Tilly’s repertoires and Swidler’s account of culture as a *toolkit* (Jasper 1997; McCammon et al. 2007; Taylor and Van Dyke 2004). This conception reproduces the same problems that Swidler herself (Swidler 2001, 2008) acknowledged in her theory: the development of specific habits is not random, but rather patterned and linked to the external conditions of the field of institutions in which the actors are embedded (Dalton 2004; Leschziner and Green 2013; Lizardo and Strand 2010). Her original emphasis on settled and unsettled times reinforced the idea that the “ordinary” use of some repertoires is uncreative, while unsettled times call for choices. In Gold’s article on a pragmatist approach to repertoire change, the author suggests building on the metaphor of repertoires and jazz playing, saying that actors “constantly adjust means to end on a situational base, in the same way jazz musicians improvise over musical scores differently each time a piece is

performed”. Similarly, activists innovate based on the characteristics of tactical performances they know how to enact. In his view, a repertoire becomes a habit, as it is repeatedly considered *useful* in a certain context, but when the context shifts, actors must innovate to make sense of the new situation. Actors adapt tactics they already know to face unexpected problems and evaluate their effectiveness through “resonance” (McDonnell, Bail, and Tavory 2017). Innovation thus it’s not a deliberate choice, but rather the confirmation a posteriori that a specific pattern “works”. In Alexander’s Cultural Pragmatics (Alexander 2004), we find a similar idea in other words: a performance reaches “fusion” when the actors use scripts in ways that are convincing for their audience, who identify with the actors and believe in the “authenticity” of their performance. These scripts become a reference for future performances. In other words, they become part of the repertoire, because they helped in reaching fusion in the past.

This proposal opens new questions: when do actors come to consider a habitual way to act “useful” to solve a certain problem? How do they judge when a context is shifting? This points back to the same problem of Swidler’s toolkit: how can you distinguish between settled and unsettled times? While performances are spatially and temporally confined, everyday interaction is continuous. If, in the first case, actors understand if a performance worked or not –because of clapping, body synchronisation, the audience leaving, or any other feedback the audience gave during a performance— in the second is more complex to establish effectiveness. Performances have a start and an end; they are confined and thus recognizable as discrete events. In continuous interaction, it is more difficult to draw temporal boundaries and evaluate effectiveness. While in micro-situation, actors experience

“astonishment, bewilderment, shock, anxiety, embarrassment and anger” (Garfinkel 1964:232) because of the rupture of routine grounds of everyday activities, it is not that easy to evaluate the effectiveness of single patterns of action in processes that take place over long periods, again for a lack of fixture of beginning and ends of processes. Actors give meaning to their action a posteriori when they need to explain to others what happened and draw boundaries, delimiting the start and the end of a process using events as markers –as turning points, indications of trajectories, pauses in time (Wagner-Pacifici 2017). The start and the end of processes are defined a posteriori only when actors are confronted with the necessity of telling others how a process took place, or if a specific pattern worked or not, and for what reasons. In parties, elections are followed by meetings to analyse the electoral results, which serve the purpose of establishing a common interpretation about what happened during the period of a campaign and the effectiveness of previous patterns of action, as well as to cool the marks out (Goffman 1952), attenuating possible conflicts that arise from different interpretations of the events and reciprocal judgment of their action and how much what have been done was “the right thing to do”. As already mentioned, party conventions are ceremonial ways to mark changes in organisations, and we will see in chapter 7 that Lega’s militants attribute salvific meaning to them, because they are ways to mark the end of long periods of internal conflict. These series of stories about the organisation and events, these series of justifications and rationales attributed to events and trajectories, contribute to a local idioculture– “a system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviours, and traditions shared in a group of interaction, to which members can refer and which constitutes the foundation of future interaction” (Fine 1987:125). In this sense, groups accumulate knowledge on how to interpret situations and,

through this understanding, establish repertoires, patterns that they creatively use to face new situations, reciprocal expectations, and rules on how to feel and act in specific contexts, building a local culture of the party. This means, that not only meanings are attributed a posteriori, but they are also attributed differently in different local contexts, as they are linked to the community that use them, resulting in several local interpretations of the same process that we normally see as unitary as, due to methodological nationalism and scarce attention to meso-level dynamics.

In every chapter of this thesis, I will follow the process of change that went on in the organisation to show different parts of the trajectory of change but also different ways in which party culture and local cultures play a role.

In Chapter 3, I will show that the process of change and the electoral peak and fall of the party involved different local organisational dynamics in different parts of Italy. These dynamics reflect the extent and the modalities to which the party was previously organised and the prevalent patterns of action in the areas. The party initially attempted to export its traditional organisational practices South. The attempt failed, and the party was forced to adapt its patterns of action to prevalent patterns of democratic practice in the area and rely on existing patronage networks to grow quickly. In the centre, the party was able to grow its presence, well using the pre-existing resources they had during the phase of peak consensus for the party leader. Due to the entrance in waves, party members hold stratified ideological positions. In the North, the party's local leadership continued to hold more influence than the national leadership. To navigate internal conflicts during the period of change, the party employed strategies such as

postponing conferences and appointing top-down commissioners, resulting in escalating internal tensions.

In Chapter 4, I will use the example of nationalism/regionalism and the model of the mass party to show that the party maintained different interpretations of the same ideological components in different locales. This multiplicity allowed for cohesion in the party despite their ideological differences. Key to this understanding will be the notion that every local group, even when they are part of the same national organisation, has a local idioculture (Fine 1979) that allows for the same elements of the party's general culture to be emphasised or downplayed through differentiated local articulations. I will also point to the idea that ideological change and organisational change are not unrelated to one another, as militants hold specific ideas of how a party should or should not be organised.

In chapter five, I will show that reciprocal expectations around how a party should work—that I will conceptualize through the idea of Group Styles following Eliasoph and Lichterman(2003)—did not align in the party, as people coming from different backgrounds—longstanding members, new members, members aligned with the national leadership and party switchers—hold different views not only in terms of ideology but also about basic everyday operation of the party. When a change arises, members act differently upon general principles, as the link between representations and action is not straightforward, but rather organised in repertoires, and their use reflects previous memberships, previous ideas and local interpretations of general representations.

In chapter 6, I will discuss the role of feeling rules (Hochschild 1979) of the organisations in shaping patterns of remaining in the organisation, voicing discontent, or exiting the organisation. Patterns of voicing discontent or exiting from political organisations are often studied through the lenses of rational action theory, portraying dissident members of organisations as economic actors oriented by material goals and the possible advantages or sanctions their actions can cause. I argue that by relying on a micro-sociological and cultural understanding of emotions, we can better grasp the relations between dissatisfaction, loyalty, and patterns of political action.

Finally, in chapter 7, we will see, as confirmation of the relevance of ritual moments to mark turn points in organisational trajectories, that militants attribute a salvific meaning to the party convention as if the formal event would end their continuous internal conflict. Indeed, the postponement of the convention also postponed the explosion of unsolved contradictions in the party, favouring formal cohesion at first and, in the long run, gradual disengagement and disillusion towards the organisation.

2. Methodological and Ethical Considerations

Research Design

This thesis reports the results of a qualitative research I conducted within Salvini's League from 2021 to 2023. I conducted 22 semi-structured interviews: 17 recorded interviews with 18 current and former party members, 3 non-recorded interviews with members and 2 interviews with non-member informants from three different zones. Most of the interviewees are local cadres or members of the party in public office, but not exclusively so. I also participated in various local and national events, including public and private events of the electoral campaign for the national elections in 2021 in one of the three zones, two national rallies in Pontida, and the state funeral of the former national secretary Roberto Maroni. (see Appendix 2 for an overview of the data collected). In addition to the primary data, I collected online materials and local press articles before and during my fieldwork for this thesis. Although this information was not used directly in the thesis to protect the anonymity of the participants, it helped me better understand the context of the areas included in my research and the political backgrounds of my participants while they were in public office.

My investigation focused on the local organisation in three distinct zones, chosen to maximize differentiation between cases. To avoid recognition of the interviewees, I will not use the names of the regions as the total number of militants is particularly low in two of the locales.

1. North: the first zone is in a region of Northern Italy characterised by the party's strong presence in local institutions. During the process of change, the local party in this area has been particularly hostile to the nationalisation of the party. Since its foundation in the 80s, the party has been fully structured and has maintained a prominent presence. Its focus in this area is still on regionalism, striving for greater economic independence from Rome. The League's popularity in this region is built upon solid connections with local power centres and consistent involvement in regional governance. The regional party leader is highly popular, while Salvini's national leadership is not universally accepted. The party's shift towards nationalism has been met with scepticism from both members and voters due to its firm anchorage on regionalism and a group culture based on the idea of *territory*. This zone has been chosen over other regions in the north because, with the initial collection of local press and party-produced materials online, they seemed more resistant to the nationalist turn than other regions. Their activity was still centered on regionalism, and they have been historically part of the minority in the party and thus less in line with federal leadership of the party. Moreover, their regional leadership was particularly strong, making the zone more autonomous than other zones in the north from the federal leadership.
2. Centre-north: The second zone is in the centre-north, in an area of former communist tradition in which the centre-left is still the dominant political force. Here, the party existed even before Salvini's election to the secretary in 2012 but grew considerably in relevance and numbers in recent years. It is not possible to regard all regions in the center as similar due to the varying presence

of the party prior to the boom. Former red zones were the first to experience the organisation's presence, while regions like Lazio did not have it, as parties with fascist and post-fascist backgrounds dominate the radical-right environment. Therefore, this zone has been selected as an example of an intermediate situation, where the party already existed before the nationalist turn but gained rapid success between 2017 and 2019. In this area, even if the centre-left coalition traditionally governs most major cities, the party has conquered some towns during administrative elections in the highest phase of electoral expansion. For this reason, the party sees itself as a minority gaining consensus, as it grew to be the first party in the centre-right opposition –a position they lost in favour of Fratelli d'Italia throughout this research. When I entered the field, the party was structured but less strongly than in the first zone, with most militant members also being elected in local public offices and a scarcity of rank-and-file members, as the electoral boom was more rapid than their possibility to structure a large base.

3. South: The third zone is in the south, where the party started its activities after 2013. Initially, I expected to find a small yet organized group in the area based on my preliminary research. However, I discovered that the organization is actually a loose network of activists. This network is particularly active during election times but tends to be small in numbers and lacks continuity. Around 2019, the party became attractive to many activists from all the other centre-right parties, which led to the necessity of mediating between different political cultures. Local activities often consist of participation as a minority in the town

and regional councils and hosting rallies with national leaders; thus, the tie with the party's leader is solid.

When interviewing militants, the most common practice is to choose anonymisation to protect the identity of the interviewee; for members of the party in public office and parliamentarians, this is usually not the case, as they are often studied adopting a study study-up logic, typical of studies of the elites. However, since the number of active members in at least one of the locales is limited, the names of elected officials and PMs would have risked making the lower ranking cadres and the members recognizable. In the north and centre-north locales, there are several sections and a generous number of elected officials, which would have allowed for a less generic description of the area and for naming at least the region. However, in the southern area, the limited number of militants made it challenging to ensure anonymity while mentioning the region and roles combined. Therefore, for consistency, I decided to give less information and treat all regions the same way.

Excerpts from the interviews include a pseudonym, the interviewee's role at the time of the interview, and their seniority within the party. When analysing the content of the collected interviews, it seems that the year a party member joined is more significant than their age. Members are categorised according to this criterion. However, details regarding age and gender are available in Appendix 6.

The following labels indicate seniority:

- *Longstanding*: members who joined the party before its nationalist shift and before Salvini became the party secretary (before 2012).

- *2nd Wave Members*: Those who became members while Salvini was already the secretary but before the officialization of the nationalist turn occurred (between 2012 and 2018).
- *New Members*: Members who joined after the nationalist turn (after 2018). This category includes both unexperienced members and party switchers.
- *Youth Wing Members*: Members who joined the party through youth branches. Their affiliation isn't necessarily linked to the nationalist shift; however, due to their age, they were not members before this change.
- *Formers*: Members who had already left the party by the time of the interview.

In line with the gender balance in the party, my interviewees were mostly male, although not exclusively. Although data on membership are generally not precise as they are self-declared by organisations and the League did not publish data on membership recently, traditionally, the party has always had a majority of male members. According to Francesca Scrinzi (2024:77), in 2011, 75% of the members of the League were men, mainly artisans and entrepreneurs. Moreover, under Salvini's leadership, the majority of positions within the party are held by males. Out of 30 members of the LN Federal Council, only 2 are women. Additionally, there are no women in the LN Federal Secretariat, which directly supports the leader's activities. The overall number of women among LN elected representatives has grown over time (Passarelli and Tuorto 2018). Yet following the 2018 elections, the party had the lowest share of female MPs of all parties (Feo and Lavizzari 2021).

I focused the conversations on organisational issues more than ideological questions, thinking this was a less conflictual terrain on which to build a relationship. Generally, most of them were very open to talking about their party, even about the most critical

aspects of the transformation, and ideological dimensions arose during the conversations even without a direct solicitation. I tried to interview members who entered the party before and after the change process and members coming from previous experiences in other parties. 2 of my interviewees were former members, as I was interested in the process of exiting the organisation, and 3 others were members when I interviewed them but recently left the party. I also had the chance to talk with prominent youth organisation members and elected figures at the municipal, regional, and national levels. The logic I followed, as said, was the logic of differentiation, to have as much variety as possible in the sample.

The interview guide (see Appendix 1) has been organised around three temporalities at three organisational levels to capture ideas about political and organisational change at the individual, local, and national levels. Interviewees have been asked to talk about the organisation's past, present, and future, starting from the militant personal history and gradually moving to the organisation, from the closest experience to the more abstract and far level of their general ideas about the national party. The guide has been used flexibly, following the spontaneous path of talking. In most cases, this led to them recapitulating their views on the entire transformation process and its conflicts without asking them directly. Table 3 represents a scheme of the thematic areas covered in the interviews.

Table 3: Interview Guide Structure

	Past	Present	Future
Militant	Previous political experiences before joining, becoming a member, career trajectory inside the party.	Current role inside the party, duties, and activities they participate in.	How do they see themselves at the party in the future, or what are their eventual reasons for leaving?
Local Branch	Past group composition, political initiatives, and salient events of the branch's history.	The branch's current composition, past differences, and relations between new and old members.	Future activities they planned locally.
National Party	Opinions about the former party (Northern League), its leadership, and the most notable events occurred during this transition.	Opinion on the present party (Lega Salvini Premier), its leadership, and the current positioning of the party. North/South relations, relations with their national level.	Future objectives the party should pursue and future paths to solve internal conflicts.

The rather low number of interviews resulted from over 70 initial contact attempts and extended negotiations over the opportunity to record interviews (see Appendix 3: First Contacts Table for a complete list of the attempts) and has to be attributed to two main elements: the period in which this research started and the intra-party conflicts going on in the party.

First, as I started my PhD at the end of 2020, during the first year was not possible to enter the field due to ongoing COVID-19 restrictions. Even when restrictions were not in place, the party went through a period of inactivity, reducing their face-to-face events at least until the first months of 2022 consequently reducing my ability to participate in their activities. As participating in their public events would have been my initial strategy to get to know them, I had to change my strategy as it was not possible to follow this route. This added to the general difficulty of entering in organisations in which you don't have any previous acquaintance (see Accessing the field on page 57). Instead of

meeting people at public events and inviting them for an interview, I had to reach out to them via email or phone contacts and ask them to invite me to events. I managed to conduct the first interview in November 2021 in one of the three zones, but it wasn't until April 2022 that I started going to their local events in the centre-north area.

The second element that constrained my possibility to enter the field was the fact the organisation was “frozen” for several years, both due to COVID-19 and the internal impasse that became the object of this dissertation. Contrary to my expectations, party members from different regions hardly knew each other because the party stopped organising national events, and I could not rely on snowballing to reach southern regions. I had thus to repeat the attempts to enter the field through emails and telephone numbers three times separately in three different locales. As my target was initially to conduct interviews in three sections, I focused on specific cities for my first attempt, but I quickly had to enlarge the focus to larger areas as I came to understand the sections were fully operative only in the north and consisted of looser networks of militants in the other two areas. The access to the southern locale has been particularly problematic: despite several attempts to contact members in my preferred locale, only three members agreed to be interviewed. Even the attempts to gain access to other regions in the south were equally unsuccessful: emails never received an answer, and the several members I got in contact with through snowballing or because I had met them in Pontida initially agreed to an interview but quickly stopped answering my messages and calls. One possible explanation is that when I planned to conduct this research, the party was still in an expansive phase, while when I managed to enter the field, the party was already in a phase of crisis, and the object of my research was sensitive: the party south was never really managed to be completely structured, thus

they were not willing to talk about their organisation. The three interviews were conducted through a video call, as the interviewees refused to encounter me personally. The first of the three interviews was conducted after the national elections in October 2022, and the interviewee invited me to go south to meet militants once they started again to organize events. They told me they were not organising any event as they were “busy with the government formation”. I attempted a second contact in January 2023, and the person I interviewed from the southern region informed me that they were "busy with the electoral campaign for Lombardy" and not organising any local activities in the southern region. I hypothesize that since the party in the south is very dependent on the leader, they were not organising events and regular activities without the presence of national leaders. I had a similar impression from the second interview, where my interviewee, contacted through mutual acquaintances, told me the party was still not fully operative. As this small number of respondents do not allow for generalisations, the information collected through interviews will be integrated with literature, press, and online content produced by the party in the south zone. I continued to send first-contact emails and reminders without response until October 2023, when I started writing this thesis.

In addition to these contingencies, the party's radical-right nature added specific challenges to data collection. I will explore this topic in the next paragraphs of this chapter, which are dedicated to the problems of conducting research in context with groups on the far right.

Internalist research in the field of far-right

The populist radical right is by far the most studied family of parties. Since the first studies in the 80s, the interest of scholars in this typology of political actors has grown. According to Mudde, this increase, to some extent, reflects the electoral success of these parties but remains not proportional (Mudde 2016) and reflects a moral preoccupation of scholars towards the possibility of illiberal groups growing, a preoccupation that is also very visible in the ways studies of the populist radical right are framed by their authors. As mentioned, most research on the far-right usually adopts an externalist perspective (Goodwin 2006), which considers social conditions that favour the emergence and consolidation of such movements rather than their internal dynamics. These studies provide essential information on those movements' emergence and flourishing conditions. Still, they never engage with the micro level, thus leaving the beliefs and actions of members aside. This almost exclusive use of external data has to be attributed both to the methodological challenges that internalist studies pose and to a general tendency in the field of party politics for quantitative studies and the use of secondary data (Castelli Gattinara 2020). The exclusive use of externalist methods can lead to overemphasising the ideological component of political commitment (see Blee 2003 on non-ideological motives to enter far-right movements) as researchers never engage in contact with militants and their motives to explain why they entered these groups, allowing participants to answer questions in their own terms. Even many studies focusing on single organisations are to be considered externalist, as they collect data from secondary sources such as internet data or official texts produced by the organisations. While this type of data can help understand how the organisation presents itself to the public, using it as an exclusive source also runs

the risk of placing too much emphasis on the image the organisation wants to give to the external world and on public figures of the party at the risk of underestimating that their positions may differ from their leaders' position (Blee 2003, 2005).

In recent years, adopting interviews or ethnographic approaches has become more common since far-right organisations are growing in consensus and visibility; thus, they are more easily accessible because of their attempts toward normalisation. As researching the far right with close-up methods poses significant methodological challenges, a growing number of articles in sociology, anthropology, and political sciences reflect on the methods and ethics of this kind of research (e.g. Ashe et al. 2020; Toscano 2019). In this chapter, I will give a brief overview of potential problems mentioned in the literature and reflect on how these problems materialised (or not) during this research.

Accessing the field

Researchers often study what is most easily accessible to them, and personal proximity to (if not membership in) progressive social movements facilitates access to such contexts as opposed to organisations in the far-right (Blee 2007a). I am no exception: like most of my colleagues in the social sciences, I did not personally know any militant of the party before this research, even if I have lived most of my life in a region in which the party is a majority and regularly wins municipal and regional elections. This caused me several problems in accessing the field, as I did not have an informant who could introduce me to members of the parties.

I knew some of my friends who were part of centre-left organisations had connections with local representatives of the League in their area as they had met them in local administrations and could help me enter the field. Initially, I considered avoiding this route entirely because I wanted to build a relationship of trust with interviewees, which is not easy to achieve with ideological distance, and I was worried about being introduced to militants by someone too involved on the opposite side. This lack of first contacts has postponed my access to the field. On top of that, COVID-19 restrictions prevented the party from organising public activities, which meant I couldn't join any such events during half the time I had a scholarship for this research.⁹ To solve this problem, I tried to use official channels: I sent first contact emails to members of the party elected in local administrations in the areas I was interested in, looking for their official email addresses on municipal websites and personal websites for those who had one. This strategy did not help me at all. During this research, I sent over 70 first contact emails, and only one of those I sent without anyone introducing me or anticipating that I would write them resulted in an interview. This happened only because the person I wrote to casually was a student in political sciences and was particularly happy to participate in research, as in the past he had already participated in one, and the good image the previous researchers –thank you— was enough for him to trust me as a member of the same category and to present me to other members of his group, allowing me to meet other people through snowballing.

⁹ Members often attribute their reduced political activity to COVID-19, even years after the lockdown periods. They also frequently attribute the success of the Fratelli d'Italia, a rival party on the right, to their opposition to Covid restrictions, which has allowed them to gain success at the expense of the League.

Something that is commonly reported by scholars of the far right (e.g. Blee 2007a; Damhuis and De Jonge 2022; Fangen 2020; de Lange and Art 2011) is the potential distrust that such contexts have towards the academic researcher. In cases of extreme right, they might be suspected of being a spy at the service of political opponents or the police. In institutional organisations, such as the League, the researcher may be seen as someone who is part of an elite that potentially could put the organisation in a bad light in public, as many members think that their public image does not correspond to reality. The researcher may also be seen as an opportunity to be portrayed in a better light. As Katrine Fangen (2020) noted, participants may ask the researcher to “tell the truth about them” in their publications, as they think that the public holds wrong ideas about them and hope the researcher will provide a better picture. Similarly, Pilkington reports that members of the English Defence League “believed that I would see things ‘as they are’ and that this provided a counterbalance to intentionally negative media reporting. They often described this as being ‘neutral’ or ‘neither for nor against’” (Pilkington 2016:27). For ethnographies on the side of “oppressed,” it is frequently the case that researchers adopt participatory methods or some form of restitution before the publication of results to ensure “the truth” has been told. Of course, this is more problematic in the field of far right than in fields in which the scholar is more sympathetic to their interviewees. In my case, being a researcher was not met with particular scepticism, although it became a matter of distinction in the field. Some of the members I was more familiar with and with whom I had more informal conversations used to make fun of my position, remarking the distance posed by the role: many times, they would ask me with polite but ironic tones what my thoughts were on a specific topic, suggesting that “as an expert” or “someone with an education”, I

surely had a very informed and clever opinion on the matter. Once, a member asked me, laughing, if I was there to work or talk to them –ironically, my job was exactly to speak to them.

Repugnant Cultural Others

When I bring up the topic, I am working on with newly acquainted colleagues who do not work on organisations in the far right, I always get surprised when I say that I chose to do qualitative research inside the League. They usually ask how I feel when talking with people I do not share beliefs with and who are generally unpleasant to talk to, and a long, eloquent eyesight follows. Indeed, doing research in a populist radical right party composed mainly of older men with whom I do not share any belief has been challenging. But with the challenge also came the thrill. To be fair, there is something voyeuristic in doing research among people whose ideas you don't like (Blee 1998, 2007b), "in which feelings of intrigue are mixed with those of fear". The party I decided to study is quite institutional in its forms of mobilisation, and for this reason, the risk of boredom is higher than the physical risk –something instead frequently experienced by ethnographers who study fringe groups.

Most scholars of the far-right are very distant in views from members of the group they study. Differences between the researcher and their participants are also very frequent for other research topics –the tool of reflexivity to minimise power over the research population is inherently built on the assumption of distance and power. Yet, something is different about studies of the far right and other distasteful populations: the risk of "going native" is replaced by the risk of "lack of proximity." (Damhuis and De Jonge

2022). This problem is usually referred to as the problem of “Repugnant cultural others” (Harding 1991), “ugly movements” (Avanza 2018), “distasteful populations” (Esseveld and Eyerman 1992), or “sympathising with the unsympathetic” (Ramalingam 2020:257). In other words: “How does one establish a relationship with people to whom one doesn’t feel akin?” (Klandermans and Mayer 2005:63)

“Repugnant cultural others” are groups of people for whom the researcher is more unlikely to be empathetic and for whom the routine theoretical moves that have been identified for studying “cultural others” –those who are different from oneself in gender, social class, ethnicity, and geographic origin are— frequently not applied. This category includes conservative groups, the armed forces, religious fundamentalists, anti-LGBTQ+ movements, and all those organised groups that, although they are very distant from the researcher, do not belong to categories to which the researcher wishes to “give voice” to “give redemption” through his studies. According to Harding, any efforts to “correct” the stereotype of the “backward” fundamentalist crystallise our concept of “repugnant other” as a clearcut ontological category. This person is seen as irrational compared to our rationality and incoherent compared to our coherence but does not receive sympathy like underdogs do. As Laura Nader would put it, “Anthropologists value studying what they like and liking what they study and, in general, we prefer the underdogs” (Nader 1972).

Covert ethnography is usually considered an unethical practice and potentially dangerous for the researcher with regard both to the researcher's safety and the possibility of losing access to the field. If overt ethnography is for sure to be preferred, in this case the expectation of being strongly sympathetic towards your participants

(see Fine 1993 on the “lies of ethnography”) is more complex than in other situations. Researchers may sometimes be torn between the necessity of building a relationship with informants to remain on the field and moral questions related their own political positioning. They may experience emotions that are difficult to manage, and they may sometimes choose to conceal biographic and political characteristics (Bellè 2016). The researcher is faced with “incompatible loyalties” (Bizeul 2007) as personal and ethnographic loyalties may conflict. In this regard, some researchers say it is necessary to prioritize relationships with respondents. Benjamin Teitelbaum (Teitelbaum 2019) argues for the “need to embrace solidarity [with far-right participants] and the immorality that comes with it to ethnographers at large” (414). Others, as Katrine Fangen, underline the possibility of building trust without compromising: “While acting in accordance with the trust I had built up in relation to my informants, I never became one of them, nor did I present myself as a champion of their cause. Yes, it is possible to build rapport and at the same time retain a critical view” (Fangen 2020:249).

In this sense, it is useful to follow Ramalingam's suggestions on the necessity for scholars of the far right to distinguish between empathy and sympathy (Ramalingam 2020). Sympathy involves showing compassionate appreciation, while empathy implies trying to understand where your interlocutor comes from. It may be impossible to show sympathy for worldviews you fundamentally disagree with. However, developing empathy for your interviewees can help you gain insights into their worldviews without subscribing to them as ‘understanding people does not require sharing their beliefs, or being obliged to offer them support; if it did, this would considerably reduce the range of people that could be studied’ (Hammersley 2006).

Our way of seeing these “others” must not be patronising and self-congratulatory. According to Pasiëka, far-right followers are often described as “poor and misled victims of the neoliberal system; people who are “angry” or whose decisions are caused by “fear” (Pasiëka 2017:S27). While this vision can, at first glance, look emphatic, on closer inspection, it reproduces the opposition between us, rational and informed voters, and them, the irrational and subject-to-manipulation counterpart.

Another crucial problem of doing research with people you don't like is the risk of the researcher not recognising the impact of their own ideological position, which inevitably constitutes an essential filter through which to look at the field. The researcher could relegate everything that does not respond to their logic to a "paradox" (Avishai, Gerber, and Randles 2013), denying the agency of their interviewees, giving too much emphasis to the elements considered problematic at the expense of a vision of the phenomenon that is true to what is observed. As an example, when I started this research, I expected to be frequently exposed to extreme right tropes and racist discourses, as this was what I saw as the main point of difference I saw between them and the political organisations I frequented as members or sympathizers. However, these topics emerged explicitly during public speeches, but much less on a daily basis. The League is a mainstream party whose members are regularly elected in local councils, a party that has been in several governments since the '90. Their political activities are similar to those of any other mainstream party. Contrary to my expectations, most discussions were not ideologically connotated when I started to attend the league activities. Meetings, electoral dinners, organising busses for leaders' speeches, discussions about trivial topics such as sidewalks, the last mayor's decision, and the last topic of debate online. In a certain sense, I was surprised by the familiarity

of their world with something I already saw in centre-left organisations: people participating in events despite a leader they don't like and yet making cues to take a selfie with him, older militants grumbling near the doors about how everything is not the same anymore, youth movements members called on stage to show that the party is not composed only by older men, women going around frenetically to do organisational duties to host prestigious guests in shirts and ties coming from Rome or the European parliament. If this sounds familiar to you, well, there is something incredibly ordinary in radical-right organisations. I anticipated deeper differences. Yet, something was always slightly different from what I saw in organisations on the left. I was always a little bit out of place with my fat body, my short hair, and my way of dressing; I was always a little bit off, as I did not possess the *habitus*. Subtexts were also different: very frequently, I was challenged by the fact that my interlocutors were taking for granted that I was in line with them. I had to manage my instinct to reply and facial expressions when I did not share their opinions. This often occurred subtly: most topics that are generally associated with the party and are the core of their political communication were rarely mentioned in my interviews or during events I had the chance to observe. On the one hand, this is explainable by the fact I chose not to engage in ideological discussions as for the purpose of this research, I am interested in internal dynamics, and I did not want to enter into direct confrontation, on the other, some topics were taken for granted, assumed to be of concern to everyone, to the point that they did not bother to explain why or what they meant, but they just alluded, sure to find confirmation in my eyes. This speaks volumes about the bipartisan diffusion of some of their positions: as an example, discourses around entrepreneurs vexed by taxes or the topic of security were ubiquitous and not even problematised. It was

surprising to me when a woman took completely for granted that I was convinced as she was that the nearby city was incredibly dangerous and needed more police intervention, a thought that had never crossed my mind before. Many things they took for granted were the opposite of what I take for granted. However, it was rarely the case that they said in person the extreme things I had read online on their own profiles. Paradoxically, their public declarations were more extreme than what they talked about in private, so I was less exposed to disgusting positions than anticipated. Even during interviews, I did not have to manage particularly conflictual conversations. To be fair, almost no one was really interested in knowing my opinion (several scholars report the same impression Blee 1998; Fangen 2020; Jansson 2010). Most of them were very engaged by the topic. They had much to say about their organisation, so it was very easy to engage in conversation once I reassured them that everything, I was recording would be anonymised in names and places. Apart from the transversal consideration that interview settings do not call for interviewees to ask the researcher questions, I was rarely asked about my opinions, and I was open to answering anyone who asked without particular reactions on their side. My political ideas remained unsaid, but for sure known to my participants, who frequently made remarks about how I was becoming “one of them” because of all the time together, or I would vote for them if I talked too much with that persuasive member they were introducing me to.

Gender, Race, and the Far right

Even though, in recent years, many parties and organisations in the far-right become more open to the presence of female leaders and leaders with ethnic minority backgrounds, far-right organisations remain, in most cases, composed of a prevalently

male and white membership. The exclusionary character of far-right environments poses additional challenges to minoritised scholars. Gender, race, ethnicity, and other characteristics of the researcher that are visible to the group members can facilitate or impede the researcher's access to the field. Race is undoubtedly a significant impediment to entering the field in more extreme white supremacist groups. Still, the contemporary radical right is most of the time associated with nativism, meaning that the boundaries of the group are sometimes more permeable. While modifying the relations on the field, race does not necessarily constitute an impassable wall in every situation, but it depends on the composition of the specific group you want to study. (see Ramalingam 2020 reflections on challenges for researchers of colour). In the case of the League, for example, while non-white members are still not numerous and still do not have power positions, there is a growing number of second-generation migrants in the party, meaning that, while a researcher of colour for sure would draw attention, and race would constitute a strong element of discomfort, it would be probably possible to negotiate access.

As emphasised by Tamta Gelashvili and Audrey Gagnon (2024) in close-up in far-right environments, female researchers experience specific challenges in terms of safety, emotions and institutional challenges. Although some of these challenges do not regard this typology of environment exclusively –being a woman exposes the researchers to unsolicited sexual attention and harassment regardless of the topic of research (Hanson and Richards 2017)—some others are emphasised by the power unbalance that derives from being a woman in a male-dominated environment such as managing the discomfort of being part of a minoritised and demonised group and feelings of physical unsafety.

However, gender is often reported as not particularly problematic in the construction of trust or the access to the field. Paradoxically, a female researcher, especially a young one, is taken less seriously than a male colleague and thus is perceived as less dangerous by the interviewees, giving them the impression that they are more in control of the situation (Damhuis and De Jonge 2022). Delaney (2007:215) suggests that being a “status subordinate” can be turned into an advantage in that it allows you to play dumb and ask for clarifications and more information. Similarly, Kathleen Blee (2002) reports that being a woman in a male-dominated context is not necessarily a disadvantage since female researchers are likely to be perceived as less threatening (see also Crippa 2019; Hochschild 2016). In my case, gender constituted a useful tool to access information: militants, especially the older ones, felt the need to explain in detail how their organisation functions and why and how certain events occurred to the naïve outsider. Paradoxically, mansplaining serves the goals of a researcher, and the status of a female outsider offers unexpected benefits (Flanigan 2023; Gelashvili and Gagnon 2024:8).

A party has factions and divisions, and this matters for the research.

In “Plea for an Emic Approach to Ugly Movements”, Martina Avanza (Avanza 2018) addresses the topic of the internal plurality of movements, saying that an emic¹⁰ approach can benefit us in seeing the internal diversity of groups that are otherwise

¹⁰ See note 7

seen as undivided. Indeed, as movements, big organisations as parties have complex internal dynamics, including different ways of organising in various locales and factions that may or may not talk to each other. This constituted a central element that shaped my possibilities to enter the field.

After the first interviews in the Central zone, I planned to enter the field in the other two regions through connections developed in the first area. I repeatedly asked interviewees if they knew any other members of the party who wanted to participate in the research, particularly if they knew members from other regions. Usually, I thought, provincial secretaries knew each other because they participated in national events together and were long enough party members to know each other. If this was true for the north and central region, this was not the case for the south: only one of the members I met in the north and centre regions knew someone in the south enough to give me a contact, and that's because they previously were member of another party, not because they met through the League. I came to understand by the practical problems that arise in entering the field in the south, that the party functioned separately in separate regions and that the national organisation had suspended any occasion for national exchange, partly because of COVID and partly as a way to maintain different lines in the organisation. They basically did not know personally any militant in the south. To solve this problem, I asked face-to-face in Pontida contacts with every regional group for southern regions and even Sardinia; just one of the people I met at the event answered my call and was open for an online interview; all the others never replied to my attempts to contact them.

The second series of problems I encountered were linked to factions. When I entered the field, the situation in the party was very conflictual, and that meant that I could not easily reach members of one faction by asking contacts for the members of the other faction already interviewed because they were not speaking to each other. I was once invited to an electoral dinner of a candidate supported by members I already interviewed and with whom I was on good terms. After the dinner, one member told me that the other half of the section refused to go to events organised by these factions because they could not even stand to dine together. I did not know anything about this, as everyone who agreed to talk with me until that point was on the same faction!

When you enter a conflictual field, as much as you can try to be “the fly on the wall,” you become part of the conflict. To my surprise, ideological distance did not constitute a big problem during interviews. Once I gathered the first access, members were open to discussing their party, even the most critical aspects of the transformation. I later understood this openness was partially due to their strong willingness to talk about this topic of change: the possibility to express their ideas on the process of change they partake in was rare due to a shrink in democratic spaces in the party; many felt that the party was changing without the possibility to talk about it internally. Sometimes they saw the research as a genuine occasion to vent, someone even thanked me for the opportunity for reflection the interview constituted. But in other cases, members saw me as a possible tool to put pressure on political rivals with the publication of my results: one interviewee asked to be mentioned by name as he was not afraid to tell everyone what he thought about the party he was leaving and sounded very sad when I told him I would anonymize every name, place or reference that could identify respondents. Another suggested that I should talk to someone from his faction if I

wanted to know more about the party, and I got the impression this was not a disinterested offer, as the offer was posed more than once during the same encounter.

3. Organisational change: More than one rise, more than one fall

Local trajectories of party change

As described in Chapter 1, the League rapidly gained and lost electoral consensus in the last years, reaching over 30% in 2019 and losing votes again in the 2021 political elections. The Italian political landscape has been characterised by electoral peaks and rapid decline in the last few years. As an example, the 5 Stars movement went through a similar trajectory in the same period as the Lega, and the same happened for the rise and fall of the democratic party leader Matteo Renzi, which quickly attracted voters and quickly lost them in a few years. This pattern has been noted and described in terms of electoral volatility and fluxes of voters, but little attention has been devoted to the effect on party organisations themselves. What happens *inside* a party that has an improvised growth in consensus? What happens when a party becomes attractive to career politicians from other organisations? Do long-time members welcome new faces or view new activists suspiciously? Winning an election doesn't always lead to an influx of new members for a party. However, if it does, it can provide an opportunity to strengthen the party's structure. At the same time, a grow in members can be unsettling, conflictual, and become counterproductive in the long run. In this chapter, I will follow the local processes through which the party gained momentum and support in the three zones considered in this research and the difficulties in maintaining their consensus in those areas.

The period we consider in this thesis started in 2012 when the Northern League was invested in a crisis linked to the illicit use of public funding that involved Umberto Bossi, the former secretary, and his close circle of family members and collaborators. Bossi was the founder and secretary of the party, a sacred figure (Zúquete 2007). Even though Bossi's leadership was strong, at times despotic, it was counterbalanced by the presence of provincial and regional leaders and by a net of local powers that were regularly consulted, negotiating Bossi's power (Passarelli and Tuorto 2018:36). Differently from other personalistic parties, that rarely survive to the political death of their leader, the league managed to survive to Bossi's decline thanks to this solid grassroots presence (Vercesi 2015). However, the 2012 political scandal severely compromised the party's grassroots structure, which lost 1014 over 1451 sections from 2011 to 2018 (Passarelli and Tuorto 2018:45). Although this decline is part of a structural process of decline in party membership and party structures in the Italian party system, the leader's fall contributed to accelerating this general process, and the new leadership did not invest in rebuilding the structure as it was before the scandal(ibid.).

In this unsettled context, Salvini emerged as the new secretary and had the opportunity to start transforming the party ideology and organisation. In regions where the party already existed, the party maintained a mass party structure until today. In contrast, in the south, the party is active mainly during electoral periods, is not evenly spread on the territory, and power is highly centralised. As underlined by Albertazzi (2016), despite the general idea that parties are declining in membership and going toward a thinner structure, the league maintained a mass party structure longer than expected. This is still true for the League and other parties in the populist radical right, who

consider grassroots activism important for gaining public support, legitimising the party, and organisational survival (Albertazzi and Van Kessel 2023). We will see in Chapter 4 that, despite the changes that occurred under Salvini's leadership, this mass party model remains like an echo in the organisation's political culture. This chapter will focus on the organisational dynamics that happened during this transformation. As the trajectory at the national level has already been described in detail in other publications, as we have seen in the literature review in Chapter 1, this chapter focuses on the three trajectories of organisational change separately, combining other scholars' findings with data I collected on the three zones and the reconstruction of the process from the point of view of members in the three locales.

Building from scratch in the south

A party that does not exist in a territory faces the problem of building a structure from scratch and establishing consolidated routines of action among new members. This problem is usually referred to as institutionalisation, meaning the capability of parties to become structurally solid through *routinisation* and *value infusion*¹¹ (Huntington 1968; Levitsky 1998; Panebianco 1982, 1988; Randall and Svåsand 2003). Moreover, in a party that becomes institutionalised, the party members develop an interest in the party's survival that goes beyond his leadership, favouring the formation of a structure that can survive leadership changes (Panebianco 1982). As already said, despite the strength of Bossi and his leadership, the Northern League was characterised by a solid

¹¹ See chapter 1 for more details on these two terms.

grass-roots presence that relies on the mass party model (Albertazzi 2016; Albertazzi and Van Kessel 2023).

The party had to be built from scratch in the South, facing public scepticism from previous anti-Southern positions. These positions are for sure one of the main reasons the party encountered resistance even during their maximum period of expansions, as the party encountered a symbolic barrier (Brancaccio et al. 2021:233) due to the derogatory language used both by militants and leadership towards the south and Neapolitans in particular in the past. This element frequently emerged in interviews and field observation, as members talked about how local public opposition towards them made their activities particularly challenging. This symbolic barrier sometimes becomes open hostility from other citizens in the South.

Eravamo in 4 [in paese], i gazebi non li facevo perché essendo un paese piccolo con diecimila abitanti eravamo visti un po' con un occhio diverso da tutti gli altri partiti. Essendo un partito del Nord, ci criticavano, onde evitare problemi non li facevamo. [...] anche quando è venuto Salvini abbiamo avuto tante, tante contestazioni in tutto il paese. Avevano messo degli striscioni contro la Lega, contro i leghisti, contro Salvini. (Antonio, former municipal secretary)

[in the town] We were 4; I didn't do the gazebos because, being a small town with ten thousand inhabitants, we were seen slightly with a different eye compared to the other parties. Being a party from the North, they criticised us, and to avoid problems, we didn't do them. [...] Even when Salvini came, we had many protests all over the town. Banners were put up against the League, against the Leghisti, and Salvini. (Antonio, former municipal secretary)

As we can see, the party initially encountered deep opposition from southern citizens, discouraging Antonio, a former secretary in a small town in the south locale, and his three other members in town from daily activities. Being part of the party also means facing the risk of losing your reputation and occurring in sanctions from friends and

acquaintances, especially in small towns, and this makes Antonio refrain from doing ordinary political tasks to avoid conflicts.

With external scepticism, militants must also confront their own willingness to become part of a party that, as we have seen in Chapter 1, based their identity on the demonisation of Southerners until just some years prior. Sometimes, this negotiation of symbolic boundaries passes through the admiration for the new leader, Salvini, described as an innovator who completely changed the party, and sometimes through the revaluation of the figure of Bossi, who is reframed as a “genius” despite his positions:

[quando] lo gli ho detto “guarda Pa’, sto cambiando partito sto aderendo a Noi con Salvini” mi fa “Che cosa?!?” [...] Ora sono diventati Salviniani, sono proprio sfegatati, eh? Cioè, ogni volta che viene Matteo si fa la foto con Matteo! Sono orgogliosi di Matteo, figurati (Mara, MP, 2nd wave)

[when] I told him, "Look, Dad, I'm changing party. I'm joining Noi con Salvini," he said, "What?!?"[...] Now they have become Salvinians and are really massive fans, you know? I mean, every time Matteo comes, [my father] takes a picture with Matteo! They are proud of Matteo, guess that (Mara, MP, 2nd wave)

Mara shared with me how her family's initial scepticism towards the political party she joined changed after they had the opportunity to meet its leader, Salvini, at public events in the area. Despite the party's negative reputation, getting to know Salvini personally turned sceptics into fans. This is to be intended both in terms of the leader's personal charisma and the charisma of his office. In a system like that in southern regions that privileges patronage, getting to know personally a politician with high political capital is an honour. In the following quotation instead, we can see how Franco, a young member who defines himself as a nationalist, renegotiates his ideological

distance from the party's previous positions through the revaluation of the figure of Bossi:

Bossi è stato certamente uno che ha dato voce a milioni di elettori del nord. si è inventato una idea, quella della Padania, che è stata avveniristica, quasi geniale, che è tanto stupida, passami il termine, e inaccettabile per un meridionale quanto geniale. Lui si è inventato il federalismo, si è inventato un sogno. Quanto di più distante da me, però gli riconosco una intuizione politica [...](Franco, Former Member)

Bossi was undoubtedly someone who gave a voice to millions of northern voters. He invented an idea, that of Padania, which was futuristic, almost genius, which is as stupid, pass me the term, and unacceptable to a southerner as it is genius. He invented federalism, he invented a dream. Nothing could be further from me. However, I recognize his political intuition [...](Franco, Former Member)

Here, the “stupid” idea of Padania is also “futuristic, almost genius”: Bossi had his virtues because he was capable of inventing a dream, the dream of Padania, convincing thousands of voters in the north of his positions. Even if Franco’s idea “could not be further” from Bossi’s lines, he recognizes his political “intuition”. In both cases, we see how a phase of initial scepticism is overcome through the unique qualities of the leaders that are worthy of respect beyond the ideas they support. Sometimes, individuals associate specific events with the decision to overcome doubts and support the party. For instance, Mara recalls an incident in Milan where she asked her brother about his voting preference and realised that her preconceived notions about the party were unfounded.

[per un periodo] andai da mio fratello che da tanti anni, ormai da più di vent'anni si è trasferito a Milano.[...] dissi a mio fratello, scusa, ma tu che voti? E lui disse “Lega” e io faccio “ma come Lega? [...] scusa, ma quelli ce l'hanno contro il sud e chiedono la secessione, chiedono la separazione?” e mio fratello mi disse,

I lived for a while in Milan, where my brother had lived for over 20 years. [...] I asked my brother, “Excuse me, what do you vote for?” And he said, “Lega,” and I went, “What? Lega? [...] are you talking about those people that have it in for the south and ask for secession and separation?” and my brother said to me, “No, you didn't understand

“No, tu non hai capito niente. La Lega è una Lega territoriale che lavora per l'imprenditore e a favore degli imprenditori e a favore dei cittadini. Quindi tutto quello che tu ascolti, secondo me sono emerite cavolate”[...] se un ragazzo del Sud che si è trasferito al Nord per lavorare e che poi con i meriti, con la sua volontà, con la sua preparazione è riuscito comunque ad avere una posizione ti dice: “io voto Lega Nord” e ti dà delle spiegazioni per cui vota Lega Nord, tu incominci a dire –se sei ovviamente una persona intelligente— “ok, evidentemente al sud arriva una informazione distorta”. (Mara, MP, 2nd wave)

anything. The League is a territorial league that works for the entrepreneur, in favour of entrepreneurs and citizens. I think everything you listened to is a load of rubbish.”[...] if a guy from the South who moved to the North to work and then with his merit, with his will, with his training managed to have a position tells you “I vote Lega Nord,” and gives you explanations why he votes Lega Nord, you start to say – obviously if you are an intelligent person—“Okay, it seems like the information that arrives in the South is distorted.” (Mara, MP, 2nd wave)

Mara is initially surprised by her brother’s position because, as a Southerner, she despises the ideas of secessionism and independentism. The discussion with her brother becomes a turning point of realisation: if someone with the “merit, will and training” of her brother – a leitmotif around welfare chauvinism that frequently emerged in my conversations with members of the party in the south— can vote for the League, anti-southern positions are a misrepresentation of the positions of the Northern League, that is wrongly depicted as anti-southern because of the distorted information that reaches the south.

On the same line, another southern member I met in Pontida told me his story of return migration from a northern region where he was a militant of the League. This experience made him realise how the South could benefit from a party closely connected with the local territory. A realisation of the necessity of joining the League comes from a detachment from the South, through distancing yourself from Southern

commoners who do not understand the actual benefits of a party like the League for the Southern territory.

If the Southern electorate misunderstands the Northern League, it is also true that the Northern League misinterprets the South. Some members in the South feel still stigmatised by their counterparts in the North, particularly those who disagree with the party's national turn.

[Matteo Salvini] ha avuto questa visione di aprirsi al sud perché sa che ci sono a sud delle potenzialità. C'è qualcuno che parla solo della visione del nord, ma che non è mai venuto al sud a capire e comprendere come è strutturato il sud, che cos'è il sud e chi è la gente del Sud. Ma non perché la gente del sud sia meglio della gente del nord, ma perché [...] bisogna proprio dividere i politici che ci hanno governato sino ad oggi [dalle persone]. È la mentalità, non sono le persone del Sud. (Mara, MP, 2nd wave)

[Matteo Salvini] had this vision of opening up to the South because he knew there was potential in the South. Some people only talk about the vision of the North, but they have never come to the South to understand and comprehend how the South is structured, what the South is, and who the people of the South are. Not because the people of the south are better than the people of the north, but because [...] you have to distinguish the politicians who have governed us until now [from the people]. It is the mentality, it is not the people of the south. (Mara, MP, 2nd wave)

A group of long-standing leaders in Lombardy, including former leader Bossi, recently announced their plans to create a "Committee for the North" in response to the poor results of the 2022 elections¹². They believe the League's original goal of achieving economic autonomy from the rest of Italy has been betrayed by focusing too much on the south. However, Mara disagrees with this view and is upset by how it stereotypes southern people as a burden, as always in need of public economic aid. Instead, she

¹² <https://www.ilpost.it/2022/10/03/bossi-salvini-lega-nord/>

believes the South has great potential for economic growth, which the League can help develop. She thinks the party should focus on supporting small entrepreneurs and local excellence, promoting the "Made in Italy" productions and valorising "merit". This approach can uplift the southern economy, which has suffered due to poor governance in previous years. Party members in the north lack the same "vision" as Matteo Salvini, who immediately understood this potential. We can see again how the same productivist views of the original Northern League, which assigned value only to "productive" areas, are repurposed here to say that the South is worthy. In other words, the interviewee does not reject the idea that unproductive zones are a burden but rather re-evaluates the boundaries of what territories should be considered worthy or not. The leader is different from other leghisti who can't understand the South because they never saw it.

A second problem the party faced in entering the South is related to interparty dynamics and specificities of the local party system, what Mara, in the previous quote, called "the politician who have governed us until now". In some regions, the presence of a stable political class at the local level –the so-called *campioni di preferenze* (De Luca 2001)—provided scarce opportunities for the party to penetrate the local networks of the centre-right. According to Brancaccio, Mete, Scaglione, and Tuorto (Brancaccio et al. 2021), one of the main issues the party has faced in the South is the tendency of Southern voters to assign their preferences to candidates before the party itself. The League faced a challenge in the southern region, lacking local political representatives. Despite the national leader's growing popularity, they initially struggled to establish their presence in elections that rely heavily on the relationship between elected officials and voters, such as local and regional elections. As newcomers, they

were systematically excluded from local power distribution. (p. 229). For this reason, despite the existence of the list “Noi con Salvini” since 2014, the party did not manage to build a stable local presence until 2017.

In 2018, Salvini's new League elected 12 deputies and 8 senators in the south, including Salvini himself, who was elected in Calabria. During its initial stages, the development of the party was controlled by the national level top-down. The central party office encouraged the establishment of new sections; however, they often delegated authority to nominated commissioners –sometimes coming from the north and sometimes chosen on their proximity to the national leadership—to address internal conflicts and provide guidance on operating within the territory. Therefore, although the party existed in the South, they did not immediately express a full political leadership of their own (ibid. 230). In 2017, Davide Vampa wrote an article about the first phase of Salvini's expansion in the south, underlining that the ideological shift also corresponded to a decline of the mass party model, which was also favoured by the falling membership and the decline in public subsidies for parties. Since the party in the south was created anew, Salvini had the opportunity to develop a structure that was highly dependent on his leadership (Vampa 2017). According to Matteo Zulianello (2021), the initial attempts to export the same model of the North in the South were unsuccessful. The party has become so far “a *quasi-colonial* structure dominated by, and dependent on, the Northern elites.” We will see in the next chapter that these choices not only had an impact on the concrete patterns of the organisation but also on locally differentiated ways in which members imagine relations between grassroots organisations and central offices.

Regarding membership, in the south, the party recruited new members, mainly attracted by Salvini's leadership, and experienced local politicians with their network of preferences and power relations who joined through party switching and cooptation by the party's central offices. While the party consensus is primarily attributed to Salvini's figure in the literature, De Luca and Fruncillo (2019) underlined that the presence of prominent local politicians also played a significant role in amplifying the party's electoral achievements in areas where they were present in local elections between 2019 and 2020. However, these local figures also carried their own political histories and networks of interest. In the interviews I conducted, it became clear that these figures and their legacies become a matter of contention in the long run. In the South, their power is too independent of the party leadership, and their reputation precedes that of the party they join, and in the North, they are mentioned as the example of how the party decayed, leaving space for opportunists. Lucia, who joined the League during its initial phase of expansion south in 2014, notes that her firm beliefs about the importance of grassroots activism, which had led her to choose the League over other centre-right parties, are now being tested by the presence of local political elites.

quando entrano coloro che fanno politica da molti più anni [...] è chiaro che entrano in gioco certe logiche e certe dinamiche che se da una parte fanno bene al partito, però dall'altra parte fanno male. [...] un partito che sta dietro le scrivanie, è un partito che non mi rappresenta, io non ho bisogno di quello, io ho bisogno di stare tra la gente, facendo i gazebo, ascoltando i loro problemi [...] nonostante [la mia carica politica], comunque io aprivo e chiudevo il gazebo (Mara, MP, 2nd wave)

when those who have been in politics for many more years come in [...] it is clear that certain logics and certain dynamics come into play, which if on the one hand are good for the party, on the other hand are bad for it. [...] a party that is behind desks is a party that does not represent me, I don't need that, I need to be among the people, doing the gazebos, listening to their problems [...] despite [my political office], I used to open and close the gazebo regularly (Mara, MP, 2nd wave)

Although discourses around the distance between politics and ordinary citizens are typical in Populist radical right parties, here the reference is mainly on the organisational form: acquiring notables means an advantage for the party, as they attract consensus, but is not in line with the characteristics the interviewee sees as distinctive of the League. Local elites stay “behind the desks” and make the kind of politics that is far from citizens' everyday lives. The “Gazebo” becomes the material representation of a set of repertoires of action that pertain to a mass party and are typically evoked by militants to stress the importance of ground activism, the kind of practices you must not abandon even when you acquire a position of power. Moreover, in the eyes of those who remain in the party, party-switching elites use the party's electoral success for personal purposes and leave the party as soon as they don't gain from it anymore. The diminished strength of the party just before the 2022 national elections is not a matter of delusion of “native militants” towards the party but just another “transition” of the same untrustworthy local political elites from one party to another.

È vero, c'è qualche nativo leghista, qualche nativo leghista che ha cominciato a fare attività politica con la Lega che è traghettato in Fratelli d'Italia. Io questo non lo posso negare, è vero. Ma se io dovessi dire è proprio un numero sparuto di persone.[...] la stragrande maggioranza di chi è andato in Fratelli d'Italia, sono quelli che si sono fatti tutti i partiti politici[...] questi soggetti che sono entrati, hanno preso la Lega in quel momento al 30% per essere eletti nelle amministrative o altro, ci sono stati e poi se ne sono andati, sono transitati in Fratelli d'Italia. (Mara, MP, 2nd wave)

It's true; there are some native leghisti who started doing political activity with the League and now moved to Fratelli d'Italia. I can't deny that, it's true. But if I were to say, it's just a small number of people[...] the vast majority of those who went to Fratelli d'Italia, they are the ones who moved around all the political parties[...] these individuals who came in when the League was at 30 percent to get elected in the administrative elections or whatever, they came, and then they left, they transited to Fratelli d'Italia. (Mara, MP, 2nd wave)

After an initial openness to the entrance of notables, the party quickly implemented stricter rules to control membership and candidatures. This decision was made due to a series of problems that emerged, linked to embarrassing affiliations at the border of criminality and judicial scandals (Brancaccio et al. 2021). If initially, this renewed control from the centre avoided the pollution of the public image that comes from being associated with criminal organisations, in the long run, it severely compromised the development of an autonomous party structure in the south, as the development was strictly controlled top down.

The openness to the entrance of notables constituted a novelty in organisational practices for the League. As the party grew fast, they needed to rely upon members with previous affiliations. In the statutes and regulations of the party, militants are required to have a specific “anzianità di militanza” (seniority as a militant) to have specific positions in the party both in internal roles (Table 4) and candidatures in elections at every level (Table 5). The League maintains a double line for membership, distinguishing between two types of members: *supporters* and *militants*. Supporters are only required to pay an annual subscription, while militants must actively participate in party activities to gain the right to vote in party congresses and be candidates on party lists. To become a militant, according to the *Regolamento Lega per Salvini Premier* of 2020, as in the *Regolamento Lega Nord* one must participate in the party branch’s activities for at least 12 months and receive approval from the local delegation, which likewise requires permission from higher regional structures. This stratified procedure assigns each organism the right to veto this status acquisition, favouring the maintenance of existing structures. It is necessary to “merit” to become fully part of the party.

Table 4 : Seniority needed to access internal roles					
	LN 2015	LSP 2020	from 2021 on	from 2022 on	from 2023 on
Militant member (<i>Socio Ordinario Militante -SOM</i>)	12 months of active participation	12 months active participation	6 months active participation Not necessary if already have any elective charge		Not necessary only with list denominated “Lega Salvini premier” or authorised civic lists
Municipal level	180 days SOM	1 year SOM	Jan 2021: suspended Jun : 6 months SOM		
Provincial Level	1 year SOM	1 year SOM	Suspended	1 year SOM for provincial secretary 6 months SOM for provincial board member 6 months SOM for delegate in regional congress	
Regional Level	3 years SOM	3 years SOM	Suspended		
Federal Level	5 years SOM	5 years SOM	Suspended		
Segretario Federale, or member of the administration committee of the party	10 years SOM	10 years SOM	Suspended		
Federal President	20 years SOM	(not mentioned)	(not mentioned)	(not mentioned)	(not mentioned)

Following the same logic, to access roles in the party, a Militant member must have specific years of militancy to access different roles in the party and to have the possibility to be a candidate in the party's lists. With regards to internal roles, the Northern League and the League Salvini Premier maintained the same timelines, with the exception of the municipal level that in Salvini's League moved from 180 days to 1 year. For candidatures, the Northern League had a precise indication, while the Lega Salvini Premier leave the decisions at discretion of the Federal Council.

Table 5: Seniority for Candidates to administrative or political elections				
	LN 2011		LN 2015	LSP 2020
		If previous members in other parties		
Municipalities <15.000 inhabitants	1 year SOM	2 years SOM	1 year SOM	<i>"The Federal Council can establish, for every electoral turn at every level, seniority criteria needed to be proposed as candidates or to be candidate"</i>
Municipalities >15.000 inhabitants and provincial levels	2 years SOM	4 years SOM	2 years SOM	
Regional and Political Elections	3 years SOM	6 years SOM	5 years SOM	

However, as the party grew fast, they needed to adjust the timelines for obtaining militant status to accommodate new entrants. The 12-month requirement was reduced to 6 months in January 2021 by a resolution of the Federal Council. The resolution, however, also contained the following addition:

I Soci Sostenitori che risultano eletti nel ruolo di Parlamentare, Governatore di Regione, Presidente di Provincia, Sindaco ivi compresa la Città Metropolitana, Assessore e

Supporters Members elected as [list of possible political and administrative roles] may apply to acquire the status of Militant Member without the mandatory six months of voluntary

Consigliere di ogni ente territoriale, Assessore e Consigliere Regionale, Presidente – Assessore – Consigliere del Municipio della Città Metropolitana, possono presentare la domanda per acquisire la qualifica di S.O.M. [N.d.A.: socio ordinario militante] senza dover svolgere preventivamente i 6 (sei) mesi di attività volontaria. (Regolamento Lega Per Salvini Premier - note integrative aggiornate a febbraio 2022)

activity in the party. (Internal regulations of Lega per Salvini Premier - supplementary notes February 2022)

This is a substantial modification of the formal rules, opening the possibility of a rapid status acquisition for those elected to any office. The document does not specify that members must be elected with the League's lists, which allows elected leaders of other parties to rapidly acquire the right to vote in the party congress. However, in 2023, the Federal Council deliberated again on this topic, specifying that this was valid only for those elected with the party's list. As one does not deliberate on something that is not happening, probably some dubious case raised the question of whether party switchers should acquire the status of militants right away or not. While internal roles initially remained strictly regulated to maintain control over the party, candidatures were left to the federal council's decisions. The council decided whether to nominate someone based on contingent situations –Allowing, for example, in the south to candidate local patrons. Something worth noticing is that a previous version of the *Regolamento Lega Nord Per L'indipendenza Della Padania* from last modified in 2011, reported different seniority rules for members with previous memberships in other parties. As they were party switchers, their times for acquiring the possibility to be candidates were even longer than the other members, as they needed to make up for their untrustworthiness. A completely different logic if compared to the strategy adopted in the South to rely on existing power networks to expand your presence quickly.

In 2021, the Federal Council also allowed for a suspension of the rules in place for internal roles:

7 gennaio 2021 - "Il Consiglio Federale, preso atto di quanto previsto dall'articolo 15 del Regolamento Federale approvato in data 15 maggio 2020 in termini di anzianità di militanza necessaria per le candidature interne, e considerato che l'attuale crescita del Movimento non permetterebbe a molti Soci di potersi candidare, fino a nuova deliberazione del Consiglio Federale non si applicano le anzianità previste dal comma 2 dell'articolo 15 del citato Regolamento Federale."

January 7th 2021 - "The Federal Council, acknowledging the requirements of Article 15 of the Federal Regulations approved on 15 May 2020 in terms of the seniority of militancy required for internal candidacies, and considering that the current growth of the Movement would not allow many Members to be able to stand as candidates, establish until further deliberation by the Federal Council, the seniority requirements set out in paragraph 2 of Article 15 of the aforementioned Federal Regulations shall not apply."

As the party is growing fast, the required seniority is not possible to respect. Thus, the party adapted the regulations to allow for the inclusion of new members. This decision is reversed after 6 months when new seniority is established for municipal roles, shorter than the previous versions. Likewise, in 2022, they established rules for provincial roles that are shorter than the previous ones in place.

10 giugno 2021 – Il Consiglio Federale ha provveduto alla approvazione del "Regolamento della delegazione territoriale comunale" determinando in mesi 6 (sei) l'anzianità di militanza necessaria per presentare le candidature a Segretario di Sezione e di membro del Consiglio direttivo di Sezione Comunale.

10 June 2021 - The Federal Council approved the "Regulation of the Municipal Section Delegation" determining in 6 (six) months the length of service required to submit candidatures for Section Secretary and Member of the Municipal Section Executive Board.

4 ottobre 2022 – Il Segretario Federale, unitamente al Consiglio Federale, ha dato parere favorevole al "Regolamento del Congresso Provinciale", predisposto dalla

4 October 2022 - The Federal Secretary, together with the Federal Council, approved the 'Regulations for the Provincial Congress', prepared by the Statutes and Regulations Commission, determining 1 (one) year

Commissione Statuto e Regolamenti, determinando in anni 1 (uno) l'anzianità di militanza necessaria per presentare le candidature a Segretario Provinciale e mesi 6 (sei) per quella di membro del Consiglio direttivo Provinciale. Ha determinato inoltre l'anzianità di mesi 6 (sei) per le candidature a delegato del Congresso Regionale.

as the seniority of militancy required to present candidacies for Provincial Secretary and 6 (six) months for that of Provincial Executive Council member. It also determined 6 (six) months' seniority for candidatures for delegate to the Regional Congress.

Another crucial factor in understanding the development of parties in the South is the patterns of party switching and the career paths of parliament-elected politicians. To what extent did the party manage to build a new presence, and to what extent did it rely on members from other parties to develop its leadership in the South? Was the party able to stabilize its quickly acquired leadership in the long run? Data on parliamentarians give a composite image. In the European parliamentary elections of 2019, on a total of 28 parliamentarians, 7 were elected in southern regions and islands. Up to date, 3 over 7 left the party in favour of Fratelli d'Italia or Popolo della Libertà¹³,

¹³ As underlined in Gauja's model (Gauja 2016), understanding party systems is crucial for comprehending party change. Throughout this thesis, I will frequently mention the two primary parties that, along with the League, make up the traditional centre-right composition in Italy. Given the prevalence of party switching in Italy, it's helpful to have a better grasp of the relationship between these three parties. Forza Italia/Popolo della Libertà, Berlusconi's party, has always been a personalistic party with a strong emphasis on the leader and a loosely organised structure on the ground. The party leans towards a liberal-conservative stance and was the primary party in the coalition until Salvini's ascendancy. The party is currently facing a significant leadership crisis following the illness and death of Berlusconi, which poses problems as a personalistic party rarely survives at the political (or literal) death of his leader. Conversely, Fratelli d'Italia, despite his recent attempt to look moderate, is traditionally a far-right party. The party still maintains a reference in their symbol to the tri-coloured flame, which symbolizes Movimento Sociale Italiano, the primary neo-fascist formation in Italy following the war. Historically, the party has been the smallest of the three, and it is strongly structured only in specific Areas of the country. It is now the primary party in the Government coalition, as many voters shifted from the League to Fratelli d'Italia in the most recent elections. Electoral studies on the last political elections show a propensity of right-wing voters to vote for all three parties with scarce loyalty to one party in particular, and for this reason, the electorate at the moment is contended among the three (Maggini and Vezzoni, 2023; De Sio and Paparo 2023). As said in Chapter 1, the three parties governed together in governments led by Silvio Berlusconi.

while only 2 over 21 left the party in the other electoral districts,¹⁴ denoting different degrees of loyalty to the party. Contrarily, data from the Chamber of Deputies show that the party stabilised the number of deputies from the south over time despite the growth and fall in the total number of deputies. This also altered internal equilibriums in the party as the same number of southern deputies now weighs more on the total number of elected officials.

In the XVII Legislature (2013-2018), the party gained several deputies in southern regions through party switching. They were first elected with Popolo della Libertà. Starting from the end of March 2015, the group lost 4 deputies from Veneto (who were against the transformation of the party), and on April 1st, the parliamentary group changed its denomination from “Lega Nord and Autonomie” to “Lega Nord e Autonomie - Lega dei Popoli - Noi con Salvini”, including the new formed “Noi con Salvini” in the name and opening to parliamentarians from regions other than the north. Notably, 7 parliamentarians from the southern areas moved from their original collocation, Popolo della Libertà, to the new Salvini group. As we have said, during the sequent legislation (XVIII legislation 2018-2022), the party reached its peak consensus, electing 126 deputies and becoming the most prominent formation on the centre-right. The parliamentary group acquired 9 more deputies from Popolo della Libertà, the 5-stars movement, and Italia Viva. Again, the party attracted deputies from centrist formations, mainly in the Centre and South. The parliamentary group also lost some members towards the end of the legislation, as the party's reputation declined after the League

¹⁴ <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/it/full-list>

decided to join a large coalition government led by Mario Draghi during the period of COVID-19. During the current legislation, the party lost its position as the leading party in the centre-right coalition in favour of Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia. It was able to elect approximately half the number of deputies as the previous one, with 66 deputies.

Let's review the previous affiliations of the deputies as shown in Table 2. In correspondence to the party boom of 2018, the number of deputies in the south is 13 over 131 at the end of the legislation, with 9 elected in Lega's lists and 4 party switchers. However, if we look at previous affiliations of those elected with the league, we can see that 4 over 9 were local members of other parties before 2018, and 2 were previously in parliament with the League but were party switchers of the XVII legislation, raising the number of total members with other previous affiliations to 10 over 13. Only three deputies have exclusively been active in Noi con Salvini or non-party organisations, as a confirmation that the party relied on pre-existing networks in the South. We will explore in the upcoming chapters that these various affiliations are important. Different parties have distinct organisational cultures, which affect members' ideological positioning and their perceptions of the party. This can lead to increased internal friction within the party.

In the 2022 elections (XIX Leg.), after a reform that diminished the number of total deputies in parliament and a sharp decrease in consensus for the league, the party elected 12 deputies in the south over 66 in total. The southern component of the party maintained stable numbers, and its weight on the total parliamentary group increased. This is important to consider because the southern component, differently from other

zones, is particularly tied to Salvini's figure and his close collaborators, reinforcing his leadership.

Table 6

Composition of parliamentary group Lega 2014-2024 Chamber of Deputies ¹⁵						
Leg.	Elected with the League	Others → League	League → Others	Tot at the end of the legislature	PDL +LEGA +FDI	Total deputies
XVII	18	+7 ¹⁶	-4 ¹⁷	22	126	630
	2 ¹⁸		-1			
XVIII	126	+ 9 ¹⁹	-4 ²⁰	131	261	630
XIX	66	-	-1 ²¹	65 ²²	228	400 ²³

Those previously deputies or senators for the party grew in number among those elected with the League, denoting a stabilisation of a series of figures as representatives of the league in the south. Among the first-time elected, we can find again several local cadres from other parties, personnel that had intermediate roles in different parties and found a new position in the League, both coming from the centre-right and the radical-right. This again highlights that the party relied on pre-existing networks for selecting personnel. While this approach may benefit the party in collecting preferences, it raises doubts about the possibility of establishing a fully

¹⁵ Data from the Chamber of Deputies official source.

¹⁶ Deputies moved from PDL and "Misto" and were previously elected in Lazio, Campania, Sicilia, Puglia, Estero

¹⁷ Deputies moved from Lega to "Misto" and were previously elected in Veneto

¹⁸ minor autonomist parties

¹⁹ Deputies moved from PDL, Italia Viva and 5stelle and were previously elected in Lombardia, Abruzzo, Toscana, Sicilia, Emilia-Romagna, Lazio.

²⁰ Deputies moved from Lega to "Misto" or FDI and were previously elected in Lazio, Sicilia, Trentino, Emilia-Romagna.

²¹ Deputy moved from Lega to "Misto" and was previously elected in Sicily

²² Until July 2024

²³ In the XIX legislature, the total number of deputies decreased from 630 to 400 after a reform.

structured party in the southern regions in the future precisely because of the different organisational models that this implies.

Table 7

Previous affiliations of deputies Lega's parliamentary group 2014-2024 South and Islands									
	Elected with the League					Party switchers in this legislation			South/ Tot League
	Other parties at the local level ²⁴	Other local organisations. ²⁵	Only in "Noi con Salvini"	League's deputy in previous legislation	Tot	Centre-right	Others	Tot	
XVII Leg.	0	0	0	0	0	4	1	5	5/22
XVIII Leg.	4	1	2	2	9	3	1		13/131
XIX Leg. Curr.	5	1	1	5 ²⁶	12	-	-		12/66 ²⁷ Curr.

Expanding in the Centre and Centre-north

At times, the geographical boundaries of the imagined land of Padania included regions that were way beyond the Po valley (see Giordano 1999 for the answer to the intriguing question "Macerata: the centre of 'Italy' or the border of 'Padania'?"). Nevertheless, despite some attempts to build a presence in central Italy, the party never gained electoral success in this area before 2010. The advancement of the party in this area of the country, in fact, precedes Salvini's election as party secretary. The

²⁴ Data on local affiliation come from official curriculums of the candidates on the Chamber of Deputies websites, integrated with local newspapers. The level of previous commitment ranges from candidate to local election to being party secretary of other parties and fully involved in local power networks.

²⁵ Labor unions and civic associations.

²⁶ Two previously elected at the Senate.

²⁷ See note 23

party found consensus primarily in Emilia-Romagna and Toscana and more limitedly in Marche and Umbria, while it has always been scarce in Lazio.

In this research the area considered is located in the center-north, in a former red zone, where the PCI and later the Democratic Party are a majority. The choice of this zone is based on the different degree of organization in this area compared to other regions in the center. I was interested in looking at a section already structured before the national turn of the party, as in the center north. In fact, in 2010, the party reached 9,4% in regional elections in Italy's red zones. According to Passarelli and Tuorto (2012), three main reasons favoured the party's success in these areas. The first is a change in the political agenda of the party: after many years in government with the centre-right coalition, the League gradually moved from exclusive attention to federalism and the autonomy of Padania to other battles, mainly moving towards antimigration topics and euroskepticism. This made the party converge on the typical positions of the European Right as it abandoned part of its initial specificities and the centre-right positions of the past (Ignazi 2005; Passarelli 2013) to embrace radical-right positions. This made the party more attractive for areas outside Padania, as Padania was not the centre of their discourse anymore. Since in this phase of the party history, anti-migration discourses relied on welfare chauvinism (Anderlini 2009) or islamophobia rather than ethnical discourses or biological racism, their claims can be more easily accepted in zones where overtly racist discourses may be less appealing to the electorate. A second element that made the party appealing was the stable presence of the party in local administrations in the regions in the north, which made the party appealing as a reliable administrative force. As towns and small cities are particularly central in the league's discourses on economic autonomy, the league instances easily

found consensus in peripheric zones, even in the former communist zone, playing on existing centre-periphery conflicts. Third, the League proposed itself both as a force of change from centre-left continuous government and of continuity with the communist tradition of the PCI. It does so by repurposing organisational structures, practices, and words typical of the social-communist tradition in zones where the centre-left was strong and structured but gradually left that model. The mass party model of the League is based on grassroots activism, sections, and cadre training, with a particular

Intenzione di voto 2018	Ricordo del voto 2013						Giovani under 18 nel 2013	
	Rivoluzione Civile	Coalizione Bersani	Coalizione Monti	Movimento 5 Stelle	Coalizione Berlusconi	Altri	2013	Non voto
Potere al Popolo	11.0	1.8	1.1	0.9	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.5
Liberi e Uguali	36.9	8.2	1.1	1.1	0.0	0.0	1.5	3.3
Partito Democratico	12.7	59.1	47.7	2.9	0.9	7.7	23.6	10.7
Più Europa	14.5	3.2	0.0	1.8	0.0	38.2	0.0	2.4
Insieme	0.0	0.6	0.0	0.0	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.2
Civica Popolare	0.0	0.6	0.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.7
Movimento 5 Stelle	17.1	10.4	9.2	65.2	6.9	0.0	17.1	12.1
Noi con l'Italia-UDC	0.0	0.0	3.6	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.2
Forza Italia	0.0	0.7	13.9	2.3	27.9	0.0	10.1	2.6
Lega	0.0	5.4	11.2	15.5	47.0	0.0	7.9	12.3
Fdi	2.3	0.8	1.3	0.6	15.1	19.0	4.8	0.5
Altri	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.2	1.2	24.6	7.0	0.2
Non voto	5.6	9.1	10.3	9.2	0.5	10.5	27.9	54.2
Totale	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Figure 5 Electoral Fluxes 2013-2018 (Toscana, Emilia-Romagna, Umbria e Marche) - Biancucci - CISE 2018
<https://cise.luiss.it/cise/2018/02/16/i-flussi-fra-ricordo-del-voto-2013-e-intenzioni-di-voto-2018-nella-zona-rossa/>.

emphasis on the idea of territory. However, the party culture also incorporates important elements of discontinuity with the past, the most important being the abandonment of class discourses (Passarelli and Tuorto 2012:10) in favour of an interclass approach that is typical of populist radical right parties, who build their boundaries on ethnic or nativist division rather than class lines.

Similarly to what we saw for the southern regions, in the centre, the party became attractive to voters coming from Forza Italia. In line with what we saw at the national

level in chapter 1, voters of the league in 2018 were previously voters of Forza Italia in 2013. In Figure 5, we can see that 47% of voters of the Berlusconi coalition in 2013 in the former red zone declared their intention to vote for the League in 2018. (D'Alimonte 2015; Paparo and Cataldi 2018). This aligns with the party's gradual electoral growth in this area, which became visible in the 2015 elections, when the League became the second party in Tuscany with 16.3% of votes. Moreover, according to Mancosu and Ladini (2020), the spatial distribution of this consensus corresponds to areas in which MSI, although minoritarian in the first republic, had local consensus and presence. This suggests the hypothesis of persistence over time of voting behaviour where "the presence in certain areas of local neo-fascist institutions (e.g. MSI clubs, or 'sezioni') during the First Republic might have left in part of the population living in those areas a highly resilient sense of belonging to the minority sub-culture" (ibid:212).

This complex picture, in which the party appears to appeal to different publics at different times and for different reasons, can help us understand the varied world I encountered when I entered the field in this area.

A first consideration to be made is that, upon observing local activities, it seems that many of the militants who actively participate are also members of the party in public office. As one of the members remarked with a laugh, during the electoral boom, they had "more seats than asses"(fieldnotes Nov. 2022), and they candidated all their members with sufficient seniority. As a consequence, it is not possible to draw a distinct line between simple militants and public office in this area, as the roles overlap greatly, and often, the members hold elective and internal roles simultaneously. Moreover, due to the double membership system, the boom of consensus in 2018 did not correspond

to a boom in militants but to a boom in supporter members. In this sense, Giovanni, the provincial commissioner, told me that while supporters reached 1000 at the provincial level –a number that shows that there was interest in the party around 2018 and 2019—only a minority of them actually became militant. According to Giovanni, many of those who joined liked the Lega all along but were not confident in joining the party before the boom as the party was still stigmatised.

Sono entrate persone molto valide, e si sono avvicinate persone che una volta dicevano “io sono sempre stato dei vostri, ma un conto è avvicinarmi ad un partito che è al 4% ed essere criticato...” perché essere leghista non è facile in [Regione] [...] ai banchetti, quando li facciamo sabato mattina al mercato, si avvicinano persone di tutti i comuni vicino, ma a [paese] sono sempre i soliti che si avvicinano[...] Però quando è stato il momento che erano dentro all’urna, alle europee del 2019, la Lega era a 46 voti dal PD, quindi dici “dove sono questi che mi danno il voto?”[...] capita anche per le comunali di raccogliere le firme e ti dicono “vienimela a raccogliere a casa perché io in piazza non mi faccio vedere, sono dei vostri ma non mi faccio vedere” (Giovanni, provincial commissioner, longstanding)

Very valid people joined us, those who used to say “I’ve always been one of you, but it’s not easy to be in a party that’s at 4% and to be criticised...” Being a Leghista is not easy in [the Region] [...] On Saturday mornings at the market, people from all the neighbouring municipalities approach our Gazebos, but in [town], they’re always the usual ones. [...] But when the time came that they were inside the voting booth, in the 2019 European elections, the League was 46 votes behind the PD, so you may say, “Where are these people who give me their vote?” [...] Sometimes you need to collect signatures to partake in municipal elections, and they say “Come to my house for the signature, I don’t want to be seen in the main square. I am with you, but I don’t want to be seen.” (Giovanni, provincial commissioner, longstanding)

What Giovanni is describing is a process of normalisation: being part of the League is still seen with suspect in those parts of the region in which the Democratic Party regularly wins elections, and the large majority of voters are left-leaning, to the point that those who sign for the presentation of Lega’s lists to municipal elections do not want anybody to know it, do not want to sign for the party “in the main square”, where

everybody could see them and associate the party with them. But, as a Christian Democratic well-known slogan from the '50s would say, in the secret of the voting booth, God can see you and Stalin does not: voters of 2019 were just 46 less than those of the Democratic Party, who governed the area for decades. Now that the party is not 4% anymore, members who were previously afraid of the stigma can join without fearing being judged. The party has moved from being niche and seen as extremist to being a legitimate voting option. During the peak period, the party significantly augmented its presence locally, not only because of the national leader's communication, as has been evidenced by the literature, but also because they conducted a meticulous recruiting campaign around towns in the area, using the structures they already had started to build before 2018.

Fino alle scorse amministrative avevamo, credo quattro sei consiglieri [...] dalle elezioni amministrative è stato fatto, un grosso lavoro di andare per esempio qualcuno è andato al bar del paese, si è messo a chiacchierare di politica. E se capitava che c'era qualcuno che poteva essere interessato, cercava di coinvolgerli, di formare un gruppetto. E poi diciamo che non tutto è andato bene. Non tutto è andato bene, però abbiamo fatto più di 50 consiglieri [...] (Silvia, MP, 2nd wave)

Until the last administrative elections we had, I think four or six councillors [...] since the administrative elections, a lot of work has been done to go- for example, someone went to the town bar and started chatting about politics. If there happened to be someone who might be interested, he tried to involve them by forming a small group. And then let's say that not everything went well. Not everything went well, but we reached more than 50 councillors[...] (Silvia, MP, 2nd wave)

Silvia talks about their growth in the area and how they managed to have ten times the councillors as before. The party on the ground remains an essential component of political activity. In a certain sense, political communication allows for electoral consensus, but direct action allows for recruiting new potential candidates. Of course, as Silvia notices, not everyone you manage to candidate remains in the party, “not

everything went well". Half of the elected did not stay in the party, and the competitor Fratelli d'Italia also tried to build on their work, contacting all members who left the League one by one to ask them to join their party (fieldnotes September 2022). Still, in any case, the party is now more structured than before.

Qualcuno è andato via, qualcuno è passato in un altro partito. Però ecco, è cambiata molto perché adesso riusciamo ad avere delle sezioni. No, non dico foltissime grandissime, però insomma, adesso abbiamo delle sezioni in ogni comune della provincia (Silvia, MP, 2nd wave)

Someone has left, and someone has moved to another party. However, there have been significant changes as we can now have sections. No, I'm not saying they're huge, but now every municipality in the province has sections. (Silvia, MP, 2nd wave)

If we compare this zone with southern regions, the party already had pre-existing networks during the boom, although they were a small and minoritarian group. This meant that, differently than in the South, they could capitalize on the leader's propulsion to obtain good results at the local level, using the electoral boom to build a more significant presence. Furthermore, the party focused on building connections with other political and economic entities in the region, especially with associations of producers and manufacturers, as well as with professional associations. The area is traditionally leftist, making the Democratic Party the main reference for all sector associations. This means that relations with the center-right are generally less established when not overtly hostile. Some interviewees in this area report that, despite being invited as guests to public events, inaugurations, and meetings by influential economic actors, they are rarely treated as equals or given the opportunity to speak publicly. This is true even though they have built personal and political ties over the years. The ties that these economic actors have with the center-left party are more established and are more desirable to the public eye, leading de facto to difficulty in

penetrating local power networks even when the actors are center-right leaning and potentially in line with the positions of the party. However, as the party managed to be elected in local governments in smaller cities, they became less undesirable: they were able to build some ties with associations of entrepreneurs, pushing especially on their classic theme of the defense of local economies from public intervention. During my fieldwork, they organized public encounters with food producers and DOP labels, pushing on topics linked to gastro-nativism (Parasecoli 2022) and tradition in an anti-EU key. In this sense, the party could engage with sectors that, more than others, view European agricultural and environmental policies as a challenge to local agricultural and food production and did not find in the dominant party an ally. Moreover, as the local governments are generally investing in social policies and migration policies, and the economic context is attractive for migrant workers, the League capitalized on anti-migrant sentiments and nativist discourses around the access to public services.

Overall, the party was somewhat successful in establishing a network in the area. This could explain why, unlike in the South, they did not immediately lose all their new members to Fratelli d'Italia. Instead, they retained some of their militants for a few years into Meloni's government before experiencing losses, even when the electoral outcome was not favorable. However, they suffered from problems similar to what we will see in the north, in which traditional Northern League culture and the culture of the New League clashed, leading some of the old members to suspend their participation in party activities or to leave the party.

In this area, in fact, the ideological positioning of members is particularly fragmented. Different waves of entrance described in the literature correspond to different

ideological positioning: Longstanding members' answers to my questions mostly resemble those of members in the north, as they frequently point to regionalism, "the territory," and the mass party as a core part of the party-political identity (see Chapter 4). Similarly to what Passarelli and Tuorto noticed (2012), they mention the political activity of the PCI in the area as a model of closeness to the territory. They also do not see themselves as right-wingers, as they consider the league as primarily interested in federalism. To express this idea, Giampiero uses a classical catchphrase from the leader Bossi: The League is neither right nor left; the league is *above*.

Non c'entriamo un cazzo con la Le Pen, [...] Infatti io sta roba qua non l'ho mai capita, di voler andare ad appoggiare il centro destra in giro per l'Europa. Ma che cazzo te ne frega?!? [...] Pensa ai tuoi affari interni, se no poi gli errori degli altri [partiti] ricadono anche su di te. [...] una volta mi venivano a dire "ma la Lega è di destra?" "la lega non è di destra, la lega è sopra." Io mi ricordo che me la cavavo così perché davvero era difficile collocarci [...] Noi dovremmo essere così. Dovremmo essere sopra! (Roberto, former regional councillor, longstanding)

We have nothing to do with Le Pen, [...] In fact, I've never understood why bothering, why bothering supporting the centre-right around Europe. Who the fuck cares?!? [...] Think about your internal affairs, otherwise you will be blamed for the errors of other [parties] [...] They used to come to me asking, "Is the League right-wing?" "The League is not right-wing. The League is above!" I remember I used to get by like that because it was really difficult to categorize us [...] We should be like that. We should be above! (Roberto, former regional councillor, longstanding)

Attempts to build an alliance with Le Pen are not well considered, as the French party is seen as an example of a centralistic and imperialistic view of economic organisation that is far from the league's original views on the economy. Moreover, allying with radical right parties is risky because their errors will be linked to your political activity. Roberto not only does not see Le Pen's party as a radical right party but rather, as we can see from this quote, as a "centre-right" party, but he also does not see the League as falling into either category.

A second wave of entrance between 2014 and 2017 comprised members particularly interested in sovereignty or critical of the European Union's policies.

Io personalmente non sono euro-scettico, ma sono euro-critico. Quindi io non sono scettico nei confronti del progetto europeo, perché credo che abbia di per sé una funzionalità, mettiamola così, positiva in senso lato. E però appunto sono molto critico perché mi sento di dire che nel mio paese, quindi nel mio piccolo —ma anche nel mio contesto regionale, e poi possiamo dire anche magari nazionale— ci si poteva aspettare di più dalle strutture europee (Marco, city councillor, 2nd wave)

Personally, I am not euro-sceptic but euro-critic. I am not sceptical about the European project because, in a broad sense, I think it has a positive functionality per se. But I am very critical because I feel like saying that in my city, in my small experience —but even in my regional context, and maybe we can even say at a national level— we could have expected more from European institutions. (Marco, city councilor, 2nd wave)

I met Marco twice, once at the beginning of my fieldwork and once towards the end. According to Marco, one of the main reasons for joining the party was its stance on European policies. He was particularly interested in the local economy of his area, which he saw as negatively impacted by European policies and the centre-left government that traditionally governed the area. He was unhappy with the party's participation in Draghi's government, which he saw as a change of line. When I met him the second time, he told me he had left the party as it no longer reflected his position, although he left on good terms and still came to see Salvini's speeches during the 2022 electoral campaign.

A third wave in 2018 comprises party-switchers from the PDL, who believe the party should be the biggest in the centre-right. In their view, the party should adapt its specificities to a national setting and become a better and more structured version of the PDL's liberal conservatism.

Non posso stare al centro perché il centro è diventato essere d'accordo con tutti, una volta con uno e una volta con un altro, e non mi appartiene. No Forza Italia perché non ha un futuro politico perché è stata rovinata dalla sua classe dirigente e purtroppo anche da Berlusconi. E quindi la Lega è quel partito che ha insieme la possibilità di spostarsi un po' più al centro, con una proposta politica più aperta, ma anche l'attaccamento ai valori fondanti. (Anna, Militant, new member)

I can't be in the centre because the centre has become agreeing with everyone, once with one and once with the other, and this does not belong to me. Forza Italia does not have a political future because it has been ruined by his leadership and, sadly, even by Berlusconi. Hence, the League is that party that has the possibility to move a little bit towards the centre, with a more open political proposal, but also with a strong attachment to core values." (Anna, Militant, new member)

According to Anna, the League constituted an alternative to the political opportunism of centre parties and an alternative to the PDL, which she saw as politically dead. In her view, the League is, most of all, a party of the centre-right as its economic positions are that of a liberal-conservative party. She is not particularly interested neither in the radical right nor in euroscepticism and sees Macron as the preferred ally in Europe for a moderate party of the centre-right.

Finally, 2018 also marked the party's entrance of members who found the party particularly appealing as a radical right party. This could sometimes mean adherence to traditional flavours of right-wing politics, such as post-fascism or "social right". Overtly nostalgic of Fascism and Extreme right members are regarded as undesirable by members of the previous flows who call them fanatics ("esaltati") or "strange people" if they want to use a euphemism. They were initially attracted by the party at its peak and by Salvini's aggressive campaigns, and they left the party relatively quickly. Nevertheless, some members with particularly extreme positions or legacies are still in the party and have local leadership positions. During an electoral event, one of my informants told me some of the more radicals in the party mocked him and called him

a “democristiano” for his moderate positions, but he was not particularly interested in being friends with a “group of fools who still saluted each other holding their forearms in a fascist salute”²⁸. On the one hand, this indicates the presence of an extreme-right faction in the area; on the other, discontent among other types of members towards them, although this discontent does not prevent the inclusion of these more radical elements in a key local position.

Finally, some of the newly entered members prefer Trumpism, the recent extremism of the Tories, and right-wing libertarianism.

le culture politiche a cui noi comunque facciamo riferimento [sono] i repubblicani di De Santis, di Trump, eccetera, per parlare degli Stati Uniti. [...]

I modelli –posto che modelli è difficile dirlo proprio perché ogni paese ha il suo contesto, quindi ha la sua tipo di politica—però diciamo sono i Tories piuttosto che i Repubblicani.[...] Dopodiché, sai, molti ti potrebbero dare risposte differenti. (Andrea, Youth Movement regional secretary, Youth wing)

the political cultures that we refer to [are] the Republicans, the Republicans of De Santis, of Trump, etc., if we talk about the United States. [...]

The models – although models are complex to say precisely because each country has its context and its kind of politics— let's say, are the Tories and the Republicans. [...] But, you know, many might give you different answers. (Andrea, Youth Movement regional secretary, youth wing)

Even on ethical stances, we can find a wide variability: the party both include strictly conservative members, sometimes coming from pro-life movements or endorsing anti-lgbtq+ positions – *“a topic we care about is family, thanks to the last government we*

²⁸ He is not referring to the Roman Salute with the right hand but rather to the custom among neo-fascists to salute each other by holding the forearm of the other with their hand, another reinterpretation of how ancient Romans supposedly saluted each other that has the advantage of not being forbidden by the law in Italy.

did not approve the DDL Zan [a law against homophobic discrimination and hate speech], and this is something that is acknowledged to us”(Giovanni)—and members who are essentially agnostic on gender, reproductive issues, and LGBTQ+ rights –“is it a priority to have such an extreme vision on such topics? Or is it a priority to talk about something else? For me, it is a priority to talk about something else!” (Andrea, Youth Movement regional secretary, youth wing).

After a few interviews and events, I started to ask myself what kept them together. From my data, at least two common elements emerged. The first is the “security” theme, which is mentioned without distinction in interviews with members with different ideas about economic positioning, self-positioning on the left-right spectrum, and amicable alliances in Europe.

Se tu chiedi a tutti della Lega, ti diranno che l'autonomia è fondamentale, ti daranno un concetto di ordine pubblico, ti daranno un concetto di Europa. Ci sono tanti elementi su cui siamo della stessa natura. (Andrea, Youth Movement regional secretary, Youth wing)

If you ask anybody in the League, they will say that regional autonomy is fundamental, they will give you a concept of public order and a concept of Europe. There are many elements on which we have the same nature (Andrea, Youth Movement regional secretary, youth wing)

Uno che hanno definito il nostro cavallo di battaglia –che per me non è un cavallo di battaglia, è una cosa diciamo normale, di buon senso— è la sicurezza. (Giovanni, provincial commissioner, longstanding)

Something they call our pièce de résistance –that to me is not pièce de resistance but something normal, common sense— is security. (Giovanni, provincial commissioner, longstanding)

Il problema del nostro paese è l'economia, è la mancanza di possibilità economica dei cittadini, l'inquinamento [...] la mancanza di sicurezza, questi sono i problemi dei cittadini. (Anna, Militant, new member)

The problems of our country are the economy, the lack of economic possibilities for the citizens, pollution [...] and the lack of security, these are the problems of the citizens. (Anna, Militant, new member)

Sometimes, the topic is mentioned regarding local party activities, and more rarely, it is mentioned in anti-migration discourses, although direct references to race are absent. Speaking of this, this is the area of the country in which I more frequently encountered second-generation migrants among militants and participants at party events. In his speeches in the area during the electoral campaign of 2021, Salvini made distinctions between good migrants who work and bad illegal migrants who are unproductive, again relying on welfare chauvinism rather than directly racial discourses²⁹ (Fieldnotes September 2021). This topic is usually framed in completely different terms both in the north and south locale.

A second element that emerges regularly is the topic of “territory,” which assumes stratified and differentiated meanings. Central in the party's discourse are discourses around the local economy, local traditions, and local politics. Territories are seen as inherently resilient and capable of self-govern. Public intervention is not needed, as territorial solidarism and local resources (meaning giving power to entrepreneurs in the area) can supply for the inefficiencies of the state. The core of Lega's discourses is the local economic actors that the party claims to represent. Small businesses, artisans, and small firms remain at the heart of the league discourse even after the national change. In this sense, the league promotes a specific form of productivism that places emphasis on the local dimension, the economic powers in the territory and the exclusion of unproductive members of society. I will explore ideological transformations in the party in the next chapter, treating this topic in depth.

²⁹ see HoSang and Lowndes (2019) as an example of how right-wing movements include previously racialised minorities among their activists and publics.

Containing northern discontent

In the north, the mechanisms we saw in the other areas are overturned: How did the party manage to survive *despite* Salvini and the national turn? When asked about their personal trajectory, militants in the north rarely mention Salvini. Here, the dimension of regional and provincial politics prevails over the national logic because militants open and close gazebos (again the material representation of grass-roots activism) regardless of their Federal Secretary.

[Qui la Lega] non ha risentito di questo calo, perché è fatta da militanti veri. C'ero prima e ci sono anche domani. Domani piove, c'è da fare un gazebo, sono là a metterlo, non importa se c'era Bossi, non importa se c'era Maroni, non importa se c'è Salvini. (Federico, provincial secretary youth wing, youth wing)

[Here the League] has not suffered from this electoral decline, as it consists of real militants. I have been here before, and I will be here again tomorrow. Even if it rains, I am willing to set up the gazebo, it doesn't matter if there is Bossi, Maroni or Salvini. (Federico, provincial secretary youth wing, youth wing)

Although Federico's words are optimistic –the electoral results and the change of leadership have indeed provoked significant consequences on the equilibrium among parties in the centre-right coalition, even in the North— it shows an essential element that helps us in framing the dynamics in this area: the Northern League was a fully structured party in the North before and after Salvini, and his survival does not depend on the national leadership. Electoral fluctuations do not directly cause the crisis we see in the north of the party. Rather, it is caused by local factors and only partially related to national dynamics. The situation is only exacerbated by the electoral fluctuation.

The first element to notice is that the change did not initially find the opposition you would expect from a party that goes from regionalism to nationalism in a few years.

Partially because the two ideological lines continued to co-exist, allowing for the maintenance of old territories and new ones, as we will see in the next chapter, and partially because Salvini had the fundamental characteristics that members consider to be relevant and legitimate: he was a longstanding member of the party who was well-known and appreciated before becoming a secretary. If in the south we saw that Salvini is seen as an “innovator”, here it’s regarded as the natural continuation of Bossi.

l’esperienza politica l’ho avuta io, l’ha avuta [presidente di regione], la ha avuta Matteo Salvini, siamo figli di quell’epoca lì, nei primi anni novanta. (Michele)

Di fatto sai, era un uomo che comunque proveniva dal basso, ha fatto la militanza esattamente come me, come molti altri, non veniva da fuori, gli si dava il massimo della fiducia. e insomma, tutto sommato una fiducia anche ripagata piuttosto bene. (Enzo)

I had that political experience, [regional governor] had it, Matteo Salvini had it, and we are children of that era, in the early nineties. (Michele)

you know, he was a man who came from the bottom anyway, he did militancy just like me, just like many others, he didn't come from the outside, he was trusted. And all in all, it was a trust that was also repaid rather well. (Enzo)

Longstanding militants recognize Salvini as part of the same party history; he has been trained in the same way and can walk his way up from the bottom, just like any other militant in the party. In this sense, the change in leader did not initially constitute a problem for the party in this area. Additionally, as we will see in the next chapter, the concept of opening up to other regions did not necessarily contradict the idea of self-governance or fiscal federalism, provided that each region governs itself. Moreover, many of them recognised that many problems had gone beyond the regional boundaries. As Enzo would put, it as ironic as it may sound:

ci sono dei problemi che valgono per me, ma possono valere anche per un campano.³⁰ (Enzo)

there are problems that apply to me, but they can also apply to a Campanian. (Enzo)

The challenge that the party faced arose from changes in its organisational structure, or rather, from the way in which a similar formal organisation was practically implemented at the local level. Although the party statutes of Lega Salvini Premier closely resemble those of the Northern League, with only some change in names of the organs in the party, the practices that were actually adopted are quite different. If we want to understand the reasons for this discrepancy, we should start from the foundation of Lega Salvini Premier. According to Matteo Zulianello (2021), the foundation of the Lega Salvini Premier resulted in the maintenance of two separate organisational models: a mass party in the north and a “wannabe mass party” in the south. In the North, the new party de facto coincided with the Northern League in terms of its structures, resources, and personnel, with minor changes in the statutes that do not change the general party hierarchy. As a legal entity, the Northern League is obligated to pay a debt of 49 million euros following the economic scandal of 2012. Due to its financial situation, the party's activity has been frozen and maintained to function only as a “bad company” kept alive to repay the debt. The party's Federal Council created a new legal entity called "Lega Salvini Premier" in 2017. This was done to avoid bankruptcy and continue receiving public funding and private contributions in the new party if legal authorities confiscated the Northern League's funds during the legal proceedings involving the party leadership. (ibid.) Until 2019, two parallel

³⁰ Campanians are the quintessential southerners in the League discourses and had been more often than any other region object of discrimination by the Lega Nord.

structures coexisted, leading to uncertainty around membership rules. A new member in the North would be enrolled in the Northern League, while at the same time, a member in the South would receive the Lega Salvini Premier card. This created paradoxes and ambiguity regarding membership within the party. Enrico remembers that the cards with the new name arrived ex officio, without their knowledge: if you had a card in Lega Nord, you received a card in Lega Salvini Premier by mail at your home.

la transizione da Lega Nord a Lega per Salvini premier è entrata realmente a regime nel 2020. Han cominciato a fare le iscrizioni reali, cioè ti arrivava la tessera a casa [e dicevi] “ah non sapevo di essere iscritto anche a questo, interessante! Ok!”(Enrico, internal roles, longstanding)

The transition from Northern League to Lega Savini Premier picked up pace in 2020 when they began with real subscriptions. They delivered membership cards to people's homes, [and you said] "Ah, okay. I didn't know I had subscribed to this! Interesting!"(Enrico, internal roles, longstanding)

The same was made to maintain the “bad company” organisation: militants who had refused to change their affiliation continued to receive the Northern League card at their home. Franco is not a member of the party anymore. He left the party when the name changed, as he was not comfortable with nationalistic messages and with the entrance of extreme-right wingers in the party. He emphatically showed me a party card to explain why he was so upset with the new leadership.

Questa è la tessera della Lega Nord per l'indipendenza della Padania dell'anno scorso [2020] Okay? quindi non è la tessera della Lega Salvini. Perché questi signori continuano a mandare la tessera della Lega Nord, anche se non è stata richiesta, in omaggio. Hai capito? tengono in vita un partito che è congelato per un po' di quei milioni di euro che devono pagare[...] A un certo punto mi hanno

This is the card of the Northern League for the Independence of Padania from last year [2020], OK? So, it's not the Salvini League card. Because these gentlemen keep sending the Lega Nord card, as a gift, even though it was not requested. Do you understand? They keep alive a frozen party because of some of those millions of euros they have to pay [...] At a certain point, they proposed that I join the

proposto di passare alla Lega Salvini e io ho detto “sinceramente guardate che io non mi dedicherò mai alla Lega Salvini” e mi sono dichiarato anche antifascista perché vedevo molta, molta destra che stava entrando in Lega. (Franco, Former Member)

Lega Salvini, and I said sincerely, “Look, I will never join the Lega Salvini”, and I also declared myself an anti-fascist because I saw that there were a lot of right-wingers joining the Lega. (Franco, Former Member)

In the first months of 2020, the restructuring of the old Lega Nord was completed with final steps. Salvini froze the Lega Nord organisation and appointed a loyal federal commissioner at the national level to prevent any potential resurgence of the longstanding militants. In this context, longstanding members continued to receive Lega Nord cards, while at the same time, the regional branches of the old Lega Nord were re-founded as regional branches of the new League. In December 2019, a congress formalised the official name of Lega Salvini Premier, with the approval of a new statute for the party. However, this congress did not involve all the levels of the party structure, but rather was a ratification of a situation that was already ongoing. For the subnational levels, commissioners nominated by Salvini were directly appointed at the regional level with the promise that this would be a temporary solution to resolve the maze of the two associations. Likewise, provincial and local commissioners were appointed for the other levels. A proper congress would be held as soon as possible. After three governments, a national election, and a global pandemic, the Congress still remains incomplete³¹. This led to the nomination of commissioners from outside regions in many regions in the centre and south and to a freeze of the new structure in the north. In the short run, as noticed by Zulianello (ibid p. 236), this strategy helped to

³¹ See chapter 7

maintain control over the structure of the Northern League during the change and ensured the nomination of local leaders who were loyal to the leadership as they were appointed. Although the party had always been particularly centralised as it worked on the Leninist principle of democratic centralism, this centralisation augmented during the transition. In the Northern League, the federal levels approved candidates, personnel selection, and internal disciplinary actions at the regional level³². Likewise, what happened locally required approval from the hierarchically superior level. However, the group members still had a say in choosing their representatives, and the top-down choice process often took on a ratification character, as representatives were usually selected among experienced militants in the party and were already considered trustworthy. In the Lega Salvini Premier at municipal and provincial levels, in many cases, the transition was not particularly conflictual. Still, due to the absence of congresses, the party appointed some commissioners selected among members of the same sections by their direct superiors in the party. This allowed for continuity with the past and a non-conflictual transition to the new party. Sometimes, these commissioners were only appointed because the previous secretary's mandate ended, and the secretary did not want to continue to have a role for personal reasons, because he received another role, or was elected in incompatible public offices. In other cases, commissioners were explicitly sent to resolve conflictual situations during transition. While commissioners coming from the same sections were considered positively

³² In a hypothetical future where the party has achieved independence, every region will be considered independent. In the Northern League, the regional structures are referred to as "nations", while the national structures are known as "federal secretary", "federal council", and "federal congress". In the new league, the regional structures are called "Regional Territorial Articulations", while the national bodies still retain the term "federal" in their names.

among militants and often had no trouble leading their branches, in some cases, outsiders from different cities became the link between the branch and the regional level, and they were not welcomed by the local party members who did not recognize their legitimacy. Even in non-conflictual situations, in which members understand the reasons for these choices, they still think that branches have lost their relevance, as they cannot even choose their secretaries.

è come se gli fosse stato tolto tutto il potere perché venivano scelti dall'alto i commissari e le sezioni non avevano più nessuna rilevanza e non esprimevano niente [...] è perché il partito è cambiato completamente a livello nazionale. Io lo capisco anche dal punto di vista federale, serviva tenere fermo ciò che era già funzionante, come poteva essere [questa regione], per prepararsi ad estendersi. Poi il partito era al governo, dunque non c'era nemmeno tanto tempo di stare a fare politica vera e propria (Claudio, city councillor, youth wing)

It seems as if all power was taken away from them because the commissioners were chosen from above, and the branches no longer had any relevance and did not express anything[...] it's because the party changed completely at the national level. I also understand that from the federal point of view, it was necessary to secure what was already functioning, as it could be [this region], to prepare the party to extend. Then, the party was in government, so there wasn't enough time to do actual politics. (Claudio, city councillor, youth wing)

Claudio thinks the postponement of Congress is understandable, as the federal level needed to maintain control of the party during a sudden change. Then, participation in government did not leave any time to “do actual politics,” meaning the kind of politics that involves discussion, participation, and grassroots activism.

In the long run, not electing your local leader causes detachment, even when the situation was not meant to be conflictual. Federico talks about how their local secretary was elected in parliament in 2018, and a commissioner was appointed to “carry on” the section until a new congress. This is an ordinary practice, assigning a temporary

responsibility until you can organize a new congress, and it does not necessarily become a motive for conflict. But then the times of congress expanded. A commissioner from another province was responsible for the party locally for over 3 years, partially because of COVID-19 and partially because Congress was willingly never called to avoid internal conflict.

Avevamo un Commissario che era di [altra provincia], il che vuol dire che [se] domani ci sono le elezioni a [città] deve venire qua, a contrattare e capire cosa vuole la città, a capire se magari ha senso esporsi per un candidato, a capire se ha senso fare una lista... [...] Non conosci soprattutto la gente. Cioè sei comunque uno di [altra provincia] e non uno di [questa provincia], e per quanto i campanilismi possano non esistere, però... [ride] [...] Un Commissario, passami la parola, è messo dall'alto, non deve rispondere a nessuno, se non a quello da cui è stato messo. [...] Un segretario è votato, è quella la differenza principale. Se qua a [città] c'è qualcosa che non va bene, vai dal segretario a dirgli "ehi, ti ricordi cosa avevi detto?" (Federico, provincial secretary youth wing, youth wing)

We had a commissioner who was from [another province], which means that [if] tomorrow there are elections in [town], he has to come here to negotiate and understand what the town wants, to know if it makes sense to support a candidate or not, to see if it makes sense to make a list. [...] Above all, you don't know the people. I mean, you're from [another province] and not from [this province], and although the parochialism may not exist... [laughs] [...] A commissioner, pass me the word, is placed from above, he doesn't have to be accountable to anyone, except to the person he was appointed by [...] A secretary is elected, that's the main difference. If here in [town] there is something that doesn't work, you go to the secretary and tell him, "Hey, do you remember what you said?" (Federico, provincial secretary youth wing, youth wing)

Elected secretaries know the territory in which they operate and the people who inhabit it so they can make the right decisions and negotiate in the party's name. While a commissioner is accountable to their superior, an elected secretary must report to party members and at least consider their ideas.

Sometimes, these commissioners were just pro forma, and the branch operated as usual, maintaining the same internal organisation as before despite the attempt to change power relations.

[il commissario era] esterno, era... non mi ricordo, di [paese confinante] forse, una cosa del genere, ma non è che avesse... Cioè le riunioni che noi facevamo le facevamo comunque con quello che era il nostro segretario e dunque non è che fosse cambiato nulla. (Claudio, city councillor, youth wing)

The commissioner was external, he was... I don't remember, maybe he was from [the neighbouring town], something like that, but he had no... I mean, we were still doing our meetings with the previous secretary, so nothing had changed. (Claudio, city councillor, youth wing)

The appointed commissioner comes from the neighbouring town, and even if Claudio does not remember precisely where he came from –maybe a sign of distance? — this commissioner had no real presence inside the branch, as they were still referring to the previous secretary in their daily activities. In this sense, commissioners were not necessarily considered legitimate among militants, who sometimes referred to previous secretaries. This is quite unusual in a party where hierarchical relations are strictly followed. Commissioners constituted a challenge to loyalty relations among party levels.

Some commissioners were sent to calm down disputes in branches that were more resistant to nationalisation, leading de facto to neutralising or expulsing those long-standing members who did not tolerate change, whether ideological change or a shift in power relations.

non ha fatto altro che andare a commissariare le sezioni come la mia, che non erano allineate ad appoggiare la sua candidatura. Quando è stata l'ora lui ha sistemato i suoi referenti, ha

all he did was to commission sections like mine, which were not aligned to support his candidature. When it was time, he set up his referees, he appointed his referees. They

nominato i suoi referenti. A me hanno nominato un referente [nome] io non l'avevo mai- sì l'avevo visto qualche volta, ma non aveva mai fatto attività politica a [paese]. Non lo conosceva nessuno come rappresentante. Io ero anni che mi dedicavo, ero segretario comunale della Lega Nord e quindi abbiamo fatto diverse attività politiche sul territorio e anche molte battaglie, perché insomma, non ci siamo mai risparmiati con gazebo, campagne elettorali, tutto, qualsiasi tipo di attività, anche come pura manovalanza. Questo non lo conosceva nessuno. (Franco, Former Member)

appointed a referee [name] I had never- yes, I had seen him a few times, but he had never done political work in [town]. Nobody knew him as a representative. I had been there for years, I was the municipal secretary of the Northern League and so we did various political activities in the area and also many battles, because in short, we never saved ourselves from participating in any kind of activity, whether it was setting up gazebos, conducting electoral campaigns, or just manual jobs. Nobody knew this person. (Franco, Former Member)

Franco was the local secretary in a small town. He had been in the party for over 10 years and “never saved himself from participating in any kind of activity” (including gazebos, of course). When the commissioner was appointed, he felt that this was a punishment for not supporting the candidature of his direct superior. The new referee was not well known in the area, as he did not participate for long in the local branch activity in town, as he came from outside. As legitimacy in the League is based on long-standing presence and grassroots participation, he lacks the fundamental characteristics you need to be the branch representative.

At this point, the party starts to lose ground at the national level, and militants start questioning the party change tout court. Conflict arises on candidatures and never-ending congresses, and any minor controversies become part of a more significant fight for the party's control at the regional level, provoking, on the one hand, militants' abandonment of the party and, on the other, resignations and expulsions of local leadership members. Who will open the gazebos tomorrow morning?

Salvini purtroppo è riuscito ad allontanare il militante storico, il che significa che domani mattina non c'è nessuno che apre il banchetto. Non c'è nessuno che va ad attaccare i cartelli. [...] io normalmente faccio il banchetto per qualsiasi appuntamento da venticinque anni a questa parte. Io oggi il banchetto non lo faccio. (Enzo)

Salvini unfortunately managed to drive away the historical militant, which means that tomorrow morning, there is no one to open the gazebo. There is no one to go and put up the posters. [...] I normally did gazebos for any appointment for the past twenty-five years. Today, I'm not doing the gazebo. (Enzo)

Enzo is worried because the party lost ground in the last administrative elections. He tells me that nobody wanted to participate in the electoral campaign, to the point that candidates had to rely on paid flyer distribution services. This is inconceivable for long-standing members who assign a sacred status to the efforts and pains of grassroots activism. Members felt that not only had Salvini crossed the lines, disregarding the promise of autonomy of the region and dedicating his time to unimportant ideological questions, but also that the candidate mayor was imposed from above without consulting them, another sign of distance from the base. Militants withdrew from party activities, as the fact they still liked the regional leadership was not enough anymore, resulting in a major defeat during municipal elections.

Moreover, the regional leadership, previously considered the leading actor in resisting the change, is sometimes regarded as complicit as they could not keep the organisation together and are not forcing Salvini towards a change. Lower ranking cadres—in the rare occasions in which they describe regional leaderships as it is not common to explicitly talk badly of your direct superiors—describe the regional leadership in ambivalent ways. On the one hand, regional government and the party in public office are described positively, as the leader and his close collaborators are considered good administrators and generally appreciated by the party's cadres,

members, and electors and even members of the party in other regions recognize regional leaders in the north as good examples of administrators. The regional leader is occasionally criticized for being ambiguous and not intervening sufficiently in internal matters. He refrains from publicly opposing Salvini, instead opting to support local opposition against Salvinian factions. This creates a situation where the conflict between regional and national leadership remains discreet, manifesting secondhand through battles over candidacies and political positions.

Finally, the only option for critics became that of “blowing everything up”:

Finché continui a vincere almeno le persone quando vanno a dare il volantino per strada –perché alla fine parliamo di quello se intendiamo un militante— le persone sorridono e dicono “Dai, dai che ce la facciamo”. Non li hai mai visti, ma ti senti felice di far parte di una comunità ben vista, anche se hai dei mal di pancia interni, te li tieni per te. Quando il vertice non funziona, ignora le tematiche che a te piacerebbero eppure perde e continua a non cambiare sistema, c'è chi semplicemente dice “sto a casa, ho una moglie figli, faccio altro” e chi si incazza come una bestia perché ci ha dedicato vent'anni trent'anni della sua vita e quindi vuole far saltare la baracca. (Nicola)

As long as you keep on winning at least people when they go to give the flyer on the street –because in the end, when we are talking about a militant, we are talking about that—people smile at you and say, "Come on, come on we can do it". You've never seen them, but you feel happy to be part of a well-seen community; even if you have internal bellyaches, you keep them to yourself. When the top doesn't work, ignores the issues that you would like, and yet they lose, and they still don't change the system, some simply say “I'll stay at home, I have a wife and children, I do something else” and those who get pissed off like a beast because they've spent twenty-thirty years of their lives on it, and so they want to blow everything up. (Nicola)

Nicola noticed that when things go well at the national level, even if you are not satisfied with what's happening in the party, you feel validation from the outside, as ordinary citizens encourage you and support you, making you think that you are part of a group that has a good reputation. But when the party continues to lose, and the lines taken

by the vertex do not even convince you, some may think it's better to leave or instead to make everything possible to “blow up” the party, to do something loud and public to attempt a last shot and try to save the situation. We will see in Chapter 6 that public intraparty conflict is very unlikely in the League, yet this is in fact what happened in all the regions in the north: prominent members started going public with their dissensus, resigning from their offices at the regional level protesting on newspapers and getting expelled from the party in Lombardia³³, Veneto³⁴, Piemonte³⁵, Friuli³⁶, Liguria³⁷. Many of these members were the most reluctant to the nationalist turn and announced their new engagement in Forza Italia.

Conclusions

As we have seen, the three contexts presented different challenges for the party to change, following the main dilemmas the party faced in changing top-down in three areas that are different in terms of political culture, internal composition, and previous electoral consensus for the party in the area. Several commonalities among cases are worth underlining.

First, during the period of peak electoral consensus, the different levels of party rootedness meant the party had varying starting points for the development of territorial

³³ <https://www.ilgiorno.it/politica/regione-lombardia-dimissioni-consiglieri-lega-53a06882>

³⁴ https://mattinopadova.gelocal.it/regione/2023/06/01/news/lega_veneto_espulsioni-12835481/

³⁵ <https://www.torinoggi.it/2024/03/12/leggi-notizia/argomenti/politica-11/articolo/la-lega-in-regione-perde-i-pezzi-leone-lascia-partito-sempre-meno-legato-ai-territori.html>

³⁶ https://www.ilgazzettino.it/nordest/pordenone/lega_ivo_moras_lascia_il_partito_cosa_e_successo-7643120.html

³⁷ https://www.ilsecoloxix.it/liguria/2024/03/19/news/riolfo_lascia_lega_liguria-14157886/

presence. This meant the necessity to develop different actions to recruit members, enlarge their presence or maintain the already existing consensus in the three different zones. This means, first of all, that a process of change involves multiple simultaneous lines of change, that all happen through negotiation between all the actors involved in every locale. The central party, the local leadership, and the members are all actors in this change, which is negotiated between the parties involved. Moreover, other actors at the local level that are not members of the party could also be involved, such as associations that intervene in enhancing or stopping the process from happening –i.e. antiracist movements in the south discouraged the party from carrying on with local activities—, power groups in other parties who ask cadres to enter in the party, existing parties that anticipate the possible threat from a new or diverse political actor and work to prevent change etc. Processes of change are situated in time, space, existing structures, and existing relations within and outside the party itself, not only at the national level but at all the levels involved in the party transformation.

Second, we saw that despite their initial intention the party was forced to adapt its practices to practices that were prevalent in the areas they needed to reach. The attempts to top-down export the organisational model of the mass party in southern regions partially failed, as the prevalent practices of party politics in the south have been historically based on networks of local notables rather than mass participation. The same model instead facilitated the entrance of members in the centre and centre-north, as the party played on the memory of the PCI to export their habitual practices in this area. In Gauja's model (Gauja 2016), "existing patterns of democratic practice" are situated at the political system level and are considered among the possible drivers of change. However, the author uses this term to refer to causes and how a party may

decide to change to adapt to external conditions that changed over time. In addition to that, it is useful to consider how widespread patterns of action enter into processes themselves: repertoires are interpreted by the actors involved according to already existing meanings that are assigned to them, which are based on previous repertoire in use in the same zone. For this reason, some repertoires may or may not work in different local contexts. Another example of this, is the differentiated patterns of development of the party in the '90, which followed the same geographical boundaries of the “white subculture” and worked only in zones where the claim to be a separate group from the south was credible, as there were no competing identitarian claims (Giordano 1999). This takes us back to the reflections on the resonance and effectiveness of new practices for repertoire change.

Third, turns may or may not attract new members with different ideas. We have seen in the Centre that militants' beliefs are particularly differentiated and reflect the rapid ideological evolutions that went on in the party, but we will see in the next chapter that in the north, where the local party idioculture remained stable as the regional levels controlled their own local symbolic production, some members, even newly entered ones, refer to the local culture more than to the national lines. Moreover, symbolic changes are not necessarily synchronised between the national and local parties. Some changes may or may not be adopted by the local organisations independently from the central organisation, following diverse patterns of diffusion, creating different articulations of the party ideology in the three areas. The degree of difference also depends on central party's efforts to make the different local groups talk, train together

and unite (i.e. national events, schools for cadres³⁸) or not communicate (i.e. avoiding congresses).

Fourth, party switchers from other parties carry with them their own experience of what a party is and what are the right practices to adopt in local politics. A party that wants to include experienced members does not completely control their political socialisation, and this may cause conflict and misunderstandings. Members become part of a group through continuous engagement with that group, learning how the group works. They also contribute to shaping the local articulation of party ideology with their own creative efforts and playing with the repertoires they knew before entering the party, or they encountered outside the party. This means that idiocultures are not to be considered ended once and for all, but rather in continuous evolution and in connection with out-group cultures.

Finally, we have seen in all three cases that changes are accompanied by concrete actions and efforts to enforce change. Years of continuous attempts to recruit members and party switchers, to collect local consensus and to organize local activities accompanied the announcement made by the Leader Salvini that the party would open to new territories. It is not sufficient to announce a change for it to happen, let alone in the direction you planned for. Local leadership and militants sometimes oppose the

³⁸ The party regularly organize "Scuole di Formazione Politica" (Political Training Schools) through the efforts of Armando Siri. The purpose of these schools was to introduce new members to the party's ideas and topics that ranged from Political Philosophy to Economics to the basics of Public Administration and Political Communication. Unlike the Northern League, which organised similar events only for its members and with internal resources and without fees, the school is open to non-members and invites university professors and experts as teachers. However, a subscription fee is required for participation.

new directions or mediate between the old and the new lines. Internal disciplinary dispositions, such as control over membership, commissaries, and expulsions, as well as the continuous postponement of the party convention, serve as means for the party to avoid internal splitting and to make the new line prevail in all three locales.

Interlude I: Two days in Pontida

As the train journey unfolded, the scenery was familiar, not because I had already been there, but because of the distinct landscape of the Pianura Padana: here, the prevalent form of urbanisation is the sprawl (Salvati and Carlucci 2016), a dispersed arrangement characterised by overconsumption of soil and unregulated building. The architectonic style is what has been well portrayed in the Atlante dei classici Padani (Galesi 2015), a breathtaking³⁹ landscape of metal barns, concrete industrial buildings, fields, and suburban family houses with a basement for hobbies and a small garden, that follow one another without a discernible order. Bergamo's surroundings are similar to the places I was born and raised in, except for the presence of the first hills of the pre-Alpi, covered by a very anthropised nature that is rather difficult to find in the flatland. I have almost always lived in the Pianura Padana. In the short time I lived outside of it, I found myself missing the thick fog that Padania taught me to love.

When I arrived in the village on September 17, 2022, I felt like I was in the middle of nowhere, and at the same time, everything was familiar. Pontida is a pretty ordinary place that neither looks extremely poor nor rich. It's just one of the numerous villages cut in half by a trafficked state highway. It has less than 3000 inhabitants. Although

³⁹It is literally breathtaking: this is one of the most polluted areas in Western Europe, as reported by the European Environment Agency in their 2023 report on the quality of air <https://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/europes-air-quality-status-2023>.

there is a walkable underpass, the road that connects Bergamo to Lecco divides the side with the church from the side with the town hall, giving the sense of a place without a proper centre to walk in. There is a discount supermarket, some small shops, a bank, some warehouses, a furniture showroom, the pro-loco association, and several bars, one of which is Chinese-owned. The anonymous aspect is counterbalanced by a certain fame as Pontida is the object of a myth. One usually thinks that mythical places are peculiar, they must have specific characteristics that make them recognizable only by looking at them. This is not the case for Pontida, whose name and story are more well-known than the place itself. According to the tradition that only finds partial historical confirmation⁴⁰, Pontida's Abbey was the theater of an oath, an alliance among Lombard cities to fight against an invader⁴¹ in the Legnano Battle that became part of the memory of Risorgimento. All the village's identity revolves around this legendary event: a commemorative plaque on the Abbey recalls the date and one of the main streets is called "via Lega Lombarda," which is the name attributed to the alliance. Under the porches surrounding the main square, piazza Giuramento (oath), you can find stone emblems of the comuni involved, and several explanatory panels provide essential information about the event. One board is dedicated to the invader Federico I, also known as Barbarossa, and his empire's territorial expansion. Another

⁴⁰There is no precise information available about the exact date or event of the oath in the contemporary chronicles. The first mentions of the oaths appear in 1505. According to the contemporary chronicles, at least three oaths were taken between February and May 1167 by different comuni to defend against Federico I. Lodi, Bergamo, Brescia, Cremona, Mantova e Milano were involved. (D'Ilario et al. 1976)

⁴¹To be true, the intent to defend the nation against the invader Barbarossa is an inaccurate interpretation. Not all the comuni involved in the battle were on the same side. Pavia and Como pursue their interests as independent comuni against the influence of Milan, supporting Federico I. (D'Ilario et al. 1976)

panel is dedicated to the Carroccio, a ceremonial cart that bore the symbols of the comuni involved during battles. One panel describes the Lega Lombarda, and the last panel explains the conflict between the League and Barbarossa, mentioning the famous Legnano Battle.

As a member of the pro-loco told me, showing me the wooden shield attached to the wall of their office (Figure 1), two main events are



celebrated in Pontida: the autumnal *Figure 6: Pontida's Pro-Loco Association*

grape feast and the historical reenactment of the Pontida Oath. This event takes place every two years on odd years, with up to 120 amateur costume performers coming from the village and the surrounding areas (Fieldnotes Pontida 2022). Two statues commemorate the battle, one featuring a hand swearing on the Bible, while the other depicts Alberto da Giussano, a warrior whose historical existence is still debated. The legend says that he led the army of the Lega Lombarda in the battle. The emblems are also exposed on a painting on the bar's walls in the main square (Figure 7), which sells souvenirs related to both the oath and the Northern League. As most acquaintance with the history of the party have already noticed reading the last lines, the legends of this village intertwine with the foundational myth of the Northern League:

in the '90, Umberto Bossi, father of the Lega Nord, chose this place as symbolic centre of his party's political action. The party is journalistically named "il carroccio"; the man on the political symbol is Alberto da Giussano, and countless references to the oath become part of the symbolic apparatus of the party and, to some extent, are still used even after the transformation to nationalism. The party still sees its organisation as a federation, the union of different territorial units for self-determination. Since 1990, the party has gathered yearly in an empty grassy area near the provincial highway, the so-called Pratone, for its annual rally. They even bought that empty piece of grass to prevent others from building over the sacred soil. The story of the place and his political resignification are intertwined to such an extent that the party feast held in Pontida is now more famous than the actual Pontida oath itself (Dematteo 2001).

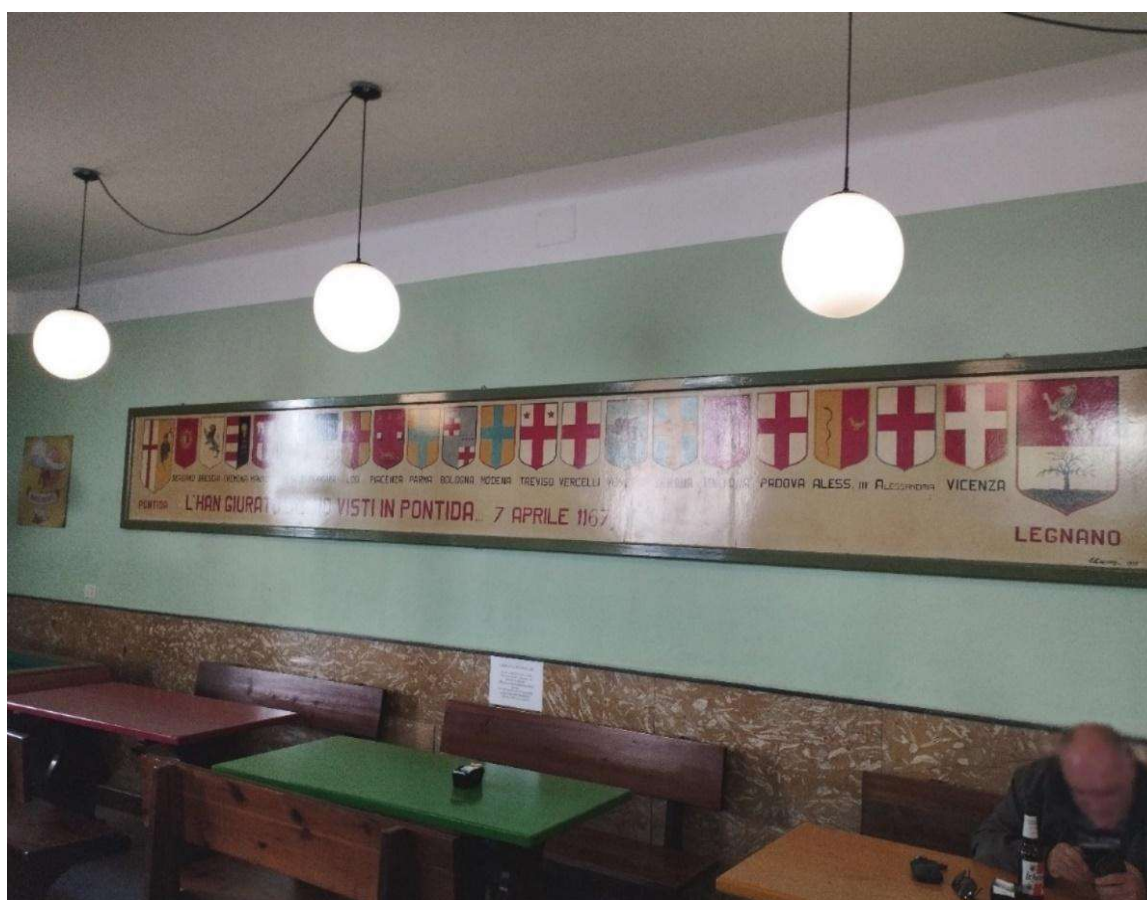


Figure 7: L'han giurato, li han visti in Pontida

In fact, I was not there for a pleasure trip or to see the historical reenactment, but I was directed to the party rally. Pontida's gathering is the most important event in the lives of the party and the youth organisation. Every year since 1990, Leghisti for every region in the north came to celebrate, meet each other on the Pratone, and listen to the party secretary's speeches. Very few exceptions occurred in extreme cases, such as COVID restrictions in 2020 and 2021 and the big political scandal in 2012⁴². As political rituals hold great symbolic and emotional importance, I had previously studied them as public displays of changes in the party's ideology. After watching countless hours of video recordings of the previous editions, I decided to visit Pontida to observe this ritual first-hand. Some members of the party, whom I had interviewed during my research, even invited me to attend the event, claiming that it was the "heart" of a true militant's life or, with a more sceptical reading, a "very peculiar situation that gives them [other members, not me] the charge for the rest of the year", something that I needed to experience at least once if I was interested in the party's life. I was eager to observe the traces of the party's past, the extent of survival of the well-known Celtic Extravaganza, and how people related to their leaders on stage. I was curious to know if Pontida was still overwhelmingly blue as the last years after the change or if some were going back on their steps, returning to the previous repertoire of the party. Did any Northist slogan survive? Salvini was still seen as an undisputed Captain, or if the

⁴² The 2012 Pontida feast was a reflection of the party's organisational health. It was labeled "mini-Pontida" by newspapers and was much smaller compared to the other editions. The event was held in Bergamo since the party was not strong enough to organize the annual event that year. As a result, it was excluded from the official count of editions, which were XXVI in 2011 and XXVII in 2013.



Figure 8: the Pratone staged for the rally

audience would contest him? I decided to go a day early to explore the village and get familiar with the place.

When I arrived on Saturday afternoon, the Pratone appeared smaller than I had expected. The stage and gazebos were already set up, but some workers from a private service were still mounting some maxi-screens and the stage's roof. Some gazebos in the shape of a horseshoe were placed in front of the stage, enclosing a portion of the lawn and making the space look less dispersive. Nothing in the official banners was green or referenced to the old league. A line of metal barriers separated the stage from the lawn, with a 2-meter distance, creating a corridor between the two areas. The passage was meant for prominent figures and the press to access. It also



Figure 9: Fixed elements in the space of the Pratone used for Pontida's Rally

allowed a big camera mounted on a mechanical arm to move around and capture professional videos of the event as they were being streamed live on social networks. The boards and signs, as well as an entire pallet of coloured flyers placed under a gazebo, were professionally printed, giving the impression of a centralised production of political materials and a carefully staged setting for the event. Blue banners with white and yellow slogans encouraged people to vote for the party in the national election the following week: "On the 25 of September, I vote Lega". A sign reading "Pontida 2022"—similar in font and placement to the signs I saw in the videos of previous years—was placed between the stage and a line of metal barriers that surrounded it.

Everything was organised much more professionally than I expected, with only a small group of volunteers and professionals involved. A big tensile structure on a corner of the lawn covered the main bar and the kitchen, where volunteers were preparing for the big day, organising the bar's supplies and food.

Young members were occupied with little chores such as mounting some boards on the pavilions with the names of each region. The only traces of the party's history were found at the Pratone's margins. An enormous "PADRONI A CASA NOSTRA" (masters of our own land)⁴³ (fig. 9) was painted green on the wall surrounding the lawn. It looked discoloured, like a trace of the past that had not been cared for. A "sole delle alpi" decoration on the stone pavement at the entrance of the "Sole delle alpi" playground, another on the perimetral wall, and a flag on top of the central kitchen. Among the militants populating the area, some wore symbols in green and anti-migration slogans on their t-shirts. A member of the youth movement informed me a few days in advance that they had decided to cancel their traditional Saturday night event dedicated to the youth movement. The national election was too close, and they needed to focus all their energies on organising the last events of the electoral campaign in the territories. For this reason, the federal organisation asked them to go over and back only on Sunday to avoid losing the last precious Saturday of campaigning. Only a small group of youth members directly involved in mounting the feast had planned to camp for the night. The only addition to the youth volunteers were some elderly couples, who had placed campers, vans, and tents in a corner behind the kitchen area and were set with camp tables and chairs to enjoy the evening together. They seemed to be relaxing and not involved in organisational tasks, wearing green shirts and Padania's bandanas and drinking beer. The only traces of the past were objects you cannot move, toponymy,

⁴³ When I came back in 2023, the mural was repainted and brand new, maybe a sign of discontent with the national turn.

and non-staged self-organised displays of symbols by marginal members, such as these longstanding aficionados in the camping.

I had the impression that the transformation of the regionalist repertoire into the nationalist one was still incomplete. There was a gap between the official line and the militants, not only with the camping ones but even with the members who were active in organisational work, who displayed t-shirts with slogans that preceded the 2018 turn. This impression of unalignment was confirmed the day after, during the feast, once I mapped the positions of the gazebos and the symbols on a map of the pratone (Figure 6). Everything closer to the stage was blue, with matching fonts and professionally

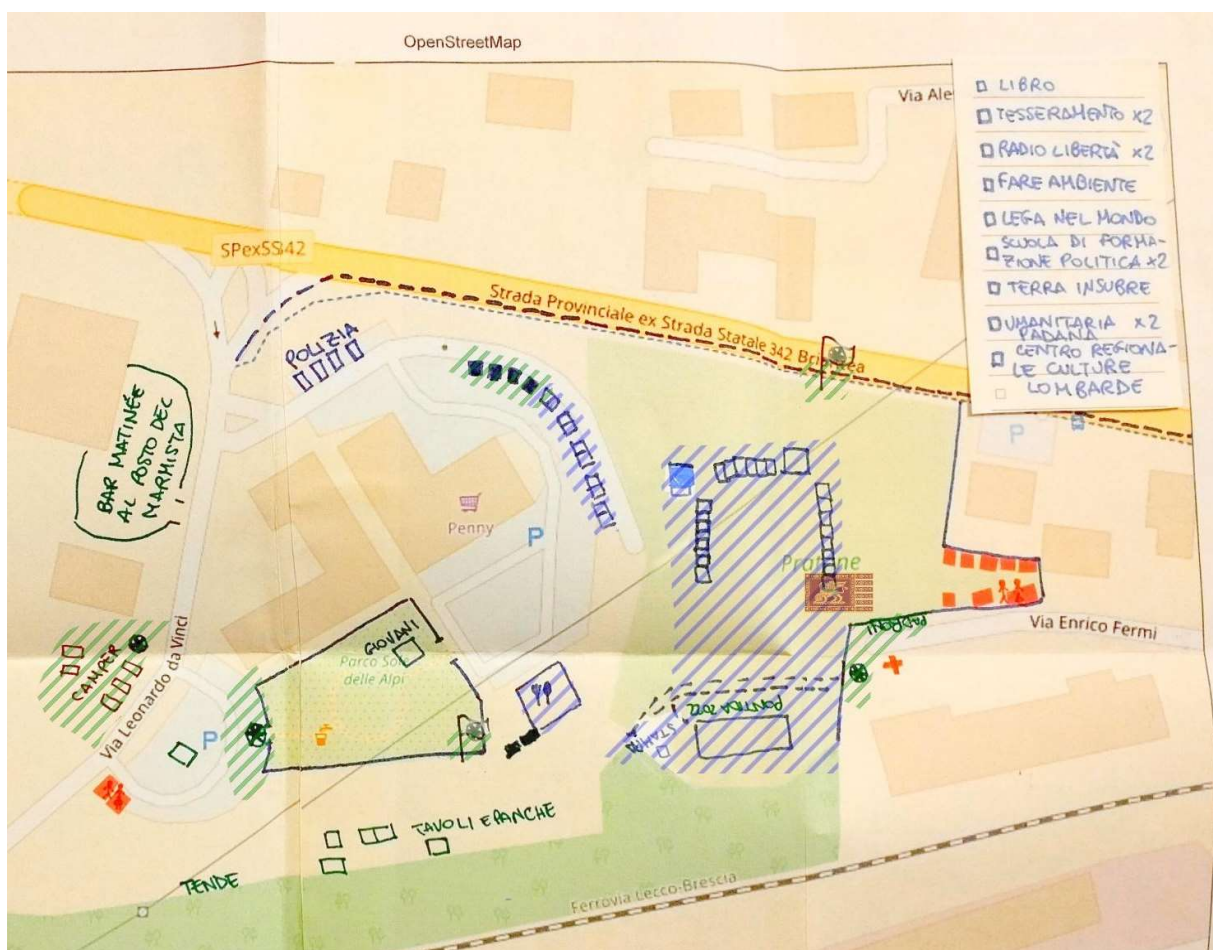


Figure 10 A Map of Pontida's Rally. The list in the corner refers to the gazebos that curve around Penny supermarket, they are in order of distance from the stage.

printed signs. The references to Padania, as said, were distributed at the area's margins, far from the stage, unless they were positioned on fixed elements. Even the order of the gazebos reflected this organisation: official party gazebos were closer to the centre of the scene and sold gadgets, such as t-shirts in blue and white, blue lighters, blue pins, and even the tricolored book "È l'Italia che vogliamo. Il manifesto della Lega per governare il Paese" by Giuseppe Valditara and Alessandro Amadori, a book that well represents the national turn of the party. The collateral organisations such as "umanitaria padana", "terre insubrie", and "Centro regionale culture lombarde" were the last in line. These organisations reminded in names and scopes of the party's past repertoire. They were part of a much larger group of parallel organisations the party founded when it aspired to become a mass party organisation. In the 90' and early 2000, the party founded thematic associations to involve militants better in party activities and to diversify their political action. This organisational setting is still evoked by members as the true way a party must be organised and still leave traces, such as these collateral associations. They were part of an organisational apparatus that was no longer the prevalent organisational form in the party. At first, I thought about two conflicting repertoires, one linked to the national league –with blue and yellow and sometimes the national flag, with slogans mainly related to migration or the leader Salvini—and one connected to Padania –with the prevalence of green and sole delle Alpi. However, at a second glance, looking again at the notes and the photos, there was also something I did not notice in the pratone as a separate category: a regionalist repertoire. Regional flags, red crosses on white fields for Lombardia, red and gold flags with the lion for Vento. But also flags with Trinacria for Sicily and Sardegna's "4 mori" flags. Sweatshirts with the names of several cities, t-shirts and signs with local slogans,

dialectal jokes, and the names of different branches. This diverse display of symbols suggested that regionalism was still prevalent despite the rise of nationalism since 2018, not only as a trace, as it was the case for Padania, but as several sets of symbols that are displayed together with the symbols of the new nationalist league. For some regions, the regional symbols were prevalent, while for others, they were almost non-existent. Different combinations of national and regional symbols were used by the militants to signal their regional appurtenance both in geographic terms and in terms of factions: of course, members from regional organisations that in the process of change, were sceptical toward change –such as Veneto and Lombardy— almost exclusively wore their regional flags, while members of recently acquired regions predominantly used the national symbolic set. Each gazebo in the horseshoe was a



Figure 11: A photo of the audience gathering in front of the Stage I took in Pontida in 2022. Regional flags are particularly numerous.

space for regional organisations to meet and display their own political materials. While the long-standing regional organisations had their own materials to distribute, such as local flyers, flags, and gadgets, the new regional organisations mostly sold regional delicacies such as Calabrian Chilli Peppers, Pasta from Basilicata, and Speck for Alto Adige-South Tyrol with little to none locally printed political materials. At the 2023 event, a year after my first visit, one of the members I interviewed from the northern section mentioned that he always visited the Calabrian stand during the festival to buy 'nduja, a spicy, spreadable pork salami. He said it jokingly, playing on the stereotype that people from the north travel south to enjoy good food but also with the absurd idea of buying southern products in the heart of Northism. In some regions, the party was structured enough to produce propaganda materials independently, while others

Figure 12 Regional gazebos selling cheese, pasta and nduja in Pontida 2022



primarily distributed national materials. The relation between the centre and the peripheral structures was organised differently in different areas of the country. This signalled again multiplicity, a process of change that occurred at different speeds in different local settings. Starting from these observations, I started to think that I was asking the wrong question: instead of searching for a definitive answer on whether the party had changed in symbols, ideology, and structure or not, a more interesting question would have been to ask how this combination of different political lines was possible and why did the party maintain this multiplicity.

By 11.00, the speeches started. As I watched videos of Pontida before, I immediately recognised the emphatic voice of the usual presenter –the same that introduced the speeches and the hosts every year for 20 years— who called the attention of the “Popolo di Pontida” to signal the start of the ceremony. The ceremony commenced with a eulogy honouring the party members who had passed away during the COVID-19 Pandemic –“the sisters and the brothers who put their heart and soul for the League ideals”. Matteo Salvini went by the “Tree of Life” –a tree they had planted at the border of the Pratone to commemorate Gianluca Buonanno, an MP who died in 2016 in a car accident— to commemorate those who “will accompany our battle from heavens”. While their photographs in contexts of militance were screened, the song “Amazing Grace” was in the background.

After this ceremony, a series of speeches⁴⁴ started, and party leaders were called to talk on stage, and the order reflected their prestige in the party. First, was Sergio Pirozzi, former mayor of Amatrice, called on stage to salute citizens from the Marche region who had experienced a flood two days prior; then was the turn of Luca Toccalini, secretary of the youth movement accompanied by its members; Flavio Castaldi, Tommaso Fiazza and Luca Baroncini, three mayors in representations of young administrators in the party; Mariano Calisse the president of the province of Rieti, on stage to represent provincial presidents. With the exception of the youth movement, which was loudly applauded, militants in the Pratone listened to the first speeches without particular attention, chatting with each other and with no particular enthusiasm. While chatting with the members I knew and those I met at the event, someone was surprised to see Pontida highly participated. There were more people than expected, as the electoral campaign had not been particularly energetic.

After the communal and provincial levels, it was the turn of the presidents of regions governed by the League. Christian Solinas, from Sardegna, entered the stage saluting “the colourful and generous people of flags, regions and identities” and underlined the importance of regional autonomy, saying that the party should pursue a vision for a “nice and generous Italy” that respects local traditions and specificities. Donatella Tesei, from Umbria, did not mention either autonomy or nationalist discourses. Maurizio Fugatti, from Trentino, was accompanied by regional councillors on stage and talked about “self-government and autonomy” that, as president of a “regione a statuto

⁴⁴ Fieldnotes of the event are here combined to the video analysis of the event, to ensure a more precise analysis of the content of the speeches.

speciale”, he could talk about with experience. Massimiliano Fedriga, from Friuli Venezia Giulia, stated that the league aimed to reaffirm their principles –hinting again at the previous period of departure from traditional positions. He mentioned that their political opponents were offering unrealistic solutions like the "reddito di cittadinanza"⁴⁵ to attract voters while voting for the League meant voting “the strength and the guarantee of the territory”. Then came Attilio Fontana, from Lombardia, who focused on the decentralisation of ministries, as Salvini, some days prior, had mentioned the idea of building a new ministry for innovation and placing it in Milan. Considering that Milan and Lombardy are the wealthiest, most industrious, and most innovative areas of the country, they were well-suited for a new ministry that promotes the future, innovation, start-ups, and more. Additionally, decentralisation had always been a priority for the party, and this was the perfect opportunity to relocate ministers from Rome to make them more accessible to ordinary people⁴⁶. While the governors were speaking, people around me commented on their insistence on the topic of autonomy, expressing scepticism that with the upcoming Meloni's victory, autonomy would be really possible to obtain. It seemed to me that whenever the party needed to reassure their base, the theme of autonomy was brought up, and even the party members no longer believed in those promises. However, at least in Pontida, autonomy was still the

⁴⁵ A subsidy to combat poverty, which was approved by the Movimento 5 Stelle and League during their time in government together in 2019. It has become a symbol for right-wingers of excessive welfare and misguided public intervention. Ironically, the League, which originally approved it as part of a compromise with the Movimento 5 Stelle, is now one of the most vocal opponents of this measure.

⁴⁶ In the party's history, there have been previous proposals to relocate ministers. In 2011, Bossi and Calderoli claimed they had succeeded in relocating some of the ministries in Monza, in Lombardia, but this claim was later adjusted to "we opened some branch offices" after a few months when it became clear that this relocation had not really happened.

main topic on stage, even if the request for autonomy was called with very different tones from the rough speeches of past leader Bossi.

Finally, it came Luca Zaia's turn. Over 30 people walked on stage wearing a red t-shirt with a lion in yellow. They carried a giant banner and a flag with the San Marco Lion, the symbol of the region Veneto. Zaia exclaimed, "Please, free the lion!!" and they unrolled it choreographically, covering the entire length of the stage as a demonstration of power and opposition to the nationalist turn. The same scene with the flag had repeatedly been performed over the years since 2017. He added, joking, "As you know, when we leave our region, we need to make ourselves comfortable, so we brought the flag". From the audience, a choir started chanting "Zaia, Zaia". He asked with false modesty for the applause to be aimed at the re-elected administrators and councillors



Figure 13 Veneti with the giant flag

of the League while smirking with satisfaction for the acclamation received by party members. Then, he started a long disquisition about regional autonomy, long-awaited by the people of Veneto, which political opponents had hindered. The autonomy, he said, was an assumption of responsibility. Someone was still going to “some communities” to say that autonomy was the “secession of the riches”, something that would bring impoverishment to those communities who still did not have a voice in the South. To them, he wanted to say that if they experienced bad government, it was not because of autonomy but because of the bad administrators they had in the past (“è colpa della mala gestio e di quei lazzaroni che hanno governato quei territori”). As five years had already passed since the regional referendum for autonomy⁴⁷, there were no more excuses. For 50 years, they had talked about being “padroni a casa nostra”, as they had “the arrogance to say they were better than Rome” in administering economic resources on the territory. Autonomy was not an invention of the League gazebos (“una invenzione di qualche gazebo del nostro partito”), but something written in the constitution and whoever opposed it was against the constitution—he said turning the opponents’ accuse that the League wanted to mine national unity. Welfarism in some communities was a new form of slavery, and the party should free those towns and their citizens. Autonomy was something that is worth the re-evaluation of a government (“vale anche la messa in discussione di un governo”) hinting at the future conflicts that the centre-right coalition foresaw on regional autonomy. Fratelli D’Italia, the future biggest party of the coalition, was, in fact, known to oppose this

⁴⁷ In 2017, Veneto and Lombardia called a referendum to consult the population about regional autonomy. See Giovannini and Vampa 2020.

topic. In Zaia's speech, the repertoires of exclusion of southern Italians –them being unproductive, a burden, criminals—were repurposed to include them by saying the population is indeed “enslaved” by the inefficiencies of their local political class. We can see a mechanism of recombination of the usual discourses of the party that move the boundary south without challenging the presuppositions according to which the south –not mentioned explicitly but through the periphrasis of “some communities”—is subordinate. The League is portrayed as an opportunity for them to escape their condition of subordination and their reliance on welfare—a condition that is never questioned but only reframed to place southern people as victims.

Then it was the turn of the Ministers: Minister for Disabilities Erika Stefani, focused her speech on militance. She remarked on her family's attachment to the party (“my father was a member of the league”) and the values that led her to join the party: the defence of the culture of her territory and the defence of identity. She said that “the political school of the League” was one of service, attachment to the flag, to militants and to the party. Members of the League serve the League; they do not follow opportunistic reasons in their acts. This differentiated the party from all the others. The League is yours, is of militants who do gazebos and serve panini at party feasts. She concluded by saying that the party, reunited in Pontida, will overcome any discredit and accuses, as the League truly represents people, as they ARE the people –a phrase that framed the party and their members as victims of injustice, a big misunderstanding. Then Garavaglia, the Minister of Tourism, and Giorgetti, the Minister of Economic Development, mainly discussed topics within their areas of expertise, emphasising the positive measures the party had implemented in support of Italian industries. Giorgetti also underlined that the decision to be part of Draghi's government was the right one,

as staying in government meant limiting the possibility for the left wings to govern alone and to do economic disasters. “The party was brave to take this position, as it is easy to critique staying at the opposition” – he said referring to Giorgia Meloni’s strategy during the COVID-19 period. Governing, he said, is always an equilibrium between what you would like to do and what you have to do – a phrase that sounded like an admission of guilt. The chosen topics of the different ministers clearly show that the speeches were aimed at two different audiences: party supporters at the rally and the general public watching a TV or Internet live at home. On the one hand, the leaders needed to address a crisis going on in the party, reuniting the militants through performing ideas of militance, trust, and return to the old league through identitarian topics of the party, such as autonomy. On the other, they also needed to underline their capabilities and their trustworthiness as government members. So, if, on one end, they needed to acknowledge a crisis, on the other end, they needed to show off their strength with the results of frequent changes of tones and changes of target in the same speech.

After a break in which Salvini walked on stage and asked ministers and regional presidents to sign a promise for Italy –six points of the electoral programs they had printed on a billboard—was the turn of heads of parliamentary groups in Europe and in the two chambers: Zanni, Molinari and Romeo. Finally, Andrea Crippa and Lorenzo Fontana, the two vice-secretaries of the party. The first one performed positions in line with the positions of European radical right: anti-lgbtq+ (“family is composed by a mother and a father”) and anti-migration (“chi arriva deve rispettare doveri, identità, tradizioni. Nessuno ci deve dire quale lingua parlare, quale carne mangiare e quale dio

pregare altrimenti Sali sul primo aereo o sul primo barcone e te ne torni da dove sei arrivato”).

Particularly interesting was the discursive strategy adopted by Fontana: He started by praising the former leader Umberto Bossi the person who allowed the “identitarian awakening of our peoples”, uniting those who were tired of paying their taxes to the “centralistic and oppressive state” – reminding to the audience about the history of the party. He added the battle of the league is still a battle for autonomy, but the word is changed as Bruxelles had become as centralistic as Rome – interpreting anti-EU positions as the logical continuation of the same battle against centralism. Then he started to say there is an international enemy called socialism, liberals, and democrats who want to impose their ideas. He praised Orban and Trump as examples of resistance, men who fought “alone against everyone” to be elected notwithstanding the opposition’s accuses. “There is a battle” he said, “between those who want globalism and socialism and those who want to preserve identities and traditions of peoples. [Our enemies] use mediatic, cultural and sometimes even physical violence to impose their ideas”. The new lines of the party, similar to those of the other parties of the radical right in Europe and in the US, are tied to the traditional culture of the party through recombination, reinterpretation and association of the new ideas within the history of the party. The Northern League has always been interested in defending local identities, traditions, and communities. Similarly, the Republicans of Abbott, De Santis, and Trump are true patriots who also defend identities. Two very different ideological positions are brought together in the same speech and rearticulated into a new line that is both recognizable from members of the party and converging with contemporary ideas in the field of the radical right. The typical discourses of the party

are reframed to be coherent with what is available in the global arena of far-right ideas, formations and leaders. The material interests that the party represented in the past – small firms, artisans, economies of the peripheral areas—are connected to the existence of a global struggle in which liberals and socialists are powerful and are allied with big corporations in the destruction of identities (“we have the right and duty to say that small firms, done by common people are important as they bring wealth on the territory and we don’t want a world of Amazon and Facebook where everyone become numbers”). Finally, Fontana praised the party militants – “Remember, if they mock you, insult you, or say you are backward or antique, be proud of that. You are right, you are on the side of good! [...] One day, in history books, someone will honour you and recognize your merits”— and the secretary Matteo Salvini—“he incarnated identitarian values of the League and for three years they derided him, and you know why? Because he never surrenders.”—portraying both the militants (defenders of values) and the secretary (an incarnation of values) as part of a global ideological and material struggle.

Finally, Salvini walked on stage smoke bombs were lit, and everyone cheered loudly. He performed a one-hour speech, mentioning all the topics of the ongoing electoral campaign. The speech blended ideas from the old league - militancy, autonomy, and local administration - with those of the national league - anti-EU stance, defence of Italy and Italians - without a particular order or a common thread. With his usual style, he talked ad-lib, moving from one topic to the other, joking, saluting international allies and mocking enemies, saluting the audience at home and asking them to vote for the league, joking again on the attacks received by the press and political opponents, thanking militants. For the first time in the three hours of speeches, he even mentioned

explicitly the other parties in the centre-right coalition. Finally, he thanked everyone for their presence and ended the ceremony with a big applause and militants left Pontida to reach their busses to home.

4. Ideological Change: Nationalism, Regionalism and the Mass Party

Re-articulation of party boundaries

In the previous chapters, we observed that the paths of change at the local level present a complex and diverse picture. Various locations pose different challenges for the party to effect change, and members hold different ideological positions and come from different political backgrounds. Despite this composite composition of beliefs, organisational features, and stratified memberships, how did the party manage to maintain unity? As suggested by the fieldnotes I took in Pontida 2021 in Interlude I, we will look at symbols, ideology, and culture of the two branches, not only to describe them but to understand how this multiplicity actually was necessary to keep the party together. To do so, we will look at two of the main features the literature mentions as central to the process of change: the transformation from regionalism to nationalism and the mass party model. If the first dimension is explicitly ideological in the most classical term, I suggest that also discourses around models of organisation—meaning discourses around how an ideal party should or should not be organised—are in-fact structural, as they constitute the ideal horizon of a group political action.

In different locales the nationalism/regionalism dilemma and the mass party/personal party dilemma assume different configurations. These combinations are similar enough to make sense in a unitary organization, but also different enough to make

sense in the different contexts, suggesting that a mechanism of local interpretation of general collective representations is in place. We will see that a series of empty signifiers are differently signified in different contexts, allowing for multiple interpretations of the same elements in different locales. We will see not only how the two topics are locally interpreted by members of different locales, but that the two discourses are connected to each other, as members of the party frequently switch from one dimension to the other, suggesting that there is a connection between nationalism/regionalism as ideology and discourses around the organisation.

This chapter starts from the presupposition of theories of *political articulation* (De Leon, Desai, and Tuğal 2009): parties do not reflect social divisions; they actively create them. The saliency of social divisions depends on whether the parties articulate them as a matter of contention. Political articulation is the process through which “party practices naturalize class, ethnic, and racial formations as a basis of social division by integrating disparate interests and identities into coherent sociopolitical blocs. [...] Cleavages, therefore, are only the *possible* differences among actors who populate the social; they do not naturally carry a political valence, but may be deployed by parties to aggregate majorities”. (ibid. 194) This kind of approach move from Lipset and Rokkan (1967) idea of cleavages that parties serves and “expressive function”, translating the conflicts already existing in cultural and social structures into demands and pressure for action. Rather, articulation theory embraces the idea that parties are social actors that build certain issues as relevant points of contention through differential interpellation (Althusser 1971) of individuals and groups of people. Competing parties can interpellate the same individual (or groups) for his religion, class, occupational status, or any other characteristic that does not constitute a political

position per se but acquires political valence through this process of recognition in a common cause. Interpellation gives coherence and unity to individuals' experiences that are “multifaceted and potentially contradictory or politically meaningless” through a process of imaginary identification with a cause (p.198)

As in Gramscian tradition, class becomes meaningful through the processes of political struggles, here any characteristic (structural position of individuals) become salient how and when they are indicated as central by political organisations, such as parties in the contemporary context (ibid 198). Parties cannot create cleavages from scratch, but they contribute to the reproduction of those structures through their political action. Social cleavages, class relations, institutional rules, and the economy all shape the possibilities and limits to hegemony. However, these structures do not self-reproduce, but they are the result of a constant work of reinforcement of boundaries that results in a naturalisation of those structures. (ibid.199). This work of unification is what is named by several theorists “articulation” (Hall in Grossberg 1986; Laclau 1977; Omi and Winant 2014). In line with Laclau’s discourse analysis, politics identify “privileged” identities –characteristics that become politically meaningful—from mere differences – all the possible lines of division— through the creation of *chains of equivalence* that unite separated instances into a system of signification(Laclau 2005). Through chains of equivalence, the experiences of single individuals become discursively linked to one another. To do so, political groups (not necessarily the populist ones!) connect these instances through powerful but vague words, such as “justice” or “freedom”, that he calls *empty signifiers* (ibid.). De Leon, Desai, and Tuğal point out that “organisational histories and the making of professional party cadres and leaders (who become experts in the manipulation of symbols and the uses of state power) is the missing

mechanism in Laclau”, as parties are the main actors in the articulation of discourses. (De Leon, Desai, and Tuğal 2015:25). Dan Slater (Slater 2020) suggests that articulation is not a one-way process but can also fail, calling disarticulation the process through which the link between the party and their social base deteriorates, leading to the collapse of the block constructed, thus reinforcing the idea that articulation is not definitive, but it’s rather a continuous process of articulation and re-articulation. This kind of approach has the potential to unite Laclau’s ideas around the discursive construction of parties and Gramscian attention to institutions, structural forces, historical contexts, and conjunctures.

Following the idea of articulation, we can see the change in the League as a process of re-articulation of the party, in which the party moved the boundaries south through mechanisms of displacement and condensation (Gauna 2016) of some key elements of their discourse,⁴⁸ allowing new electorates to be included while maintaining credibility in the north. But what happens when we include intra-party dynamics in the picture? Following the suggestion of Mudge and Chen (2014), we will look at intraparty dynamics more closely. In this chapter, I will look at what we can broadly call cultural structures, and I will talk about practices in the next chapter. Two are only analytically separate, as practices are “a language”—thus being structuring as well— and vice versa representations are visible in interviews only through discursive practices. I argue that the League party differently articulated discourses in different parts of the country, playing on multiple significations of the same signifiants and emphasising or

⁴⁸ This has been the object of my master’s thesis in 2019.

downplaying different elements of the same party ideology. This is consistent with the idea highlighted by several theorists that collective representations are polysemous and can take different meanings in different contexts (e.g., Hall 1973; Sahlins 1981; Schudson 1989; Swidler 2001; Walzer 1986). Different locales in the same organisation develop their local idiocultures –“system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviours, and traditions shared in a group of interaction, to which members can refer and which constitutes the foundation of future interaction” (Fine 1987 p.125)— that allows for the same elements of the party general culture to be articulated differently despite being part of the same organisation. The vagueness of the national discourses, often referred to as chameleonic (e.g., Ströbel 2022), is not just vague but vague in a way that allows for multiple political stances to be united despite the differences. This distinct articulation has made an initial enlargement of the party possible. This differentiation has been favoured by the avoidance of the party convention as if the party never reaches a clarifying moment⁴⁹, the vagueness is never cleared definitively, and the party can maintain different positions in different zones.

I will analyse the two aspects that have been more frequently mentioned in the literature as important for the change in the League: the transformation from regionalism to nationalism and the transformation of the mass party model. We will see from the interviews that in North, centre-north, and South, militants differently organize discourses around nationalism and regionalism, as well as discourses around how a party should or should not be organised. Moreover, we will see that discourses around

⁴⁹ See chapter 7

ideology and organisation often emerge together, and are intertwined, revealing that ideas around the organisation are not only a utilitarian matter but are parts of the local idiocultures of the party, as discourses around organisation are ideological too.

Regionalism/nationalism and the mass party abandonment

As said, two aspects are the most frequently mentioned in the literature: (1) the shift from regionalism to nationalism (ideological transformation) and (2) the weakening or abandonment of the mass party model (organisational transformation).

(1) Nationalism/Regionalism was by far the most publicly debated topic when the party boomed in 2018-2019, both in the media and in academic publications. Even if all Lega scholars recognize this element of change, the extent to which this was recognised as a radical change for the party varies. Some authors initially framed the process as a mere change in communicative strategy, as Brunazzo and Gilbert did in 2017 (Brunazzo and Gilbert 2017). However, when the article was written, the League still had a limited presence in the South, and Lega Nord and Noi con Salvini were still two separate organisations. Passarelli and Tuorto (2018), insisted on the idea that the party was truly changing and taking a new far-right ideological position, drawing from nationalistic discourses typical of other areas of the traditional right. A more nuanced position is that of Mazzoleni and Ruzza (2018), who underlined that the new League never abandoned regionalism completely: its new political line combines nationalism and regionalism since the two, even if apparently incompatible, are both present in the League positioning. This is possible because the party perceives EU policies as more threatening to regional interests than the national state. On the same line, Criscitiello

and De Rosa (2022) underline that regionalism and localism are still very much present in League communication, even after the switch to nationalism. The ideological change did not fully correspond to a nationalisation of the party, that still remains “a nationalist party, without ever quite becoming a national party.” (Passarelli and Tuorto 2022:4). We will see that the idea of a combination of nationalism and regionalism that was indicated by the literature on the national party is confirmed in my interviews with militants in all three locales. However, the combination is not the same in the different locales, suggesting the persistence of different local interpretations of the party ideology.

Regarding the mass party, as we already saw in the previous chapter, Davide Vampa wrote an article discussing the initial stage of Salvini's expansion in the southern regions of Italy. The article highlights that the ideological transformation was accompanied by a decline in the mass party model, which was also aided by a decline in party membership and public subsidies. Since the new creation of the political party in the south, Salvini was able to establish a structure that relied heavily on his leadership. (Vampa 2017). Matteo Zulianello (2021) notes that attempts to export the same model of the North to the South were unsuccessful, the party South is dominated by and dependent on Northern elites. As for the organisation, my interviews, as they were conducted later, from 2021 to 2023, partially disconfirm Zulianello's idea that the party was maintaining a mass party structure. My interviewees report a crisis of the original organisational model due to the general weakening of the organisation, verticalisation of decisions, and intra-party conflict. If the organisation is formally the same, the party's organisational routines were “put on standby” to avoid internal splitting due to unresolved discussions on the new line of the party. In the south, however, a thin structure highly dependent on the national leadership is confirmed.

After the exploration of the concrete organisation of the party in the three locales that we saw in the last chapter, in this chapter, we will see that discourses around the mass party continuously emerge despite the party change. They remain like an echo, a set of scripts that prescribe how a party should or should not be organised, whether the party is actually organised accordingly or not.

North

In the interviews I conducted in the north, regionalism remains a prevalent feature of the party idioculture. Here the party is very well structured and become prominent properly because of regionalism. Many members prioritize fiscal federalism as the main political objective, and their conversations revolve around regional matters rather than national ones. They view involvement in national politics as a way to achieve their regionalist goals, which are often related both to economic growth and the representation of regional identity and local communities. Some members strongly oppose the party's shift towards national politics, as they feel that the transformation detracted from the importance of local structures in the party's decision-making processes. Most of them do not consider Salvini as their primary referent, and they value the importance of regional leadership over the national one. Even new members of the party, such as Federico, who is a local secretary in the youth movement, say they joined the party for reasons related to regionalism:

Io sono entrato nel 2018 e il 2017 è stato diciamo il culmine- cioè, quello che mi ha dato conferma che dovevo entrare in Lega che è stato il referendum sull'autonomia. Io sono convintissimo dell'autonomia e del federalismo fiscale, quindi per me sono

I joined the party in 2018, and 2017 has been the pinnacle- the confirmation that I must join the league was the referendum on autonomy. I am genuinely convinced of autonomy and fiscal federalism, to me those are the main goals that the league should have

quelli gli obiettivi primi che deve avere la Lega come partito, gli ideali che comunque che ha sempre portato avanti da quando [...] la Lega è stata fondata, e... il referendum per l'autonomia è stata la conferma al 100%. (Federico, provincial secretary youth wing, youth wing)

as a party, ideals that the league has always pursued since its foundation... the referendum for autonomy was the 100% confirmation (Federico, provincial secretary youth wing, youth wing)

Despite entering the party during a period when Salvini and Nationalism were omnipresent online and on television, Federico firmly adheres to the party's local positioning, which prevails over the national turn. In this sense, we can see that the party still attracts new members interested in regionalism in this area because the local version of the party culture, as well as the local political action of the party, is oriented toward regionalism.

However, regionalism rarely appears alone in the interviews: among my participants, only the most intransigent regional separatists have voiced their wish to return to the previous era of federalism, believing that it would make them more in tune with the people's views in their region and their desire for autonomy. Most of the interviewees, instead, expressed mixed positions. Some of them believe that various political matters, such as migration and relations with the European Union, affect all regions equally and, for this reason, do not see the national turn as concerning. Some others initially were optimistic about Salvini, as he was a well-known leader of the Lega Nord party even before his role as secretary. However, over time, they lost their hopes. Given his longstanding membership and notable roles, they supported his position as a leader. They were persuaded by electoral outcomes that the party's attempt to go south

was a favourable decision⁵⁰. They acknowledged Salvini's capability to broaden the party's electoral consensus, and they understood that the party had to expand southward to overcome the financial scandal and become the first party in the centre-right. But as time passed, their stance shifted as they began to see the growing nationalism as a disregard for their territory.

Renato started his political activity in the 1990s. He was very young when he entered, and he talks about his political career as coming from personal beliefs about regionalism and local identity and the need for economic autonomy in the region. He is a longstanding member who began his political participation in the youth movement and is now a prominent member of the party's regional structure. When I ask how the party has changed over the years, he says:

L'obiettivo principale per cui siamo nati è territorio, federalismo, autonomia, identità. Ecco, questo negli ultimi 3 anni, 4 anni è stato decisamente messo da parte, è stato decisamente... vorrei dire anche cancellato, perché il diverso modo di organizzazione del partito, il tema e il messaggio nazionalistico quasi che si è imposto nella agenda politica è un contesto di pensiero politico che non mi appartiene. Io non sono un nazionalista, io sono un federalista. sono autonomista e un federalista, e non sono nemmeno uno che è di destra, come non sono di sinistra, cioè sono uno a cui piace la politica nel contesto in cui l'ho conosciuta, l'identità, il territorio, la vicinanza, le

Our primary goals at the foundation were centred around territory, federalism, autonomy, and identity. However, in the last 3-4 years, this has been for sure disregarded... I would say also cancelled because this different way of organising the party, the nationalist topics and messages that became central in the political agenda, are all a "context of political thought" to which I do not belong. I am not a nationalist; I am a federalist. I am an autonomist and a federalist, and I am not even right-wing, as I am not leftist. I mean, I value politics based on identity, territory, proximity, and what is right. (Renato, regional councillor, longstanding)

⁵⁰ This topic will be explored in the next chapter.

cose giuste. (Renato, regional councillor, longstanding)

We can see that Renato starts talking about regionalist ideology, mentioning territory, federalism, autonomy and identity. Then, he immediately switches to the organisational dimension as the "new way of organising the party" together with nationalism are "a context of political thought to which I don't belong" – meaning they are equally ideological in his view. The ideological and organisational elements often overlap in these quotations: the shift towards nationalism resulted in abandoning the party's mass model, and members understand the two as intertwined, as you cannot understand the national turn without considering the organisational shift. The frequent co-occurrence of the two elements in the same strand of the conversation reveals a connection between these two dimensions. These activists believe the party must have a well-structured local presence to represent local needs effectively, and they view mass party practices as the routines associated with regionalism, as if the two elements "naturally" worked together until the national turn.

Renato continued our conversation by providing examples of how the Lega North had already attempted several times to go South before, to show me that his discontent with the national turn was not strictly about the involvement of Southerners but rather about how this transition to nationalism occurred. According to Renato, the party has recently lost its identity and has become increasingly right-wing, adopting more radical positions on ethical issues rather than concentrating on reforming the centralistic state. Overall, in his words, the issue of regionalism appears more complex than mere *nostalgia* or a belief that the southern regions are entirely different from the north.

Lo si può vedere come qui c'è la Lega Nord e lì c'è la Lega Sud e facciamo un patto di federazione, lo si può vedere come partito unico, quello è una discussione aperta, ma il messaggio politico non può cambiare [...] io credo che ci sia la possibilità, in una Lega che parla al paese —anzi la necessità— che il tema principale sia quello dell'identità territoriale. [...] sull'autonomia, qualunque regione, anche del sud deve avere la propria. [...] se tu fai capire che sei un partito di destra, che sei nazionalista, che dell'autonomia ti sei dimenticato, i temi e il modo in cui li comunichi sono da Alleanza Nazionale, alla fine uno guarda e dice “beh voto la Meloni”, questo è successo. (Renato, regional councillor, longstanding)

We could see us as the Northern League and then as the Southern League and form a federation, or we could consider ourselves as an undivided party, this is up for debate. But you can't change the political message. [...] I believe there is a possibility for a League that speaks to the country —even the need for it— but the most important topic should be territorial identity. [...] Every region, even in the south, should have its own autonomy. [...] If you promote the idea that you are a nationalist party, that you forgot autonomy, you end up having the topics and the communication of Alleanza Nazionale, and at the end, people can say “ok then, I vote Meloni”, this is what happened. (Renato, regional councillor, longstanding)

Renato firmly believes in regionalism and thinks all other southern regions should embrace this idea. He believes that regionalism is important, but the party can still have a national presence as long as every region advocates for their own regional autonomy. What set Lega apart from other parties in Italy was its commitment to regionalism. Completely abandoning this focus would make it similar to other right-wing parties, ultimately risking a loss of electoral support in favour of Fratelli d'Italia. Claudio, a town councillor and youth movement member, shares this viewpoint and feels the party made a mistake by abandoning federalism to gain favour in non-traditional territories. Instead, he suggests that the right path would have been convincing southern regions about federalism.

Io sono estremamente critico di quanto sia stato abbandonato il tema federalismo eccetera, anzi, io —anche se non sono il segretario della lega [ride]—lo avrei spinto perché quello

I am extremely critical of how much the issue of federalism, etc., was abandoned. In fact, if it was for me — even though I am not the league's secretary [laughs]— I would have

fosse il modo per far esplodere il partito anche al sud, portare avanti le idee del federalismo, cioè l'opposto di quel che è stato fatto. È stato fatto rendersi nazionali e abbandonare i temi dell'identità- quelli regionali, del federalismo regionale, per rendersi piacevoli alle regioni del sud che magari erano più timorosi nei confronti di queste istanze, io avrei fatto il contrario (Claudio, city councillor, youth wing)

pushed on the topic of federalism to broaden the party's influence in the South as well, pursuing this idea of federalism even in the South. That is the opposite of what was done. They became national and disregarded the topic of identity and regional federalism. This was done to appeal to the southern regions, who may have been more insecure about these claims. Personally, I would have taken the opposite approach. (Claudio, city councillor, youth wing)

The party should be national but not nationalist, regional and local topics should be central to the party's action, and the territory should not be neglected. Opposite to what has been done, regionalism could have been a battle for every region, even in the South. Interestingly, for the majority of members in the North, the matter is not the demonisation of southern areas anymore, but rather the fact that the national enlargement was not regionalist enough.

One topic that frequently emerges is that of "Territory", a very interesting term in the League's language since it simultaneously means "regionalism" and "regional organisation." This means the ideological positioning and the organisational practices are called with the same exact words. An explicit example of this is visible in the interview I made with Aldo and Franco, to former members. I met Aldo and Franco in a bar, and they arrived with a bag full of documents and flyers from the 1990s for me to see their political activity in the small town, what symbols they were using, and what claims they were making. They left the party after twenty years and more because they disagreed with Salvini's line and the local leadership's management of internal dissent.

Qua in particolare è stato pesante per noi accettarlo [che il partito stava cambiando] perché la lega è sempre stato un partito territoriale, abbiamo sempre avuto questa particolarità rispetto ad altri soggetti politici ed è venuto a mancare completamente anche questo aspetto perché poi alla fine con Salvini pochissima attività sul territorio, pochissima attività di [ascolto dei bisogni dei cittadini]. Ha eliminato addirittura le circoscrizioni dallo statuto, non ci sono state più assemblee e incontri di condivisione sono stati congelati i congressi, un sistema devastante. Molti lo hanno capito subito, altri lo hanno capito dopo. (Aldo, Former Member)

Here, in particular, it was hard for us to accept it [that the party was changing] because the League has always been a territorial party. We have always had this particularity compared to other political subjects, and this aspect was dismissed entirely because, in the end, with Salvini, we did very little activity on the territory, very little activity of [listening to citizens' needs]. He even eliminated *circoscrizioni* from the statute, there were no more assemblies and meetings, and congresses were frozen, a devastating system. Many understood it right away, and others understood it later. (Aldo, Former Member)

Aldo talks about how the organisation changed and mentions the term “territorial” to describe the organisation. He talks about being in contact with electors and immediately turns the conversation to changes in the party's internal structure. Despite being the most active in coordinating small municipalities, one organisational level between towns and provinces was eliminated. Being in contact with electors and the level of organisation within the party are considered two parts of being “territorial”. Territory is simultaneously the space in which the party acts, the way in which the party act and the scope of the party action, reaching more autonomy for the territory through regionalism.

In conclusion, in the northern region, the idea of a national federation of regionalist party is prevalent, as the party culture has been regionalist for over two decades. When discussing this topic, they refer to both ideology and mass party practices, as the two elements are seen as part of the same ideological sphere, as two sides of the same

problem of giving voice to the “territory”. While they do not support nationalism, they do not negatively see the party's expansion in non-traditional regions. For this reason, the majority of them were willing to follow Salvini's turn as long as federalism was still the main objective of the party, but now feel betrayed because of the diminished importance of federalism together with the (temporary?) suspension of normal organizational routines associated with the mass party that emerges as privileged models of political action of the regionalist party, despite the fact they are only partially practised in the contemporary league in the north (see chapter 3).

South

League members in the south tend to describe themselves as right-wingers. Usually, they were members of other parties or were active in right-wing movements and organisations before joining, and they mention their family origins as reasons for being right-wing. Their idioculture is much more similar to that of a traditional right-wing party than the idioculture in the north. Many mention anti-migration campaigns and their support for Salvini as the main reasons for joining the party.

Giorgio is a recent member of the party in the south. This is not the first time he has been a party member, and he tells me that he had been active in other centre-right parties before joining the League in 2018. He describes himself as a nationalist and a right-wing man. When asked if he would have ever considered joining the party before Salvini, he answers:

La Lega di prima era assolutamente incompatibile con la mia posizione, io sono assolutamente nazionalista e meridionalista, non gli avrei

The Lega from before was absolutely incompatible with my position, I am absolutely nationalist and *meridionalista*, I probably wouldn't

probabilmente neanche stretto la mano. (Giorgio, city councillor, new member)

even have shaken their hands. (Giorgio, city councillor, new member)

But then, when asked about more nuanced positions, such as federalism or fiscal autonomy, he gets very passionate and says he is very well-documented on the topic, since he studied the norms in depth. He believed that these concepts were not in contrast with nationalism since the Italian Constitution allows regional governments to have varying degrees of autonomy from the central state. He goes on to explain the legal changes that have occurred over the years and why these concepts are not necessarily related to right-wing politics. He saw them as promising ways to organize the central state and local government relationship.

sul federalismo fiscale io penso che l'idea di responsabilizzare gli enti locali, soprattutto quelli del sud, sia un'idea sacrosanta, l'idea del separatismo invece è deleteria. Però federalismo fiscale non vuol dire togliere a uno per dare a un altro, vuol dire dire agli enti locali che sono responsabili di quello che fanno [...] vanno individuati dei livelli essenziali di prestazione in modo da evitare che chi ha di più abbia ancora di più, e chi ha di meno abbia ancora di meno. Io non ho paura dell'autonomia, ho paura dei cattivi amministratori. [...] questo tema è uno spauracchio della sinistra che dice che la destra vuole la secessione [...] la destra è per sua natura unitaria, nazionale e patriota, l'idea di dividere l'Italia non va neanche discussa. (Giorgio, city councillor, new member)

on fiscal federalism, I think that the idea of making local authorities accountable, especially those of the south, is a great idea, while the idea of separatism is harmful. However, fiscal federalism does not mean taking away from one to give to another, it means telling local authorities that they are responsible for what they do [...] essential levels of services must be established in order to prevent those who have more from still having more, and whoever has less has even less. I'm not afraid of autonomy, I'm afraid of bad administrators. [...] this issue is a bogeyman of the left who says that the right wants secession [...] the right is by its nature unitary, national and patriotic, the idea of dividing Italy shouldn't even be discussed. (Giorgio, city councillor, new member)

Giorgio deeply supports nationalism but also believes that regional autonomy can coexist with this ideology. He views regional autonomy as primarily an economic and

administrative issue rather than one of identity. However, the concept of nationhood remains a significant aspect of the League's political identity in the South as testified by the straightforward references to national unity, patriotism and nation.

Likewise, Mara, a prominent member of the party in the South, believes that regional autonomy and nationalism can be reconciled. She comes from a right-wing background and was previously involved in civic right-wing organisations before joining the party. She explained to me that all the southern regional branches face similar challenges in communicating their ideas to citizens.

il nostro problema grande qual è? Il fatto di non riuscire a far comprendere quanto sia importante l'autonomia regionale, in questo noi stiamo peccando. io ritengo che sia fondamentale invece far comprendere le motivazioni per cui è importante avere l'autonomia regionale. Perché il sud è sempre stato vissuto e visto come una zavorra che l'Italia dovrebbe portarsi, ovviamente quella zavorra che è piena di debiti, dove non c'è lavoro, sono tutti delinquenti [...] per cui la lega dovrebbe portare quella ventata di novità di pensiero, non di persone. La novità di pensiero è la meritocrazia, l'autonomia, e far crescere la propria regione (Mara, MP, 2nd wave)

Do you know what our big problem is? The fact we have not yet been able to make people understand how crucial regional autonomy is, we are sinning in this. I believe that instead, it is essential to make people understand the reasons why it is important to have regional autonomy. Because the South has always been experienced and seen as a dead weight that Italy should carry, that dead weight full of debts, where there is no work, they are all criminals [...] The league should bring fresh thinking, not just new people. The fresh thinking is meritocracy, autonomy, and making one's region grow. (Mara, MP, 2nd wave)

Regional Autonomy is viewed as an economic opportunity to show that the southern regional economy can be productive and meritocratic, rather than a burden. Nationalism and regional autonomy can be compatible when considering federalism as a way to organize relations between regions and the state.

On the organisational side, the party is thinly structured and strongly dependent on the national level. The national leadership attempted to export their organisational model to the region, but this was unsuccessful for the reasons we saw in the previous chapter. Additionally, building a structure as quickly as their consensus was growing was not possible. Antonio, the former local secretary of a small town, joined the party because of his admiration for Salvini and thanks to his acquaintance of some local members. However, he eventually left the party due to its overly structured organisational model which did not meet his expectations.

C'erano degli incontri, ogni due settimane ci incontravamo con l'onorevole [nome] con degli incontri di tutti i paesi, tutti i segretari cittadini. Si parlava di più e del meno, di come dovevamo organizzarci durante il mese, facevamo dei gazebo. Poi pian piano vedevo che la cosa- certa gente si allontanava, perché non era una cosa... non è un partito, era diventato militarizzato. Come il militare! [...] Se non eri presente, ho notato anche in qualche paese, se non portavi tot persone [agli eventi], il giorno dopo stavi fuori. (Antonio, former municipal secretary)

There were meetings, every two weeks, we would meet with [parliamentary member] with meetings of all the towns, all the town secretaries. We would talk about this and that, about how we should organize during the month, we would have gazebos. Then slowly I could see that the thing... some people were leaving, because it was not a thing- it was not a party, it had become militarised. Like the military! [...] If you were not continuously participating, I even noticed that in some towns, if you didn't bring a certain number of people [to events], you were out the next day. (Antonio, former municipal secretary)

If members in the north express concerns about a lack of organization, Antonio faces the opposite issue: the demands of the organization are excessive and do not meet his expectations. This testifies again a different way of thinking about how an ideal party should work, to the point that Antonio feels that a party that is this demanding “is not a party” but an army.

Even the types of events mentioned by the members reflect the relationship between the local organization and the national leadership. For instance, when I spoke with members in the south about their local activities, they consistently referenced national events: although my interviews with members in the north and centre-north were mainly conducted face to face, in the case of southern regions, I was forced to conduct my interviews from a distance through video calls. I inquired about the possibility of meeting my interviewees in person and joining them in their local activities in October 2022, immediately after the national elections. Significantly, they informed me that they were not holding any local events during that time and were instead focused on government formation as if an event on the national level was detrimental to local activities. I followed up in January 2023, but they still told me they were not organising any local events since they were occupied by regional elections. Since regional elections took place in Lombardia, I assume that national leaders would not come south, so their local public activities stopped (Fieldnotes January 2022). As I reflected on the interviews I conducted, I noticed a common theme among the local activities mentioned by the interviewees: many of them talked about organising Salvini's speeches in various cities and events with other parliamentary members.

Il nostro elettorato nasce dagli incontri, dalle cene, dalle feste che noi facciamo con i nostri elettori e simpatizzanti... per cui questo è mancato molto durante il periodo Covid, ed è stato un danno per la lega. Il periodo covid è stato realmente un danno, ed è stato una delle motivazioni per cui secondo me il nostro elettorato si è allontanato. Noi dobbiamo ritornare a rifare quelle attività, infatti noi appena tutta questa grandissima emergenza è terminata abbiamo cominciato ovviamente ad

Our electorate comes from the meetings, the dinners, the parties we have with our voters and sympathizers ... so that was missed a lot during the covid period, it was a damage to the league. The covid period was really a damage, and it was one of the motivations why I think our electorate turned away. We have to go back to re-doing those activities, in fact, as soon as all this very big emergency was over, we started, of course, to organize some parties. Even with the coming of

organizzare delle feste. Anche con la venuta di Matteo Salvini, non erano solo e semplici comizi, erano proprio delle feste con della musica [...] dove si poteva comunque mangiare, chiacchierare tra di noi, ritornarci a salutare. Sembra assurdo però per noi è stato fondamentale riacquisire proprio quegli abbracci, quei sorrisi... che avevamo prima durante gli incontri e le manifestazioni di Matteo (Mara, MP, 2nd wave)

Matteo Salvini, they were not just simple speeches, they were parties with music[...] where you could still eat, chat with each other, and come back and say hello. It sounds absurd, but for us, it was essential to precisely regain those hugs, those smiles... that we had before during Matteo's meetings and rallies (Mara, MP, 2nd wave)

These activities mainly involved public rallies or dinners with members and supporters. Unfortunately, Lucia explains that Covid-19 has impacted their ability to organize these local activities. It's clear that Matteo Salvini plays a central role in party rallies, highlighting the party's strong connection to its national leader. Interestingly, Salvini is never mentioned in relation to local activities during interviews conducted in the North.

To conclude, In the southern region, the party is primarily nationalist, and federalism is seen as "compatible" with this view. Federalism is mainly framed as an issue of economic and juridic nature, not as a matter of local identities as in the north. References to desired ways of organizing points to a weaker model if compared with the mass party one, that is seen as too demanding, highlighting very distant ways of interpreting the current state of the organization in the party. When discussing their activities militants frequently mention the national leader and the assistance provided by various figures in the national leadership during their party formation process, suggesting the prevalence of centralization of decisions over the mass party model.

Centre-North

In the centre north, some of the longstanding party members hold similar views to those in the north. However, the beliefs and practices here are more diverse due to weaker regionalism, the party's younger age, and the traditionally leftist nature of the region. The party was small before Salvini's leadership, and because it typically serves as the minority party in local administrations against the centre-left, many members consider the party a right-wing entity. Contrarily, despite stronger federalist positions, in the north party members describe themselves as leaning more towards the centre. In this area the party gained momentum in 2018-2019 and attracted members of other centre-right parties, resulting in additional internal fragmentation in views on both ideological and organisational matters. The party managed to elect some mayors in larger towns, reflecting its growing appeal, but recently lost part of its voters in favour of Fratelli d'Italia. Although longstanding party members strongly advocate for regionalism and resemble in position to members in the north, newer members are usually less concerned with federalism. They are also interested in local politics. However, they do not necessarily think about it only in terms of regional autonomy.

For example, Marco, a young city councillor from a town governed by the League in a historically leftist area, joined the party during the peak of the 2018-2019 administrative election. When asked about his reasons for joining the party he primarily focuses on municipal politics and the opposition to the Democratic Party, which is the dominant force in the region. He does not consider himself a right-winger; he just thinks the League has good proposals for his municipality. His interest in local politics is a "civic commitment".

E quindi diciamo che mi sono avvicinato [alla lega] per una... una generica diciamo infarinatura prevalentemente a livello politico, però soprattutto per un impegno civico, di militanza legato al mio territorio e alle problematiche che affliggono tutt'ora e affliggevano la mia città. (Marco, city councillor, 2nd wave)

So, let's say that I started to gravitate towards the Lega for a generic, general background of political reasons, but mainly for a civic, militant commitment related to my territory and the issues that still afflict and afflicted my city. (Marco, city councillor, 2nd wave)

Conversely, other members' positions more closely resemble those of southern members, who joined the party because they were right-wingers looking for a right-wing party to support. Andrea, a prominent youth movement member, joined the party because he liked Salvini's strong positions. Only later did he "learn" to appreciate the focus on the local level.

Quando l'ascesa di Salvini è diventata chiara a livello nazionale [...] vedevo questo nuovo centro destra che si stava creando, un nuovo centro destra radicale, determinato, anche su certe cose, comunque, che potesse essere visto anche come estremo su certi punti, ma secondo me erano punti che assolutamente erano condivisibili e di buon senso. [...]

dopodiché una volta che entri in quella che è una comunità politica ne inizi ad apprezzare dall'interno anche determinate particolarità, ad esempio il tema del federalismo, dell'autonomia, delle comunità territoriali, delle tradizioni locali... tutto questo pensiero conservatore che però è un pensiero conservatore che si lega strettamente al concetto di comunità locale, è un qualcosa che io ho fatto mio totalmente ma che non avevo prima e che ho iniziato ad apprezzare dopo. (Andrea,

When the rise of Salvini became clear at the national level [...] I saw this new centre-right that was being created, a new radical and determined centre-right, it can also be considered extreme in some respects. However, I personally found that their views on certain issues were agreeable and based on common sense. [...]

When you join a political community, you gradually start to appreciate from within its peculiarities, for example, the themes of federalism, autonomy, territorial communities, local traditions... All this conservative thought, a thought that is strictly tied with the concept of the local community, is something that I totally embraced, something I didn't have before, and I started appreciating only after joining. (Andrea, Youth Movement regional secretary, youth wing)

Youth Movement regional secretary,
youth wing)

Andrea was socialized to the League's specificities only after joining the party, when he learned to be Leghista. He sees the attachment to the territory as a conservative political ideology tied to the concepts of traditions and local community. When talking about the party ideology, right-wing positions precede regional autonomy, similarly to members in the South.

However, differently from the South, the pre-existence of a regionalist party means that the difference between “real” leghisti and newcomers is still an object of conflict. When he became leghista, Andrea had to learn the party's specificities, which are instead taken for granted in the North and not relevant in the South. As an example, sometimes, during public events, regionalist militants underline the difference between those who joined the party because they are conservatives and those who are, in their view, the “*true* leghisti.” During a public gathering, a provincial youth coordinator noticed a homologous from a different province mentioning Margaret Thatcher in her speech. When it was his turn to speak, he underlined the importance of prioritising federalism over right-wing views in the League. He publicly suggested her to quote Carlo Cattaneo instead, sanctioning her choice and position. On the same occasion, another leader of the youth movement said “La Lega deve tornare a fare la Lega, non la brutta copia dei fascisti”⁵¹ (Fieldnotes November 2022), denoting another attempt to

⁵¹ the league must go back to do the league, not the poor imitation of fascists

define the boundaries using the party's original culture. The divisions between regionalists and nationalists are visible in many ways, both on the ideological and organisational levels.

Another element to consider for this area is party switchers: members whose political culture was already formed before joining the party during the electoral peak. Anna comes from Forza Italia and thinks that to confine your political action to the local level is a sign of political immaturity:

[quella di prima] era una Lega però un pochino [...] ancora primordiale dal punto di vista di struttura, di attività politica, di proposta politica, e poco nazionale. Non dava una visione politica strutturata di lavoro sul territorio, soprattutto anche con un respiro nazionale. [...] Invece, negli ultimi anni la Lega con Matteo Salvini si è nazionalizzata, quindi ha cambiato la sua visione, la sua prospettiva. (Anna, Militant, new member)

[the previous] League was still a bit primordial from the point of view of the structure, political activity, and political proposal and was not very national. The party did not have a structured political vision for the territory, especially not with a broader national scope. Instead, in recent years, the League with Matteo Salvini has become nationalised, so it has changed its vision, its perspective. (Anna, Militant, new member)

In her view, local action – again framed using the word “territory”— must have a broader national scope to be mature. Her idea of what a party should be like refers to the national level, and she approves Salvini's attempt to nationalise the party. The party in which she started her activity as a militant was scarcely structured on the ground and mainly centred its activity at the national level. She holds a negative opinion towards the fact that several members of her group have an excessive attachment to always listening to rank-and-file members:

ahah lo lo stimo molto a livello politico, poi ci siamo sempre scontrati tantissimo, proprio perché lui è uno di quelli vecchi, legati ai valori, e io invece

Ahah, I respect him a lot on the political level, but we constantly clashed so much, precisely because he is one of the old ones, attached to values, and I

sono- lui ascolta tutti i militanti, tutti, proprio tutti. E io invece, insomma, sono abituata a un livello politico diverso (Anna, Militant, new member)

am instead- he listens to all the militants, everybody, just everybody. And I, on the other hand, I mean, I'm used to a different political level (Anna, Militant, new member)

However, not all former members of Forza Italia share the same views. Sometimes, a more robust organisation is the very reason why they choose to join the League. During an electoral dinner, one of my interviewees introduced me to his friend, a self-defined “moderate” named Dario. He had been active in Forza Italia in the past. He explained that he had initially considered joining the Lega because he desired to be part of a political community with a well-structured party, which he felt was lacking in Forza Italia. However, upon attending the party activities, he found that the promised organisation was absent. He believed that the League had also lost some of its organisation and was dominated by factions. Consequently, he ultimately decided not to join (Fieldnotes Sept. 2022).

Lastly, the topic of the mass party, even in this locale, emerges again in combination with discourses around regionalism among longstanding members. They point out that the organisation has become weaker over time. When asked about nationalism, Roberto immediately turns to organisational issues and how the ideological change corresponded to an organisational change.

L'amore per la bandiera... non eravamo abituati a queste cose, noi avevamo i *nostri* simboli, il sole celtico... si caratterizzava proprio come un partito indipendentista vero e proprio. E lui ha un po' cambiato queste cose e si è occupato più di problemi trasversali. Durante questo periodo, un po' per il fatto che non c'era

The love for the flag... we were not used to these things, we had our own symbols, the Celtic sun... it was really characterised as a real independence party. And he kind of changed those things and became more involved in cross-cutting political issues. During this period, partly because of the fact that there was no structure, as we had

una struttura, come la avevamo nella vecchia lega, diciamo che c'è stato un po' di scollamento –secondo me eh? È quello che penso io—c'è stato un po' di scollamento tra la base e i vertici. Se prima si vedevano spesso i vertici, si sentivano, c'era tutta una catena di comando, diciamo così, attraverso le segreterie comunali, provinciali, regionali fino ai vertici federali. Questa cosa è andat- non sono riusciti ancora a ricostruirla. (Roberto, former regional councillor, longstanding)

it in the old league, let's say there was a little bit of a disconnect –in my opinion, huh? That's what I think—there was a bit of a disconnect between the base and the top. If you used to see the top leadership often and hear from them, there was a whole chain of command, let's say, through the municipal, provincial, and regional secretariats all the way up to the federal leadership. This thing has gon- they haven't been able to rebuild it yet. (Roberto, former regional councillor, longstanding)

Again, the ideological and organisational changes are mentioned together as part of the same continuum.

Conclusions

As I have shown through the analysis of the interviews, ideological change at the national level, what we could call the national party culture, is reinterpreted at the local level through the combination of the same elements in different patterns. Each of the groups considered provided local interpretations of the same events and ideas that reflect the local idioculture of the group, the history of the group, and the context in which their political action is pursued. The ideological shift from Regionalism to Nationalism not only resulted in a combination of the two lines but in different combinations, different trajectories, and different conflicts in separate areas of the country. On a national level, the leader often adopts flexible and vague positions to appeal to diverse electorates, earning them the label "chameleonic" (e.g. Ströbel 2022). Nationalism and regionalism are co-present in national discourses and in the public speeches of leaders, which often contradict themselves. However, rather than

searching for logical coherence, if we look at the level of local practices, we can point to the effects of this multiplicity on the organisation. Maintaining multiple positions allowed for different local practices to be pursued in different contexts, though different articulation of the same signifiers. As the party avoided Congress for long periods, the different regional articulations of the party did not necessarily have to reach a consensus on ideological issues. This initially benefited the central party as they could handle relations with local leadership separately and use different ideological and organisational strategies. On a local level, combinations of nationalism and regionalism are – borrowing a phrase from Eliasoph and Lo (Eliasoph and Lo 2017:782)— “vague in very precise ways”, are combined in a way that has its internal logic in accordance with local cultural patterns and it’s only apparently contradictory.

	North	Centre-north	South
Regionalism/ Nationalism	Regionalism ideology but national party, federalism is the key, all the regions should have their autonomy	Fragmented, different positions depending on the length of their militance and possible previous parties	Nationalism, federalism as a positive way to organize the relations between the local administrations and the state
Mass party/ un-structured party	Strong emphasis on the importance of the party organisation	Fragmented	Strong emphasis on the relations with the national leadership

Table 8

All the locales considered present both elements of regionalism and nationalism, but these elements assume different local meanings.

In the northern region, militant prevalently think the party should be national but not nationalist, as regionalism should be pursued in every region in the country, and they associate nationalism with economic centralism. When discussing this topic, they refer

to ideology and practices, as they believe they are not separate. While they aim to avoid nationalism, they do not see the party's expansion in non-traditional regions negatively and for this reason, the majority of them were willing to follow Salvini's turn as long as federalism is still the main objective of the party.

In the southern region, the party is primarily nationalist, and federalism is seen as an economic and juridic project compatible with this view. The party is primarily a right-wing party and only secondarily pursuing federalism. If in the north, the scope and the mass organisation needed to reach it are almost always overlapped in discourses of militants, In the south, someone even considers the party too structured, and the national leaders are always mentioned even when describing local activities.

The situation is more diverse in the central-northern region because the League is part of a minority in a traditionally left-wing region. The party consists of longstanding militants, new members, and members who joined through party switching. While its organisational model is similar to that of the northern regions, its ideological positioning is more complex to determine.

Furthermore, since ideological and organisational change themes are often intertwined in the data, we can see a connection between the two aspects that are only analytically distinct. Organisational methods are naturalised as the obvious correspondent to ideological stances, and unwanted practice changes are often described as a violation of abstract principles.

During change processes, local organisations become arenas for conflict and interpretation, which can lead to the success or failure of general change processes. Since most studies of parties overlook the local level while studies on movements

usually do not deal with multilevel and structured organisations, we have very little comprehension of how complex organisations change and how change at a national level becomes change in local practices. An approach focusing on the local level allows us to observe different parts of the general dynamic of change, as well as the intertwining between culture and action during processes of change.

5. Change in internal practices: a clash of Group Styles

In the last chapter, we have seen that on the ideological level, the party maintained different interpretations of the same elements in different locales. We have also seen that discourses around the organisation itself are continuously linked by the members to discourse around ideology, suggesting the permanence of the ideology of the mass party in regions where the party was already present before 2012. In this chapter, we will move from the level of collective representations to the level of patterns of interaction to examine how actors use collective representation to make meaning in everyday political activity. Conflicts that occurred inside the League's branches after the electoral boom are not only related to organisational choices made by the party's leadership in different contexts (Chap. 3) or to different articulations of the party ideology that may or may not convince different factions in the party (Chap.4) but also to mismatched reciprocal expectations among members in their everyday activity. In particular, ideas about how the group should be organised regarding internal rules, identitarian belongings, boundaries, and interaction strategies become a motive for clashes between members.

Building on the theoretical framework proposed by Nina Eliasoph and Paul Lichterman (2003), I will use the concept of group style to refer to the shared expectations within local groups. A change that aligns with these shared expectations is more likely to be accepted and, at times, even desired by activists and local leaders. Conversely, a

change that disrupts these expectations runs the risk of failure as it encounters resistance from the base.

Eliasoph and Lichterman's work combines cultural sociology and interactionist conceptions of culture. Sociology of the '50s and '60s (Almond and Verba 1963; Parsons and Shils 1951) treated culture as a set of values or inner beliefs that guide the actors. Differently, culture is now prevalently conceptualised as a set of publicly shared repertoires, codes, or symbols that, similarly to a language, both constrain and enable action (e.g. Alexander 2004; Alexander and Smith 1993; Bellah et al. 1985; Kane 1997; Steinberg 1999; Swidler 1986). Culture is structured and structuring, drawing from Durkheimian ideas of "collective representations" (Durkheim 1912). Whether actors draw from their cultural "toolbox" to act (Swidler 1986) or perform cultural scripts (Alexander 2004), authors in this area start from the macro to arrive at the micro level of analysis. Action is an enactment of collective representations. On the other hand, symbolic interactionism, cognitive sociologists, and pragmatist social philosophers start from the micro to arrive at the macro level. They share the idea that actors always make meaning together in everyday life in concrete social settings, giving primacy to interaction over representations. Actors "make meaning in relation to each other as they perceive each other" (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003:736) as these perceptions constitute a shared ground for interaction (Mead 1964, 1934; Dewey 2012; Goffman 1961), and they develop a "working agreement" on identities (McCall and Simmons 1978) or a common "definition of the situation" (Goffman 1961) that allow them to interact. While earlier works in interactionism think of meaning as only emerging from contingency, contemporary versions of interactionism instead moved from the study of casual encounters (Edgerton 1979; Lofland 1973) to the study of

durable relations in groups where interaction happens regularly over time, as these contexts can help in studying shared cultures emerging from continued interaction (Fine 2003:53). Gary Alan Fine points out that groups develop their own local *idiocultures*: “systems of knowledge, beliefs, behaviours, and customs shared by members of an interacting group to which members can refer and employ as the basis of further interaction” (Fine 1979:734). Repeated performances organize and routinize interaction, creating group styles (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003) and structures of action and interpretation (Sato 1988). Larger, extra-local environmental conditions impact local scenes as “Groups exist in an institutional context that is both structural and macro-cultural” that “enables, constrains, and partially constitutes group interactions” (Fine and Hallett 2014:1776).

The article by Eliasoph and Lichterman marries the two perspectives, saying that groups not only share a series of ideas and collective representations – symbols, vocabularies, shared codes that allow interaction— but they also share *group styles*, which are “recurrent patterns of interaction that arise from a group’s shared assumptions about what constitutes good or adequate participation in the group setting.” (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003:737). Collective representations are filtered through group styles and put into practice through recurrent ways of interaction, meaning that different styles of acting upon representations are always possible as there is not a direct correspondence between representations and a specific way of acting, but rather a local interpretation, a way of acting upon representation that is meaningful for specific groups and settings. Similarly to what we said for repertoires in Chapter 1, actors creatively use representations but rely on repetition. Styles are habitual local interpretations of the same discourses. “Groups use collective

representations in a way that usually complements the groups' meaningful, shared ground for interaction" (ibid. 749). According to Gross (2009:371), these can be understood as a specific set of habits that are collectively enacted inside groups. Similarly, Tilly's Repertoires of Contention, mentioned in Chapter 1, are the collective habits that regard action toward the external world.

Eliasoph and Lichterman point to three main dimensions of group style (2003 p.739, p. 785):

Group Boundaries are practices related to the group's assumptions about relations with the outside world. This dimension relates to the sociological concepts of "social identity" and "symbolic boundaries." It includes ideas that a group has about its relations (real or imagined) to other groups, the distinctions between them and other groups, and generally its ties with the broader world, including institutions, organisations, the press, or "the public."

Group Bonds are practices related to assumptions about reciprocal responsibilities and expectations between members. Even if organisations are formally organised similarly, they may impute different meanings to internal ties, mutual obligations, and connections between members. This dimension includes images of what a good or bad member is, prized or sanctioned behaviours, characteristics that members consider common among all group members, such as gender or ethnicity, and correct or incorrect ways to interact internally.

Speech Norms are practices related to assumptions about appropriate speech. They concern tones and modes of expression and what they mean in the context of the specific group. This dimension includes assumptions about how members should talk,

in which contexts and to what extent, which members of a group are legitimised to speak, and which are not, and how to manage disagreements and conflicts.

While this conceptualisation has been used primarily to study associations and civic action, I will apply this conceptualisation to a party. Parties are usually more complex than a civic organisation: they are multilevel; they have multiple sections that may or may not collaborate with one another; they serve different purposes at once, as noticed in the classic differentiation of Katz and Mair between parties in central office, party on the ground and party in public office (1993). Moreover, the authors use this conceptualisation to describe the link between cultural structures and habits inside the organisation. As my main interest is change, I will not only describe the Group Style of the organisation but also the dynamics of negotiation that emerged around internal practices in the party in the last years. In the following paragraphs, in fact, I will use this concept to show how party members from diverse backgrounds act upon similar ideological stances differently in their everyday political activity and how these differences become a motive for conflict inside the organisation. As the link between representations and action is not straightforward, but rather organised in repertoires, when a change arises, members reinterpret the repertoires creatively. They act differently; their use of repertoires reflects previous memberships, previous ideas and local interpretations of general representations. This raises conflict, discussion and mediation until a new agreement is reached (see Boltanski and Thévenot 1999, 2006).

Group Boundaries

North/South

As the main change in the party is related to the enlargement of group boundaries on the north/south divide, we already saw in the last chapters several aspects of the change process related to this dimension. Something to notice that is related to party internal practices is the question of who can or cannot be part of the party. As we have seen in the previous chapter, central to the discourses of the Northern League was the contraposition between a productive north and a parasitic south, meaning that ideas around productivism were related to geographical boundaries. This translated also into membership boundaries, as most members of the parties were artisans and small business owners in the north, especially in non-urban zones. In the new League, membership has been opened to southern members, both in the south and in other areas of the country, where it is now possible to find southern migrants among members. However, this has translated into different practices in different areas.

In Chapter 3, Mara explained that the South can be just as productive as the North, and the Southern members of the League are those who understand that the South needs a change in "mentality," which means avoiding public subsidies. This is a local interpretation of the abstract idea of productivism, in which Southerners can be part of the productive group and, therefore, also members of the League. Only one of the two elements mentioned matters for the new practice of membership.

In the centre-north, the previous style is not meaningful anymore, and it is frequent to find southern migrants in the party. Here, like we have already seen, practices around

membership reflect the multiplicity we have seen in ideologies. As an example, Francesco, who is a member of the party mainly because of anti-EU positions, is not only open to the entrance of southerners but even of non-Italians, as he traces the boundaries on euroskepticism. He told me:

Ma guarda sinceramente, per me hanno fatto solo bene [ad aprire al sud] e io non sono leghista vecchio stampo che diceva Roma Ladrona. [...] il federalismo secondo me fa comodo [a tutte le regioni d'Italia] farebbe comodo un po' a tutti. Non a tutti ma quasi a tutti. Per me è stata un'ottima apertura, tant'è che il ragazzo con cui lavoro molto bene dei giovani e ha origini, non mi ricordo se- è marocchino, o marocchino o tunisino, quindi proprio Zero, ma zero ma zero... Anzi, mi trovo molto bene e ce ne fossero, e ce ne fossero. [...] sono anti europeista, [...] le mie piccole lotte sono in questa direzione, più che in un litigio interno alla nazione. (Francesco, municipal party secretary, 2nd wave)

Look, honestly, for me, they only did well [to open up to the south], and I am not an old-fashioned leghista who says "Roma Ladrona"⁵². [...] Federalism, in my opinion, is useful [to all the regions of Italy], would be useful to everyone. Not everyone, but almost everyone. For me, it was a very good opening, so much so that the guy from the youth movement I usually work with is- I can't remember if - he's Moroccan or Tunisian, so it really does not matter to me at all... On the contrary, I get along very well, I wish there were more like him[...] I am anti-European, [...] my small battles are in this direction, more than a fight within the nation. (Francesco, municipal party secretary, 2nd wave)

In this stratified piece of interview, Francesco says that he is favourable to opening the South as "almost anyone" could benefit from federalism –the ones excluded are, of course, those who are not rich enough to benefit from retaining taxes at the regional level. In his words, different typologies of excluded are put on a scale: he insists on the fact he is not contrary to Southern joining the party, as testified by the fact he is not even contrary to the entrance of migrants that are even worse considered in the party, as one of his close collaborators in the party is of Moroccan or Tunisian origin. Further

⁵² Roma Ladrona meaning Rome is a theft is a famous slogan of the party from the '90

in the interview he told me this youth movement member is a good guy, as he is studying at the university and working hard, and he really contributes to the life of the local party. In some form, the criteria of productivism emerge again, but in a very different form than that of the Northern League.

In the north, the original criterion is questioned but not completely disappeared. As an example, Federico, notwithstanding the fact that he is a member of the youth movement and therefore was not part of the party in the Padan period, believes that voters in the north “believe more” in what they vote, if compared to southerners:

[l'allargamento al sud] politicamente è una scelta abbastanza discutibile [...] dici “vi do il reddito di cittadinanza” e tutti quanti vanno a votare il movimento 5 stelle.[...] io sono veramente uno molto passionale per quanto riguarda la politica, cioè veramente io sono entrato in Lega per il federalismo fiscale e l'autonomia, quindi vedere chi veramente si svende o va a votare chi gli dà di più mi dà fastidio. È come dire, scusa se ti faccio sempre esempi calcistici parlando, “eh oggi ha vinto la Juve, forza Juve, domani l'Inter fa una bella partita, forza Inter”. Vanno un po' dove tira il vento, dove gli fa comodo, il voto al sud rispetto a quello che è qua da noi, sai tanti industriali sia perché comunque... le persone ci credono di più in quello che fanno (Federico, provincial secretary youth wing, youth wing)

[opening to the south] politically, it's quite a questionable choice [...] you say “I'll give you *citizenship income* and everyone goes to vote for the five-star movement. [...] I'm really a very passionate person as far as politics is concerned; I mean, I really joined the League for Fiscal Federalism and Autonomy, so to see who really sells out or goes to vote for whoever gives them more annoys me. It's like saying, excuse me for always giving you football examples, “Eh, today Juventus won, Go Juventus, tomorrow Inter plays a good game, Go Inter”. In the south, they go where the wind blows, where it is more convenient, while here in our region, you know, there many industrials... also because anyway... here people believe more in what they do (Federico, provincial secretary youth wing, youth wing)

Here, productivism is an exclusive characteristic of the North where “many industrials” truly believe in the League and know what to vote, while the southern “go with the wind” and sell out their vote to receive an economic advantage as northerners “believe more

in what they do". Ironically, the industrialists know what their economic interest is (federalism), while the southerners who follow their economic interest (reddito di cittadinanza) are to be blamed. The difference in the two economic interests is, again, how productive you are, based on your economic position and your occupational status. The elements of the previous general representation are here both maintained, as productivism and geographical origin still go together. However, even in the North, many members are okay with Southerners' entrance as long as they truly believe in regional autonomism and want to exit their condition of subordination:

Magari qualcuno anche al sud veramente vuole l'autonomia e va bene, nel senso... [...] Avere autonomia è un senso di responsabilità e gestione. Sono soprattutto convinto che in certe zone, finché si può dare la colpa allo stato non cambia mai niente. (Enrico, internal roles, longstanding)

Maybe someone, even in the South, really wants autonomy, and that is fine; I mean... [...] Having autonomy is a sense of responsibility and management. I am especially convinced that in certain areas, as long as you can blame the state nothing ever changes. (Enrico, internal roles, longstanding)

In Enrico's quote, members in the south are not automatically part of the party, but he gives the benefit of the doubt that someone could really want regional autonomism. Similarly to what we say in Zaia's speech in Pontida (Interlude I), southerners are subordinate, but only as long as they blame the state and rely on state intervention, the real reason for their subordination. Southerners are not lazy anymore per se, but only if they are not productive.

Relations with the electorate

Militants claim belonging and nearness to the territory as the distinctive characteristic of the League among other parties whom they describe as only "working behind their

desks,” non-existent on the local level, or not representative of the true needs of the people. Being representative of the territory in the league means substantially being near to the economic fabric of the area. Members of the party see themselves as representatives of “those who work,” meaning primarily small business owners, artisans, and professionals, often posing an accent on their contribution as a party to the defence of the local economy. This means that many members describe themselves through their profession and positively describe members in their group who are well-known as self-employed professionals or business owners in the area where they live. A member told me her primary motivation to enter the party was to contribute to the territory in which she lived because, as the wife of an entrepreneur, she had many things to say because of her position (Fieldnotes May 2022), explicitly referring to the idea that someone who owns a business knows more than the others about concrete problems of the area. Even though Forza Italia has always centred his rhetoric on economic liberalism and the defence of entrepreneurs, the style in the League is different. The Northern League presented itself as engaged in defending the interests of a group defined on an ethnic basis (Diamond and Gunther 2001:11) – the northern people—and not the interests of an economic power network – the entrepreneurs – even if entrepreneurs and the industriousness attributed to them have always been at the centre of the League's rhetoric. In its transition to the Salvini Premier League, the party has absorbed some local notables previously in Forza Italia's networks. It has also invested in building a different relationship with business and professional associations in regions where it once had no presence. This, combined with the well-known communicative strength of leader Salvini, has proved crucial in the local growth of the League in contexts other than the North. Nevertheless,

long-standing members are not at ease with the new climate. Once, I was chatting with a longstanding party member after a conference. A younger member approached us to greet Roberto, and a nearby member complimented her elegant dress. When she left, Roberto said sarcastically, "Everyone is very dressed up, huh?". Several participants wore shirts, suits, dresses, and high heels for the women. I replied that I would have dressed better if I had known. He replied, "Not me! I'm fine like this", implying that he was proudly different from some of the others. Later in the conversation, he said he is not made for aesthetics. He is a more concrete person. Both of us knew that we were not talking about clothing but about the membership style. The Northern League was traditionally considered a party of "popular origin", in which members were not required to maintain a formal register during assemblies of public events. Contrarily, the northern league leader Umberto Bossi was considered unapologetic by allies and rude by opposers. Even Salvini keeps a similar profile and frequently uses exaggerated tones, even rude tones, as a communication strategy. Similarly, leghisti are not demanded to be polished in everyday interactions since the substance is more important than form. Roberto was not at ease with the kind of political occasion to which lawyers and judges are invited, and the register is very formal. But with this kind of event, the party can create new ties with parts of the right-wing electorate that previously voted for Forza Italia. A change in style also accompanied a change in the relationship with the potential electorate.

A similar episode that marks the unease of old members during this shift happened during a big regional event in which I took part in the Centre Area. The National Party organised various events across Italy to meet with economic producers, including agricultural, food, fashion, automotive, and raw material sectors. The initiative was

announced to hold a "listening tour" across Italy, aiming to meet the "Made in Italy" producers and understand their problems. However, the meetings were streamed online and organised more like a performance than a meeting. The hosts were called one after the other on stage, following a precise schedule with no interruptions. The sessions included professionally made videos about the quality and richness of Italian national productions and the threats posed by the EU policies to national productions. It was a listening tour, but there was no space for the public to intervene, and only the session chair could ask questions. An old lady sat beside me and listened for the first 15 minutes. She then mumbled, 'This is completely useless,' and took out her crosswords to pass the time. Her husband shook his head in agreement with her. On stage, the hosts from various consortiums explained the economic issues related to their respective sectors of expertise, thanking Matteo Salvini for providing them with a great opportunity and the necessary support to solve some of the problems they had previously faced. Similarly, members of the party on stage expressed gratitude towards the entrepreneurs for their courage and determination to withstand the attacks of the European Union and excessive taxation. This resulted in a 2-hour cycle of mutual appreciation, where each party acknowledges the other's hard work and achievements of the other. The woman beside me seemed annoyed and started sarcastically commenting on some things being said on stage. However, she occasionally clapped when explicitly critical statements were made, particularly regarding small businesses and traditional local products threatened by low-cost counterfeits, the EU, or the requests of extreme environmentalists that cause problems to firms. Halfway through the event, the CEO of a well-known fashion brand came on stage and talked at length about the quality of their "Made in Italy" brand. The woman smirked and said, "Made

in Italy? He produces cheap accessories in Poland and China. What does he know about "Made in Italy"?". To what extent does the attempt to appeal to a broader public fit with the previous style of the party? The party still claims to represent entrepreneurs, but not all entrepreneurs fit with the idea of entrepreneurs typical of the previous League that is usually linked to the idea of the territory and local production and, therefore, is often at odds with the interest of big industrial groups that members frequently consider as part of "the elites" and previously mostly linked with Forza Italia. Now that the balances in the coalitions have shifted, ideas of who the party represents also shifted, and not only on the north/south divide as it is more evident.

Group bonds

Militance and concreteness

We can distinguish between two main typologies of new militants: those without relevant political experiences and party switchers. If the first easily adapted to the style of the League—as one "gradually starts to appreciate from within its peculiarities" (p. 173)—the latter had different consolidated ideas on how the party should organize their relations with the external world. Unsurprisingly, old and new members share different expectations and attribute different importance to local political action.

In the party, a particular status is attributed in the centre and north to rank-and-file membership and local commitment, constituting a specific style of doing party activities. Militants consider their involvement in their cause as a "passion" that motivates them to sacrifice the free time they could have spent "with their families". They view political involvement as an act of service rather than a pleasurable activity

or a means of self-expression or affirmation. They rarely mention possible career opportunities openly, and many see their commitment as something to be done in their free time and not as their first career. They often refer to activities like "the gazebo" as genuine political engagement, even after being elected to full-time roles in government and they perform other typologies of tasks. A parliamentarian explained to me in detail their duties, commissions, and thematic interests that constituted their daily political activities, yet, they remarked, they still "went to hang up posters" during the 2022 electoral campaign. At a political dinner, a semi-private event I was invited to, the candidate to parliament himself cooked pasta for all his campaign supporters in a camp kitchen at the entrance and where everyone who joined the party could greet him while he was cooking. A provincial secretary and a city councillor were serving at tables with other volunteers. Local and national leaders who are appreciated are often described as "concrete", "humble," and available to militants when a local problem arises. These characteristics point to being down-to-earth and practical. A member in the centre region described a parliamentarian who was elected as "not even answering the phone" and was very disappointed when this person was a candidate again because they were considered capable by higher ranks in the party. The issue at hand was not necessarily favouritism but rather the fact that this individual was solely engaging in political activities that would cast them in a positive light - such as giving press conferences or appearing on local TV - while shirking more humble tasks, including being available "to militants" when necessary. Similarly, a member I met in 2021 highlighted that he liked a leader he met from another region very much because they came to help with the electoral campaign. Despite their position, they were open to distributing flyers and talking with normal citizens. Instead, members with a long

presence in Forza Italia before joining the league do not attribute the same sacrality to rank-and-file activity. Forza Italia is a personalistic party (Scarrow, 2014) that historically has presented a loosely articulated structure, primarily active during electoral campaigns, and the national leader was the main symbolic centre of the party. As an example, Anna, in the previous chapter, saw the emphasis on the territorial activity as a sign of political immaturity (p.174) as the party in which she started her activity as a militant was scarcely structured on the ground and mainly centred its political activity at the national level. She would prefer engaging in other activities, such as working on national topics, relations with other European parties and political proposals. Assigning different relevance to local or national politics denotes different ways of thinking about the basic activities a party should perform and the mutual obligations among members. Moreover, different ideas about the territorial reference of the organisation are in play. Boundaries are defined according to group styles of the party of origin: long-standing militants the local as the boundary of political action, militants without previous experience can adapt to Northern League's style, militants with earlier experiences in other parties still refer to previous expectations that local action should have a broader *national scope*.

To rise through the ranks (*fare la gavetta*)

The traditional expectation in the League is for militants to respect hierarchies and prioritize the organisation over themselves. An often-repeated motto is "Si serve la Lega, non ci si serve della Lega" (You serve the League, you don't take advantage of

the League)⁵³. Since the party was born during Tangentopoli as a regionalist protest party fighting against the corrupted parties in Rome, it is not surprising to find in their words some traces of the foundational myth of the pure and incorruptible *Leghista*. Before aiming at internal roles or candidature at elective offices, you must “deserve” to become a militant, showing you deserve trust and are faithful to the party. This idea is explicitly stated in the party statute, which, as we have said in Chapter 3, distinguishes between *supporters* and *militants*. To become a militant, according to the Regolamento Lega per Salvini Premier of 2020, one must participate in the party branch’s activities for at least 12 months and receive approval from the local delegation, which likewise requires permission from higher regional structures. This stratified procedure assigns each organism the right to veto this status acquisition, favouring the maintenance of existing structures. It is necessary to “merit” to become fully part of the party.

Chiaramente, ha diritto di scelta [...] chi milita dentro il partito, chi conosce le dinamiche, chi si è speso negli anni per la causa. Uno che mi passa di lì che mi vota il segretario non è che mi piaccia molto. (Simone)

Clearly, the right to decide is up to militants, who know the dynamics and have dedicated themselves to the cause over the years. I don’t like the idea of somebody passing by and voting for my party secretary. (Simone)

Simone refers to primary elections, which in Italy are mainly associated with the League’s main political adversary, the Democratic Party, which was the first to implement them. In his views, they negate what internal democracy in a party should be. The idea is that militants have the right to choose the secretary. At the same time,

⁵³ It’s a wordplay between the verb *servire*, to serve, and the reflexive form *servirsi* to take advantage of something.

simple voters should not enter intra-party decisions because they don't possess the necessary knowledge and have not demonstrated loyalty to the party.

Pietro had prior experience working with pro-life organisations but was never a party member. He contemplates the reasons behind the initial scepticism shown towards him by other party members. When he first joined the party, he was disappointed because no one in the section listened to what he said. Later, however, he realised that respect is earned on the field in the League: it is only by demonstrating loyalty and perseverance that one is considered (Fieldnotes, Nov. 2021). He had to learn how to adapt to the organisational style of the party. He was not expecting closure, but he later understood the criteria for which a good member is valued and embraced these criteria.

An excessively rapid growth in members generates a situation of disequilibrium, in which new militants are not socialised yet to group style and understate the relevance of "rising through the ranks", betraying reciprocal expectation about the right way to become a local leader in the organisation. A man I met in Pontida in 2021 tells me he moved back to his region of origin in the south after a long period in a city in the north, where he was a party member. He thinks that *leghisti* in his region are "*not leghisti enough*", and this sudden growth damaged the party: the double membership system allowed for the gradual training of new members. Now, new members do not have a clear idea of how a party should work, so they decided to elect a local secretary who is probably not even a card-carrying member, and they don't even see why this is problematic (Fieldnotes, Pontida 2021). Being "leghista enough" is associated with the knowledge of internal rules, again with the need to become a Militant Member after months of political activity before aspiring to any internal role. Since the need to grow

and organize fast in the South, internal rules were not applied, and those familiar with the previous way of organising were not satisfied. You are not a *true leghista* if you don't understand the value of militance and the right times for choosing who the local party secretary must be. Even in Salvini's case, being a *true leghista* reinforced his credibility as a leader among members. His career path as the leader of the party's youth movement and his long-standing leadership in Lombardia made him a *true leghista*, the legitimate heir of the previous leader. Despite having different positions, his affiliation with the party structure made him a trustworthy option for the role of party secretary.

It's important to note that experience gained in one political party may not be transferable to another. Often, members from different parties are viewed with suspicion and must earn the trust of others before being considered a legitimate part of the new party. This is not always the case. In other parties, experience in other political groups or fields such as academia, sports, or any other career is highly valued and considered advantageous regarding votes and skills. For instance, during the European elections 2024, Salvini announced their candidacy in the Lega list of a military general who had published a controversial extreme-right book and became very famous for his political stances. However, this decision was not well-received by many prominent figures in the party, who pointed out that he was not a party member and, therefore, they would not support him. They claimed they would use preferences to vote for a Leghista who works on the territory.⁵⁴ Likewise, members from other

⁵⁴ https://www.corriere.it/politica/24_aprile_15/vannacci-fronda-centinaio-io-non-votero-f6ea38ac-fb25-11ee-a868-af4ddd73eb0e.shtml

parties are seen as people who change their minds with the current. In the Nord group, the election of a member who previously was in Forza Italia as the only party representative in the council generated splits in one of the sections, as some members felt this was an injustice.

When, as we have seen in chapter 3, criteria for militance and candidature were changed to accommodate the new situation in the party, the topic of “merit” became less linear and more contestable. On the one hand, leaders from other parties are already expert politicians, so they are potentially useful for the cause. On the other hand, other parts of the membership may not be ok with the criteria for assigning Militant status.

Quando tu inizi a promuovere a militanti, quindi promuovendo a membri reali della comunità [...] persone che non hanno nessun merito, per quanto magari loro siano bravissimi, non ho nulla da dire su di loro, [...] con l'unico criterio che sono fedeli a tizio e caio, stai negando l'idea di comunità. (Enrico, internal roles, longstanding)

When you start promoting to militants, thus promoting to actual members of the community people who do not deserve it, no matter how great they may be, I have nothing to say about them, [...] with the only criterion that they are loyal to so-and-so, you deny the same idea of community. (Enrico, internal roles, longstanding)

It is again about the motto "You serve the League, you don't take advantage of the League" an idea that is brought up when decisions are interpreted as motivated by personal political interests. Enzo was not re-elected as a city councillor and thinks that those who replaced him represent their interests more than those of the party:

Qui sono entrati cani e porci, cani e porci. Tutti i fuoriusciti degli altri partiti, tutta gente che non sapeva dove andare ma ha a cuore soltanto i propri interessi economici, le proprie reti... io prendo voti di popolo, non prendo voti

Here any Tom, Dick, and Harry came in. All the runaways from the other parties, all the people who didn't know where to go and only cared for their own economic interests and networks... I take votes from the

da imprenditori, non ho chi mi sponsorizza. E oggi semplicemente, io dico che questi sono i portatori di iella, perché questi hanno nella loro indole la iella e dove vanno distruggono. (Nicolò, Former Assessore, Longstanding)

people, and I don't take votes from the businessmen, I don't have any sponsors. Today, I say these people simply carry misfortune; misfortune is part of their character, and wherever they go, they bring ruin upon everything. (Nicolò, Former Assessore, Longstanding)

Nicolò's reference, however emphatic, hints again at the difference between being representatives of the people or an elite that we mentioned in the previous paragraphs.

Paradoxically, for some of the older militants, respecting the style of ties in the organisation also overrides improving electoral performance. Maximising new membership is not necessarily the primary goal of the party. Rather than leaving the party in the hands of "any *Tom, Dick, and Harry*" it is better for the party to downsize:

Secondo me è anche un bene che ci sia un ridimensionamento dal punto di vista elettorale. Rimangono quelli che ci credono, rimangono quelli che ci credono. (Roberto, former regional councillor, longstanding)

In my opinion, it is also good for the party to downsize from the electoral point of view. Those who believe in the party will stay, those who believe in the party will stay. (Roberto, former regional councillor, longstanding)

Activists assign crucial importance to the idea of "rising through the ranks" (*fare la gavetta*), which is the only right path to becoming a *true leghista*. Group bonds must have a specific style, and violations of this style become reasons for conflict. Even if the party's leadership imposes a change through a change in internal rules, the cultural pattern still emerges as a demonstration of the permanence of the party's idioculture over formal regulations.

Speech norms

You only talk privately.

The question of what is appropriate or not to say in an organisation becomes particularly interesting when, in the face of growing internal dissent, the norms of speech in ordinary use in the party still prevail. Given the hierarchical structure, it is not acceptable in the League to speak publicly about what is wrong inside the party, especially if one criticizes the leadership. At the end of a long assembly in which everyone continued to introduce their speeches, saying they were grateful to “finally have a space to talk freely about problems”, a member of the national leadership intervened, saying it is crucial to be critical and not to be yes-men, but is equally important to learn to criticize only during internal occasions. Talking with newspapers is only a way to instrumentalize real problems for your personal payoff. (Fieldnotes, Oct 2022)

I have written these notes after attending a lengthy regional assembly that aimed to analyse the electoral loss of 2022. Over the past few months, most organised activities were public, and as usual practice in the party, it's important to avoid discussing sensitive topics in public. This is the first assembly in months, and the overall mood is critical of the party's decisions from the past year. Every member who has the chance to speak at the assembly expresses gratitude for the opportunity to finally talk openly and thanks the organizers for making it possible. Although the need for criticism was expressed multiple times during the assembly, the special guest from the national level

emphasised the importance of discerning when criticism is legitimate and when it is not during their final speech as a reminder of internal speech norms.

In most cases, militants and local leaders refrain from publicly expressing their disagreements unless the situation becomes exceptionally conflictual and escalates. This is also the case, as we seen in chapter 3, for regional leaderships, who very rarely intervene directly against the national secretary and his entourage, even if their position is not dependent on the national leadership. Publicly expressing dissent is met by varying degrees of sanction, such as informal exclusion from internal dynamics or expulsion from the party in the most severe cases. Some of the longer-standing militants report that in the past, it was common to argue during meetings, and this must be considered healthy as long as it happens in a private setting and the party comes out publicly with a unified line.⁵⁵ According to them, the opportunity for internal discussion has decreased over time, and meetings are less frequent. Given these conditions of reduced spaces for debate and dissent —exacerbated in the last two years by the pandemic and further reduction of in-person meetings— *the congress* takes on an almost salvific dimension: in all the interviews done, recurs the hope of having a congress as soon as possible, that reflects a widespread need for spaces for discussion (see Chapter 7).

⁵⁵ The way they describe party organisation resembles democratic centralism, a method often used by communist parties inspired by Leninism. This involves democratic discussion among party members, followed by adherence to the party's decisions once the discussion has concluded. They frequently mention the Italian Communist Party (PCI) when describing their ideal party structure and the party's role as avant-garde for a better future, in which the people will not be oppressed by the centralistic government. They believe that the need for a party will no longer exist once the system changes.

The official transition from *Lega Nord* to *Lega Salvini* premier has never been formally discussed. The congress of the new political organisation has long been postponed, and the national organisation has appointed temporary local referents with the promise of organising a proper congress in the future. Sometimes, those referents were well-known members of the local branch, and sometimes, they were sent to sedate possible conflictual situations. Perhaps, as Gianpiero argues, postponing the congress has been made to avoid losing control of the organisation:

Può anche darsi che lo abbiano fatto volutamente di mantenere sdraiate un po' le organizzazioni territoriali. [...] Con Salvini [...] c'è stato il boom di voti. Noi un po' più anziani militanti sapevamo che era una bolla [...] Quando succedono queste cose si imbarcano tante persone e non tutte sono oneste, diciamocelo chiaramente. Secondo me non creare le strutture coi segretari eletti a livello territoriale è stato fatto apposta per mantenere la situazione sotto controllo. (Roberto, former regional councillor, longstanding)

Perhaps they intentionally kept the local organisations “laid down” for a while. With Salvini, there was a boom in votes. But veteran militants like myself knew it was a bubble [...] When these things happen, you take on board many people, and not all of them are honest, let's face it clearly. In my opinion, the decision to avoid creating the structures with elected local secretaries was made on purpose to keep the situation under control. (Roberto, former regional councillor, longstanding)

The local organisations have been kept “laid down” to avoid the risk of giving too much power over the organisation to new members, which might change the party too fast. Given this substantial transformation, the party avoids on-purpose internal discussion and the election of local leaders because the risk of losing control of the party is too high. Elected secretaries have been substituted with temporarily appointed referents (usually a long-standing member) or, in the most conflictual cases, placed under the outside management of a commissioner sent from another province or region.

If initially not having a congress allows for control over the organisation, in the long run, not discussing makes the problems become "a giant elephant in the room."

[Il passaggio dalla Lega Nord alla Lega di Salvini] è stato un passaggio che non è stato formalizzato, mai. [...] Salvini ha voluto fare prima una transizione di contenuto e poi di forme, è anche molto bella come cosa, perché spesso si cambia il contenitore ma non il contenuto. [...] Ma rimane una lacuna, un topolino che poi negli anni diventa un elefante. E adesso è un elefante gigante nella stanza. (Andrea, Youth Movement regional secretary, youth wing)

[The transition from Lega Nord to Lega Salvini premier] was never formalised. Salvini wanted to make first a transition of content and then of form. It is also genuinely nice because you often change the container but not the content. But there remains a gap, a little mouse that becomes an elephant over the years. And now it is a giant elephant in the room. (Andrea, Youth Movement regional secretary, youth wing)

An elephant that is not good to talk about in public but cannot be discussed privately without meetings or a congress. Speech norms conflict with the need to maintain control over the organisation, creating a contradictory situation. While public criticism is discouraged and may result in sanctions, internal discussion is also discouraged, reinforcing divisions between members with differing views or entering the party at different times. This lack of discussion impedes the potential for definitive reorganisation. Boundaries have been kept intentionally vague, but this vagueness has caused unpredicted conflicts.

Conclusions

Conflicts within the League are certainly about political disagreements between different parts of the organisation, but they are also about the betrayal of shared expectations of interaction. The group style—group boundaries, group bonds, speech norms—prescribes to militants a set of patterns of interaction. Ongoing organisational

changes and the arrival of new militants challenge these patterns, requiring improvisation and creative ways of interpreting interactional norms.

In the case of the League, we can observe how members with diverse backgrounds define organisational boundaries differently. We can notice that the organisational styles of the original organisation still hold relevance even when members switch parties. These differences become significant when members interpret party strategies in varying ways and contend over the legitimacy of political decisions.

We can see that the style of group bonds, particularly how a *true leghista* is defined, enters at various levels in the discussion about change and the electoral boom. It is relevant in determining when new members stop being new and become worthy of participating in the branch activity. It is used as a referent to criticize the leadership when it allows career politicians from other parties to join the party, skipping the necessary experience in the ranks.

The speech norms become relevant when the organisational need to keep control over the party causes a shrink in internal democracy, but talking externally is sanctioned, creating the impossibility of discussing the processes of change that are going on in the party. The party's political culture changes in a slower time than the rapidity of the electoral peak, and formal changes in the organisation fail to align with fluctuations in consensus. In this sense, political culture may become a deterrent for change if the new practices are not in line with the old ones because there is a conflict over the legitimate way to organize a party or act in the context of the party. In a party that experiences a sudden boom in militants, diversity needs to maintain control over the organisation, maintaining internal equilibriums among members and simultaneously

allowing for change conflict. These needs are autonomous dimensions that intertwine, clash, or align, delineating the outcomes of change processes.

Interlude II: The imminence of a failure

During the last weeks of the electoral campaign in 2022, I took part in two events in the centre-north area in which the party leader, Salvini, gave a speech. The first one was organised in a bar in the bigger city in the region and was the event of the presentation of candidates for that district for political elections; the second one was an event to close the electoral campaign in the area, in one of the few towns in which the party governed the municipality. While the first one was almost only for journalists and insiders, the second one was a public event in the main square of the town.

The first event was organised on a weekday morning. When I arrived at the bar at 10:30, a group of people was already waiting outside for Salvini to arrive. About half of them were journalists, carrying cameras and microphones and chatting with each other. The other half were mostly important members of the party and staff, including senators, deputies, city councillors, and party members. As on previous occasions, their attire reflected their level of power in the party; those with elected positions wore suits, ties, and party pins on their blazers, while lower-ranking members were more casually dressed. Many faces were familiar to me, as I had already met several members and took part to events in the area. As this speech, a press conference was held in the morning, when most workers were not available, the only non-members were what seemed to be pensioners. There was nothing to spare with the seas of people of the 2019 electoral campaign in which Salvini was the absolute centre of attention and was always met with large crowd in his tours around Italy. I approached the party members I already knew to salute them, and they asked me how the research

was going, promising to give me some more contacts to interview. A group of foreign tourists passed by, and one of them asked their guide why there were people waiting. He snorted loudly when the guide answered that a right-wing politician was coming, and the entire group walked away. While everyone was waiting and chatting without a particular thrill, a young lady responsible for the organisation of the event, whom I came to know as Linda, appeared to be the most stressed person in town, going back and forth on the square followed by some other organizer. Several months later, I had the opportunity to briefly chat with her, and she told me she was responsible for media and communications. She ended up working for the party not because of her political beliefs but because she used to work for a private communication agency, and her boss asked her to handle the party's communications at the regional level, which eventually led to her taking on the role full time and abandoning the agency. Linda frenetically scampered back and forth in the square, answering phone calls and messages. She directed the journalists to go upstairs and wait in the designated press conference room. Some followed her instructions, while others seemed to ignore them. Linda, annoyed, reiterated the request. One leftist-looking camerawoman with a multi-coloured scarf and baggy trousers told her she would prefer to remain downstairs, just in case something happened on the street when Salvini arrived, and many around her nodded, approving her stance. Linda grumbled and responded with, "What do you think could happen?" but many journalists agreed they would remain downstairs. In doubt, I decided to remain downstairs too, thinking that perhaps the journalists knew better than me how to be in the right place at the right time, or maybe they were aware that there would be protesters waiting for Salvini. However, nothing significant occurred; not only was there no opposition but there were no supporters waiting to see the leader.

Only insiders knew he was there. This would have been very unlikely during the previous electoral campaign, as the media always focused on Salvini, and he always received either very warm welcomes or very heated contests (or both) at every event. Even I only knew about this event because I was on a mailing list and received details about the event a few days before.

A dark car arrived, and journalists ran to gather around it and ask questions, ignoring Linda's recommendation to avoid pressing on his arrival. However, their efforts were in vain as Salvini entered through a back door, avoiding the crowd. Thus, everyone went upstairs to listen to the press conference. The room upstairs was small and had been staged with banners with the party logos and the slogans of the electoral campaign. Electoral materials and rubber wristbands with the slogan “Italians first” were



Figure 15: the press conference



Figure 15 One of the posters of the electoral campaign, also on the banner in figure 9

distributed over tables for people to take. Salvini and the candidates were sitting behind a desk. A presenter introduced the topic of the day, the presentation of candidates for the Senate and Chamber of Deputies. Candidates were introduced briefly by name and electoral district, and at no point in this presentation where they give the floor to speak, as the central point of their own presentation was not their presence but the presence of the party leader, Salvini. He was, in fact, given the space for nearly an hour of electoral speech, a speech in which the leitmotifs of the campaign were repeated without a clear connection from one another and without logical order, just by the association of ideas: gastronationalism and food as the centre of Italian culture, insect flour, soy milk, pensions, energetic crisis to be solved with nuclear energy, the crisis of industries and the problems caused by “reddito di cittadinanza”. He also joked about the left wing's tendency to label the party as fascist, racist, and connected to Russia, saying the next insult will be they are aliens. The general tone of the speech was portraying Italians as victims as is common for popular radical right parties (see Dematteo 2010): victims of European institutions, victims of the bad choices made by previous governments. Ironically, the party was part of the majority in the previous government and would have been in the new one, according to the voting polls. The press, in fact, anticipated the centre-right to win, but with a shift in balance. The first party was not Lega anymore, but Giorgia Meloni and her party Fratelli d'Italia, which had grown fast, as they were the only party that was not part of the government coalition during the COVID-19 crisis, resulting thus not being responsible for the economic crisis that followed the sanitary one. Salvini's League and Fratelli d'Italia are long-time friends and enemies. Despite their similarities as radical-right parties, ideological differences between the two –the same that occurred between the Northern

League and Alleanza Nazionale—have always been too deep to be real friends, despite being allied in several governments together. National Alliance's nationalism, patriotism, and economic centralism clashed with the Northern League's regionalism and free market policies. In the past, the rivalry was contained because they hardly ever competed, as the League was strong in the North and the National Alliance mainly in the Centre and South. However, the nationalisation of the League and the overlapping interests that resulted from the convergence of the party on radical-right themes led to open conflicts at the sub-national level and subtle conflicts at the national level. They competed most of all with regard to the themes of migration, on which both have radical positions and thus could be the party of reference for right-wing voters. It wasn't until 40 minutes into his speech that Salvini mentioned this topic of migration, stating that regular migrants are welcome, but "clandestine" migrants are not. This approach is typical for the central areas of Italy, where overt anti-migrant sentiments are less accepted than in other regions. In general, Salvini looked tired, and the speech was not particularly captivating or brilliant. At the end of the speech, there was a brief question-and-answer session. Salvini then quickly left without allowing people to take photos with him or ask him any questions, as he had to rush to his next speech in the next city.

The same topics were repeated in several campaign events. Food, Europe, Insects, Reddito di Cittadinanza, Migrants, every time I watched the news during the month of the campaign, I could recognize one or more of the slogans, repeated word by word as I had heard them in speeches, including jokes and catchphrases. Twenty days after the first event, at the end of the electoral campaign, Lorenzo, a member of the party whom I met many times at that point and who was particularly open to laughing and



Figure 16 An Inflatable gazebo

joking with me, said, "he is a broken record at this point," referring to Salvini's repetition of his jokes about how this or that local food is much better than the insects that Europe wants us to eat. The event was organised in the late afternoon in a small town governed by the League in that area. They had mounted a stage

and inflatable gazebos in the main

square. Some people from the entire region came to witness the final campaign speech, but the venue was not particularly crowded when I arrived. It reached its peak at only half-full when Salvini took the stage.

As I went there early, I had the chance to meet again many members I already interviewed. I met Marco, whom I had interviewed many months prior, and he told me he was not a member anymore, but since he lived in town, he passed by to greet friends. He was talking with another youth movement member. Marco told us that since the party was not pushing anti-Europeanism anymore, he did not feel it was the right party for him. He did not like many of the decisions made during the last years and was even distant on economic topics and felt out of place. He introduced me to his friend from the youth movement, who was still in the party and definitively less critic of Salvini's leadership. They involved me in a chat about the imminent electoral fall. The youth movement member said emphatically that the main problem was the party's ambiguity about central topics, which was alienating voters. Even if the vote had not

happened yet, the bad results were taken for granted. They had several other setbacks in the party history, he added, but this was not like the other ones, as the party structure was weaker, and they did not have the energy to start anew. The last time, even at 3%, they had the possibility to count on a very tight group of militants who believed in the party ideals and were ready to work harder after an electoral fall. This time was different as there was no internal cohesion anymore. The conversation continued, and the two discussed their opinions on why the League was going to have a very negative electoral result, although the centre-right was going to win the elections for sure. We continued chatting for a while and exchanged numbers for an interview.



Figure 17 Fratelli d'Italia in a corner of the square

While we were talking, an unexpected host came to attend the event: a delegation of Fratelli d'Italia had decided the best place to place their banners that day was a corner of the same square where the League organised the final event of the electoral campaign event. They had not only placed their flags but even banners with the giant face of Giorgia Meloni under the colonnade. I knew from

previous interviews that their attempts to disturb the rival radical right party's campaign were not new. There had been previous conflict in this area, as they had gone through the electoral campaign mocking them and saying they would lose this time. In this turn, FDI was profiting from the fact they had already established a presence in the territory and from being the only party in the opposition during COVID-19. Moreover, they have had some problems in the municipal councils in the past, harshening the competition in this particular town this turn. I saw the town's League party secretary walking back from the corner of the square. I asked him, laughing, what was happening. He smirked and told me that he had asked FDI if they had come to the event to collect Lega's crumbs.

In the meantime, the square was slowly becoming more populated. The event started, and the mayor and other prominent figures in the party performed their speeches. The mayor concluded his part by saying, "Vote for Lega Nord." He realised the lapsus and corrected himself. After a couple of speeches by local figures and candidates in the area, Salvini walked on stage. His speech was repetitive, at least for me, who had seen him speak three times in a month at that point. As said, Lorenzo said Salvini was a broken record at that point, always talking about food and food traditions even when was totally out of place. We stayed together in the back of the group, me, him and Chiara, a member of the youth movement, listening to the speech and commenting on what was going on. Their tone was sarcastic, and they smiled at each other every time Salvini said one of his typical slogans as they took part in one too many similar speeches at that point. The performance of Salvini on stage was not very effective, nor particularly ineffective, much like the overall campaign itself.

During his speech, Salvini was interrupted by someone from the crowd. He asked the person their name and received the response "I'm Yussuf." This led to Salvini jokingly saying, "Hi Yussuf, see you later online on TikTok, ok??" Chiara was particularly cringed by the interaction and said, "Did he really say that?". Everyone in the crowd that had gathered in front of the stage laughed. Surprisingly, apart from party members with flags and banners, the crowd consisted mostly of teenagers. What was even more unexpected was that almost none of them had white skin. The town, in fact, has a large component of immigrant workers, which was the very reason why the party won municipal elections in the previous turn in town using anti-migration themes, despite the fact the area is traditionally leftist. The teens were running back and forth, laughing and joking. They were basically there to mock the party and Salvini, cheering and jeering loudly. They didn't seem to be a political group, but rather just a big group of teens who wanted to disrupt authorities just for fun, with the added delight of mocking racists. During the speeches, the teens applauded Salvini, but their tone was clearly mocking, as they were too loud for the context. Party members, who were mostly adults, were slightly embarrassed, but they did not intervene as the mockery did not interrupt the speeches. Shortly before the beginning of the speeches, two of them, two girls of 15 years at best, had approached me to ask if I was really a supporter of the party as "I looked educated (istruita)", and they wanted my opinion. They told me, "Do you know they want to kill all migrants on the boats?" leaving me torn, as I did not want to tell them my position. As I was internally panicking, I evaluated if they looked like members of the youth movement or not to adjust my answer accordingly, but I felt unsafe for that "educated" that had hit too close to my scope on the scene. I went for "the vote is secret, and everyone votes what they think is better", feeling incredibly

stupid for not having a better answer to deliver as they had literally mentioned the killing of thousands of people at sea. After the TikTok joke, Salvini continued with a long discourse about how the party liked migrants who do not come to break the laws and want to legally work in this country and mentioned the big community of Indians who work in town. Some minutes later, a group of 5-6 Sikh men with turbans approached the stage to salute Salvini, and cheerfully went to salute some members of the party. The speech concluded with Salvini stating, "Yesterday, the workers here voted for the PCI. Today, they vote for Lega." "Yes, and tomorrow they will vote FDI," Lorenzo added, laughing.

While at the buffet, Lorenzo mentioned that the campaign had been very poorly organised, and it was no surprise that the party would lose ground. Only 30 of the 180 militant members in his city took part in the organisation of events, propaganda and gazebos. Lorenzo told me that many were waiting to see what was going to happen to the party, ready to leave if the party lost too much ground, so they did not do even the bare minimum for the electoral campaign. Moreover, FDI was targeting specifically their audience. They had not spotted any FDI gazebos in town during the campaign, and only later did they realise from social networks that they were not in the city centre because FDI had gone all over the province to contact one by one those members the League had lost over the last years, to convince them to switch party. They were organising the campaign out of town, profiting from the work the League had done before the fall. A loss was imminent, and everyone in the party knew.

6. Negative emotions, Loyalty, and patterns of voicing and exiting.

It was my first day of fieldwork. The local secretary had invited me to a conference they had organised in a restaurant just outside the town centre. I had already conducted a few interviews with the first members I got in contact with, but I was not sure what to expect from a party event yet. Around 30 people were in the restaurant when I walked in. A Vasco Rossi song played in the background while waiters in uniforms served the welcome buffet. The place was simple, clean, and elegant, with white curtains on the large porch windows and several lines of white chairs prepared in front of a small stage ready for the event. It was nothing I would have expected. I frequently had gone to centre-left party events in the past, and the atmosphere was almost always very casual, apart from party conventions or very official events. Contrary to my expectations, the atmosphere was formal. Many members were nicely dressed, and I was underdressed for the occasion. Most women my age wore high heels, and young members wore suits, sometimes with an Alberto da Giussano brooch appointed on the blazers. Older members dressed more informally and looked more relaxed while chatting and taking place in the chairs for the event. Two women were smoking near the entrance of the venue. Later, I came to know that they had organisational roles in the party, as is often the case in the League for female members (Bellè 2014). They were discussing recent news about the Pontida gathering, news they had received not by internal communications but by public announcement. Due to COVID-19, the

gathering had been on hold for a few years, but it was recently publicised for a weekend in September. They said nobody from the national organisation had called yet, but they would certainly ask the provincial sections to organize transports for members to join the gathering. One of the women told the other that she was tempted not to attend the event in protest with the party leader, Salvini. She did not say why, but the other woman nodded, as the reason for her discontent was self-evident. During their conversation, the first woman said she was waiting for a party convention as soon as possible, as the current situation was unbearable. Even Fedriga⁵⁶, she said, was not an option as party leader anymore as he announced his willingness to substitute Salvini too soon and “burned” his possibility. The two women carried on with their conversation about their party's crisis. They both agreed that the party was not doing enough to address the situation properly. Party members in their area were not attending party activities as frequently as in the past, as many were disappointed and distanced themselves from the party. With a sense of defeat, the older one said that while she understood their reasons, she disagreed. “It is easy to leave when things do not go well, but during tough times, it’s important to keep working with even more effort and determination (*a testa bassa*)”.

In the notes that introduce this chapter, two Lega militants are talking about the crisis that is going on in their party. In doing so, they refer to the appropriate ways to act. Like in a breaching experiment, the rules of the game are discussed out loud when

⁵⁶ Regional president of Friuli-Venezia Giulia. For a brief period, he was vociferated among other few as a possible party secretary. A premature spread of this hypothesis to the press made him less likely to be a viable solution to substitute Salvini as his loyalty to the current leadership was doubted.

something breaks the routine or is not working as it should. Hints on appropriate responses to negative emotions often reference “guidelines” for *true militants*. According to the two women smoking outside the restaurant hall, when a member is not happy, they should remain and work more, as a true militant is loyal to the organisation and capable of suppressing their feelings of discontent and acting accordingly. The dimension of negative emotions and appropriate ways to display them is crucial to understanding how the members decide between protesting or remaining silent, remaining or abandoning the party, or maybe switching to other parties, remaining enrolled without engaging in activities, ignoring the problems justifying fellow members even without agreeing with their choices. In this chapter, I will highlight the connection between negative emotions, political choices, and organisational-specific loyalty models.

Patterns of voicing discontent or exiting from political organisations are often studied through the lenses of rational action theory, portraying dissident members as economic actors oriented by material goals and the possible advantages or sanctions their actions can cause. Although there is for sure a component of strategy in political action, it is now widely shared in sociology that the dimension of emotions is crucial and that we miss a consistent part if we exclude this element from our analysis if we treat political culture, symbolism and emotions (Berezin 2002; Goodwin and Jasper 2006) as residual. In the following paragraphs, I will first discuss Hirschman’s model of Exit, Voice, and Loyalty (1970), arguing that, despite the great diffusion of this model, it presents many conceptual problems. Those problems are primarily linked to adopting an economic idea of social action, which also creates consistent problems in how loyalty and membership are conceptualised in the model. Assuming that members act

according to economic satisfaction principles detaches them from the organisation and context in which they perform their actions. Actions are assumed to be individual, independent from those of other members, and from shared reciprocal expectations, beliefs, and habits in the organisation as action is detached from the situational dynamics.

I argue that by relying on a micro-sociological and cultural understanding of emotions, we can better grasp the relations between loyalty and patterns of political action. I will discuss how feelings of disappointment and dissatisfaction towards their party are managed by members and justified mobilising models of what a good member should or should not feel and act in certain situations.

Exit voice and Loyalty

Hirschman's book "Exit, Voice, and Loyalty" (1970) is a very well-known publication that proposes a model to address the problem of decline in firms and organisations. Customers, voters, employees, or members of an organisation –whom the author treats as comparable as every kind of action is oriented by economic reasoning in his view— once they are confronted by a decrease in the quality of the product or a price increase, can choose to *Voice* their discontent through protests and grievances to change the situation or to *Exit* when they don't see the possibility of any change happening or if they see a possible alternative that will benefit them more. Hirschman suggests that *Loyalty*, a special attachment to an organisation or a firm, can prevent individuals from leaving and encourage them to voice their concerns as "Loyalty keeps exit at bay and activates voice" (ibid. p. 78). Some members may remain dissatisfied

with the organisation but continue participating due to their loyalty. Alternatively, they can voice their opinion first and then Exit only later when they think the desired change is not forthcoming. Although some authors consider Hirschman's approach a symbolic one (e.g. Van Haute 2011) as it includes non-material incentives in the formulation, it remains fundamentally non-symbolic in his model of action.

This model has gained significant influence and has been applied to various types of organisations, resulting in a substantial body of literature. Hirschman, the creator of the model, reviewed this literature twice, in 1974 and 1986, as the model gained popularity since the beginnings (Hirschman 1974, 1986). The model encountered broad application across different disciplines and areas of research, including economics, urban sociology, management, psychology, and comparative political science (see Dowding et al. 2000), and the applications to different phenomena are still very common, ranging from employee behaviour to voting, to customer satisfaction and of course also membership in political organisations. The general idea in this model is borrowing from political science studies of protest to study the economic behaviour of customers and from economic models of customer behaviour to address organisational dissatisfaction.

Previous studies on the decline in party membership have mainly focused on the broad structural changes contributing to the decline rather than individual-level decisions (Ponce and Scarrow 2013; Van Biezen, Mair, and Poguntke 2012). Among the contributions that focused on the individual propensity to exit parties, several scholars pointed out the relevance of ideological mismatch and disagreement with the party (Kölln and Polk 2017; Kosiara-Pedersen 2016; Wagner 2017). According to Emily van

Haute (van Haute 2015), only a few studies have applied Hirschman's model to party organisations. Eubank, Gangopadahay, and Weinberg (1996) have applied the model to the decline of the PCI, and Salucci (2008) to the decline of the Democratici di Sinistra. Some have used it to look at party-switching of parliamentarians (Kato 1998) or party leaders in mono-party contexts (Langston 2002). In addition, we find the work of Barnfield and Bale (2022) on Starmer's Labour.

In studies of far-right movements, this topic is usually studied under the term disengagement (e.g. Bjorgo 2008; DeMichele, Simi, and Blee 2024; Horgan 2009; Simi et al. 2019) and mainly pertains to studies of violent extremism. A systematic review by Windisch et al. (2016) examine factors linked to disengagement across different typologies of violent extremism and finds that two main dimensions are crucial: the first is Disillusionment --“the realisation that a consistent incongruence exists between idealised expectations and the everyday realities associated with those same expectations”(ibid. 14) and Relations – family, kinships and friends discouraging from engaging in violence. However, the authors notice disengagement does not equal deradicalisation, meaning that ideological position can remain the same even when members intend to leave violent organisations. However, even in this field, it is not common to connect the dynamics of voicing and exiting in the same study.

Different applications of the model have taken very different directions as the central concepts of exit, voice, and loyalty have been interpreted in diverse and sometimes opposing ways. According to Hirschman (Hirschman 1970:15), exiting is the archetypal action economists value studying – as it's a binary choice that either happens or not happens. In the eyes of economists, any counteraction on the part of the organisation

comes “by courtesy of the invisible hand”(ibid.) as an adaptation of the firm to customers' behaviour. Following market rules, exiting happens because of an increase in prices or a decrease in the quality of services. It presupposes the existence of another option on the market or the possibility of avoiding buying altogether—in party politics, we can call these possibilities party-switching and becoming non-partisan. On the other hand, *Voice* is the “political action par excellence”(ibid.), as it implies an expression of discontent in public and the articulation of opinions. Voice is defined as *“any attempt at all to change, rather than to escape from, an objectionable state of affairs, whether through individual or collective petition to the management directly in charge, through appeal to higher authority with the intention of forcing a change in management, or through various types of actions and protests, including those that are meant to mobilize public opinion.”* (ibid p. 30). This means that the Voice varies in intensity, modality and scope. In Hirschman's model, Exit is a direct and definitive action, a binary variable, while voicing is subtle and nuanced and thus can be represented as a continuous variable (Dowding et al. 2000:471).

Hirschman associates these dynamics with material interests. However, material interests are ambiguous (Collins 2022: ch. 5). Although interests are usually used to explain political action, it is quite challenging to define unequivocally what the "interest" of actors is. Interests can be defined according to different criteria by different actors. Therefore, those who disagree often accuse actors of doing things that are not coherent with their own interests. Goals must be symbolically defined, and material interest becomes a motive for action only when they become meaningful to actors, when an emotional and symbolic meaning is attached to a specific material goal. As an example – Collins says—white-collar workers rarely unionize despite the fact this

could be convenient to them on economic terms. This does not happen because they tend to see their conditions as a temporary situation before having a chance to move to an upward role. The desire to join a union does not typically come by rational calculation but needs to be supported by a rhetoric of solidarity, and the symbolic boundaries of the group –the workers— must be built before even defining what is of interest to that group (Collins 2022). Since Hirschman’s framework is based on the presupposition of rational action, it misses this central aspect: membership is emotionally and symbolically charged. Leaving an organisation requires intricate identity work, belief negotiation, and management of negative emotions, and it’s not only a matter of convenience. This is particularly true if we talk about membership in political organisations, but it is still true for other typologies of organisations.

This problem of action model is particularly evident if we consider the third element of EVL, Loyalty, which is the most debated part and, from my point of view, the most problematic. While the term is generally used to indicate some kind of positive attitude toward the organisation, there has been a consistent debate around his specifics.

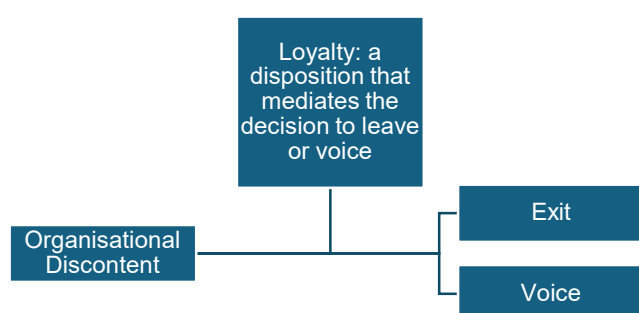


Figure 19 Loyalty as intervenient

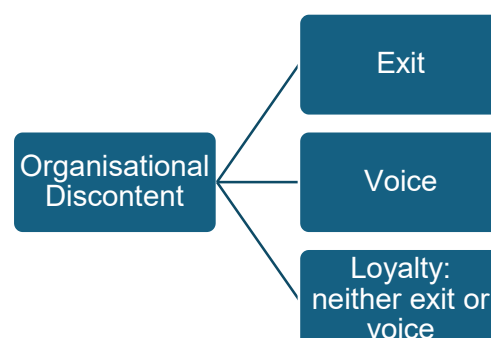


Figure 19 Loyalty as residual option

Studies that use the EVL model (Graham and Keeley 1992) have been characterised by two main strategies for addressing loyalty: those who consider loyalty a variable intervening in the choice between exiting and voicing (Figure 18) and those who consider loyalty a third option (Figure 19).

Attempts to test the relation between loyalty and voice gave mixed results due to different ways of thinking about a loyal member: sometimes loyalty activates voice (e.g. Barry 1974; Boroff 1989; Evan 1975; Graham 1986; Laponce 1974; Spencer 1986), sometimes loyalty suppresses voice (Birch 1975; Farrell 1983; Fisher and Locke 1992, 1992; Gorden 1988; Mayes and Ganster 1988; Rusbult et al. 1988; Scott 1986). This disparity in outcomes is linked to a debated issue: is loyalty an active or passive form of behaviour? (Graham and Keeley 1992). Barry (1974:98), more in line with Hirschman's original formulation, describes loyalty as "a positive commitment to further [an organisation's] welfare by working for it, fighting for it and –where one thinks it has gone astray—seeking to change it. Thus, voice is already built into this concept of loyalty." In this formulation, Loyalty is active; a loyal member is a member that fights to change their organisation and voices their opinion because they want to change. Thus, the relation between loyalty and voice is positive, the more a member is loyal the more they chose to remain instead of exiting. On the other hand, Birch (Birch 1975:75) states the opposite: "Loyalty means a disposition to accept rather than a disposition to criticize". In this version a loyal member passively accepts decision in his organisation without voicing discontent. Thus, the relation between loyalty and voicing is negative.

According to Farrell (1983:598), loyalty can be described as a third option, independent of exit and voice, where one chooses to "suffer in silence". This opens the line to a

second strain of literature, in which loyalty is the option of neither exiting nor voicing, a residual category. In this option, members of organisations or customers, neither voice their discontent nor leave, hoping for a change to happen in the future (Rusbult et al. 1988) or hoping that someone else will speak their discontent (Birch 1975).

Over time, different attempts to apply the EVL model to different cases lead to a multiplication of the options considered in the model. On the first strand, several scholars noticed that Exit and Voice are not mutually exclusive, but rather are two different choices (Barry 1974; Birch 1975; Graham 1986; Kolarska and Aldrich 1980; Laver 1976; Spencer 1986), one between Exit and Non-Exit, and one between Voice and Non-Voice (Figure 20).

Figure 20 Graham and Keeley 1992, p.192

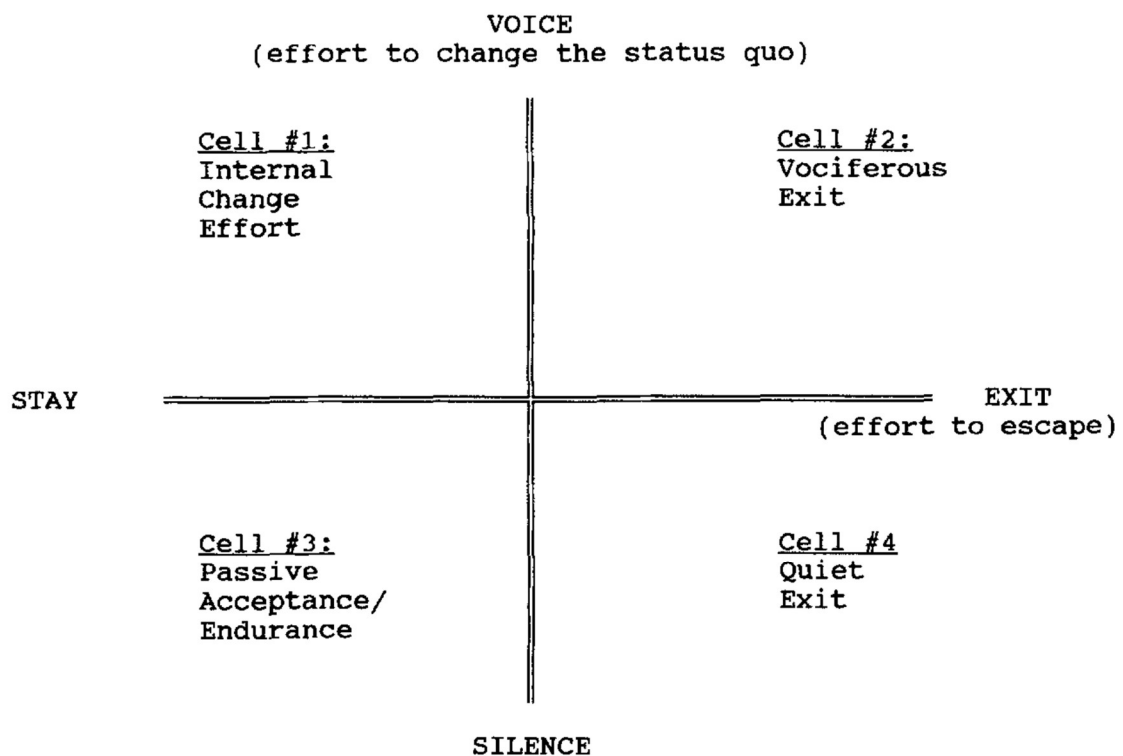


Fig. 1. Exit and voice 2 × 2: Potential responses to organizational decline.

This considerably multiplies the possible patterns of action that the model can address and also opens to the possibility that exit can sometimes be a form of protest when the actors state their discontent while leaving.

On the other hand, among those who consider loyalty as a passive form of action, several suggested adding other options. The neglect option –the option in which actors reduce their efforts towards the organisation without quitting or voicing or hoping for a change— has been suggested by several scholars in the eighties (Farrell 1983; Kolarska and Aldrich 1980; Rusbult, Zembrodt, and Gunn 1982) and had so much success that now the model is usually indicated with the acronym EVLN. According to a recent critical review (Aravopoulou, Mitsakis, and Malone 2017), several other variations of this typology appeared over the years to study a variety of different cases, including categories like Compliance (Bourantas and Nicandrou 1998), Organisational Cynicism (Kanter and Mirvis 1989; Mirvis and Kanter 1989; Reichers, Wanous, and Austin 1997), Patience (Naus, Iterson, and Roe 2007).

A different take on the problem of dissatisfaction

In my view, we can see this multiplication as a sign of an excessive rigidity of the categories. If we consider Exiting, Voicing (and Neglect, Patience, Cynicism...) as a discrete set of choices, our observation of reality will force us to add more and more variations to the categories every time a different pattern is observed. But if we move from the categories and we consider these options simply as part of repertoires of political actions in organisations, we can recognize the multiple ways in which actors decide to act upon dissatisfaction. Patterns of action are specific to specific

organisations because members of organisations hold specific views about what is appropriate or not appropriate to do in different contexts, and for these reasons, members of specific organisations can act differently upon their dissatisfaction, creatively using the repertoires they know to address the problem they face. Since the model addresses only individual responses, members are detached from their organisations, and the existence of common conventions and repertoires for addressing situations is not recognised. Thus, every author tries to add a new option that reflects better what they are seeing in their data, failing to recognize the collective component of this mechanism: group culture and group emotional rules to face dissatisfaction. The same pattern of action can assume a different political meaning in the context of a specific organisation and on different occasions over time.

First of all, organisational culture enables the recognition of some situations as problematic. As we have seen in Chapter 5, members of an organisation interpret situations of conflict relying on a common understanding of how a group should work—group styles (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003)—and this understanding varies across different groups, as shown by different positions between longstanding militants and party switchers from other organisations, that maintained different styles during the process of party change in the League. Thus, similar problems are seen differently in different organisations, to the point that some situations may not even be considered problematic at all. For instance, in an organisation that follows the principle of Consensus decision-making, it is considered disrespectful towards the opinions of minorities in the group to decide by majority. This can be a cause of dissatisfaction within the organisation. On the other hand, in organisations that operate by majority,

making decisions by voting in situations of disagreement is the norm, and the presence of a minority is simply a part of the game.

Secondly, members of organisations can *feel* different emotions, as any culture has what Hochschild calls *feeling rules*, 'guidelines for the assessment of fits and misfits between feeling and situation' (Hochschild 1979:566). Framing rules prescribe the appropriate emotion for the context. How is it appropriate to feel for this specific violation of expectation? Should it be rage, delusion, indifference or anything in between? According to Hochschild, actors have an understanding of what they "expect to feel" and "should ideally feel" in specific situations. These emotional rules "reflect patterns of social membership," meaning that some rules are widely shared while others are unique to specific social groups (p.566). These rules can appear in actors' recall of situations as "the right to feel" (p.565) enraged for something or, by opposite, stories about being "too angry" about something.

Finally, emotions are publicly performed according to display rules that prescribe appropriate ways to act upon emotions (ibid. 1979) or suppress them (Cossu 2010). In this sense, going back to our patterns of action towards dissatisfaction, voicing your discontent or not, and leaving the organisation or not leaving are all meaningful ways to act that actors perform according to display prescriptions. Adopting this kind of reasoning can help us solve the previous problem of multiplication of options, as now we consider them repertoires of action related to membership in specific organisations and thus different for different cases while the mechanism is generalizable.

Where is loyalty now?

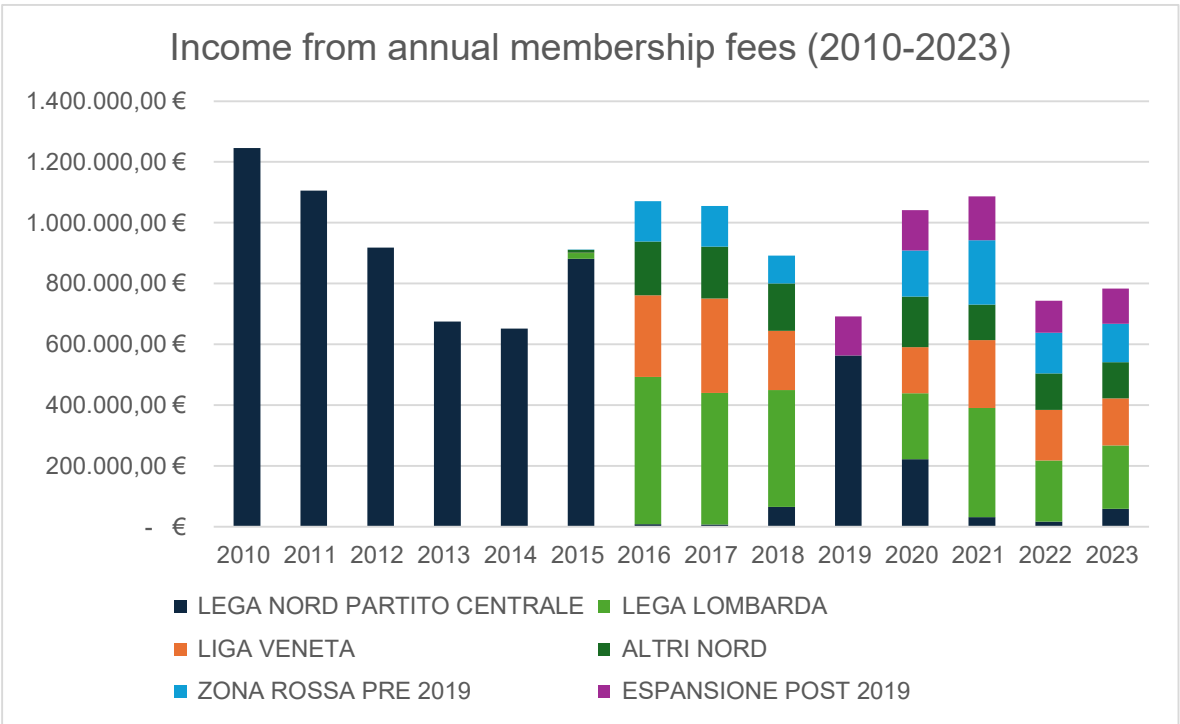
As we already said, Loyalty is the most problematic concept in the EVL model. As the Loyalty of members of organisations is considered similar to customer brand loyalty, scholars in the realm of parties criticised the idea for being too weak. Membership in a party “may evoke emotions more profound than those suggested by Hirschman” (Eubank, Gangopadahay, and Weinberg 1996). Moreover, loyalty can refer to the organisation or to ideology, which causes interesting dilemmas when we study party crises (ibid.). The authors applied Hirschman’s model to the Bolognina Turn of the PCI in PDS, and refer to the decision to abandon the party as the decision to leave a faith. The membership in a communist party, they claim, is similar to believing in a secular religion (ibid. 58), and for this reason, loyalty may be conceptualised differently than in other kinds of organisations. Moreover, the authors point to the fact that loyalty could refer to the ideology or to the organisation itself, making it again difficult to determine which option is to be considered loyal, and producing different patterns of voicing and exit. One may remain loyal to their ideology and thus exit an organisation that is changing or may remain loyal to the organisation and thus decide to remain despite change. Although this study suffers from the usual problem of considering some forms of participation as less rational than others⁵⁷, it contains a powerful indication: switching from the idea of loyalty as a characteristic of the individual to the idea of loyalty as a relation –being loyal to someone or something—can be beneficial for our comprehension of the puzzle. Loyalty is a relation with someone or something, and

⁵⁷ See the methodological chapter on possible bias scholars have towards organisations they believe are less rational than their own.

discourses around loyalty can be mobilised to justify different patterns of action related to different objects of loyalty. This moves our attention from the criteria that researchers identify as loyalty that we have seen in the previous paragraph to actors' own criteria to define who a loyal member is and to what object loyalty should be directed. Loyalty is, in other words, acting according to the reciprocal understanding of what it means to be a good member of that specific group. Loyalty has been difficult to operationalize mainly because it referred to different relations that all make sense to be reconducted in some instances to the abstract concept of loyalty in their specific context of usage. Moreover, loyalty models are not only organisationally specific but also contradictory and multiple. A "true member" of the League is supposed to be loyal to their organisation and to their leadership, causing a paradox when the leadership is not serving the organisation well or when the organisation requires a change according to their leaders but not the base. A loyal party member might be praised the most when it's coherent with the party's ideals, even if this means sacrificing good relations among members. In this case, loyalty enhances Voice, as criticising is part of what good members are usually required to do and inhibits voice when obedience to hierarchies is praised the most. By contrast, examples of "bad militants" are frequently mentioned to indicate inappropriate ways to act. Indications about what constitutes a "loyal member" are stratified, contradictory, and complexly organised, so conflicting interpretations of what is adequate can arise in different situations, and often *moral tales* (Fine 2003) and local anecdotes are mentioned to support the understanding of the most appropriate thing to do.

Managing dissatisfaction in the context of the League

A first consideration is to be made about the dimension of this problem in the party. Although there is no precise data about the number of people exiting, as the party does not publish this kind of data, we can see from the economic balances of the party a decrease in funds coming from memberships⁵⁸. In 2022, the amount decreased from €358.612 in the previous year to €200.863,92 in Lombardia (-44%), from 223.230 to 166.390 in Veneto (-25,5%). If these indicators alone cannot tell us about the actual numbers in the party, as membership campaigns have not been conducted regularly and data may differ significantly from year to year, the differences are high enough to say that a consistent part of the members did not renew the membership.



⁵⁸ <https://legaonline.it/bilanci/> last checked 13/05/2024.

At the beginning of this chapter, we had an example of some ladies smoking outside a conference and discussing their organisation. They believed that the organisation was going through a crisis but did not explain the reasons behind their belief (they just nodded at each other's phrases). They shared a tacit understanding of what was problematic, or at least a mutual recognition that something problematic was happening. Delusion is a valid emotion in this situation, to the point that the older woman comprehends and even shares the emotions of those who abandoned the party, even when she does not agree with their way of acting upon dissatisfaction. Diminishing their participation in party activities is, in fact, the wrong way to act, as real militants work "a testa bassa" when things are hard. On the other hand, silence is not the only option, as the woman herself wants to voice her discontent by refusing to go to Pontida. An act that she finally did not do as I re-encountered her there in September (notes Pontida 2022).

In the following paragraphs, I will provide several examples of how members talk about remaining or exiting from the League. To organize the data, I will refer to the Graham and Keeley (1992, p.192) table (Figure 20). I will show that actors justify any combination of voicing and exiting by appealing to what a loyal member would do, versus what an unfaithful member would do to manage dissatisfaction.

Non-exit and non-Voice

Some members are happy about the party's national turn. They like Salvini, and they think that there are no problems deep enough to exit the party, even when the party is losing electoral ground. For them, the question of non-exiting and not-voicing is not

even a question. For this reason, they understand those who leave the party as self-interested.

Tanti erano arrivati alla Lega quando era nel suo picco, quando hanno visto calare il consenso, e anche quindi la propria importanza, hanno deciso di andare in altri partiti. (Anna, Militant, new member)

Many people joined the League at its peak, but when they noticed a decline in consensus and their own importance, they decided to join other parties. (Anna, Militant, new member)

Similar to what we saw in chapter 3, where Mara describes party switchers as just “transitioning” from one party to the other in search of personal advantage, Anna sees members who stayed in the party only for a brief period in negative terms. Party switchers are the epitome of what a good member of the league should not be. As we have seen in the previous chapter, experience in other organisations is seen with suspicion. To the point that even Anna, who was previously in another party, does not include herself in this category. They are accused of being self-interested – something that is ironically what EVL model takes for granted but here is seen as the least desirable option—and by contrast, those who remain are seen in positive terms.

però non c'è niente da fare, il leghista vero rimane lì perché sa, sa che i problemi si risolvono prima o poi (Roberto, former regional councillor, longstanding)

There's nothing else to be said, the real leghista stays there because he knows, he knows that problems will be solved sooner or later (Roberto, former regional councillor, longstanding)

Io sono in lista perché la Lega porta avanti questi ideali. solamente quando a qualcuno mancano gli ideali, allora qualcuno può voltarti le spalle. (Federico, provincial secretary youth wing, youth wing)

I am part of this list because the League supports these ideals. Only when someone lacks ideals can turn their back on you. (Federico, provincial secretary youth wing, youth wing)

Roberto use the term *real leghista* to indicate what a good member should do, Federico attribute the decision to leave to a lack of *ideals*, both pointing to a moral dimension that is linked to the adoption of specific pattern of action. A real leghista is patient, as he knows that problems will be solved sooner or later –a reference to how one should manage his emotions—and loyal to the party and his ideals –which in Federico’s discourse are completely overlapped.

In other cases, members are dissatisfied with their organisation, but they still find reasons to remain. A member of the party in the centre region was particularly critical of the last political choices of the national party. He did not like the decision to partake in Draghi’s government in 2021 as he despised the idea of “technical governments” that he sees as “the death of democracy”. As the interviewee was particularly critical of the party, towards the end of the interview I asked him why he was still in the party. He answered:

Sono dentro perché intanto riesco comunque a dare il mio piccolo contributo alla città di [città], e svolgendo ruolo di consigliere comunque riesci a porti su certe questioni. E per quanto riguarda il partito... io mi trovo molto bene con la gente che c'è, perché anche loro rimangono- un po' anche non si trovano d'accordo neanche loro con le nuove scelte fatte e quindi è una questione anche umana, di rapporti interpersonali che si sono creati durante questi anni di lavoro e di risultati che abbiamo portato a casa insieme tutti quanti. (Francesco, municipal party secretary, 2nd wave)

I am still in because, in the meantime, I still manage to make my small contribution to the city of [city], and by being a councillor, you still manage to bring up certain issues. As for the party... I get on very well with the people here because they also remained a little bit- they disagree with the new choices that have been made, and so it's also a question of human relations, of interpersonal bonds formed during the years of work and results that we have all brought home together. (Francesco, municipal party secretary, 2nd wave)

Francesco stays in the party despite the last turns, as he assigns primacy to local activity and bonds with other party members. Members with whom he shares a common interpretation of what is going on in the party. Group belonging takes precedence over personal position (loyalty), an element that we could not see if we frame the issue in terms of personal decisions. Moreover, he adds:

E poi se uno deve cambiare per- ti ho detto- Voglio vedere un po' come- come va... le prossime evoluzioni. Però, anche essere sempre d'accordo con quello che viene fatto, se basta che ci sia il minimo screscio e uno dice esco dal partito [non va bene]...(Francesco, municipal party secretary, 2nd wave)

And then if one has to change for- I told you- I want to see how- how it goes... the next evolutions. It's not even good to always agree with what is being done and to say, "I exit from the party" if there's just the slightest disagreement... (Francesco, municipal party secretary, 2nd wave)

In his view, it is not good to exit the party when the first problem arises (display rule). He decided to wait and see the next evolution (non-exit and non-voice). Not all disagreements are worth leaving the party, as disagreement can be managed even without exiting, waiting to see what happens before taking decisions. A similar idea is expressed by Roberto:

Un vecchio militante prima di andare via sta un po' alla finestra a vedere cosa succede. (Roberto, former regional councillor, longstanding)

An old militant, before he leaves, waits on the sidelines for a while to see what happens. (Roberto, former regional councillor, longstanding)

In his words, we can find several references to what an "old militant" or "real militant" would do: old militant waits on the sidelines [stare alla finestra](non-exit and non-voice) to see what is going on before taking any decision. "Old militants", those who were members of the league when the mass party model was in place, are the models for loyalty. In the following lines, Roberto compares old militants to national leaders he

recognizes as models, while "new leghisti" are described as disloyal members who change their ideas at the first sign of trouble:

Questa è una cosa abbastanza curiosa, eh? I nuovi leghisti, quando è terminata la bolla Salvini se ne sono andati, i vecchi militanti di Bossi [batte sul tavolo] sono rimasti lì. Perché siamo abituati noi eh? A queste cose, a questi cambiamenti radicali,[...] passavamo dal 10 al 2 così[schiocca le dita], ai tempi di Bossi. [...]

This is a rather curious thing, huh? The new leghisti when the Salvini bubble ended left, the old Bossi militants [bangs hand on table] remained. Because we are used to it, huh? To these things, to these radical changes, we used to go from 10% to 2% like that [snaps his fingers], in Bossi's times. [...]

E per cui, se Calderoli sta lì [batte la mano sul tavolo] c'è un perché. Calderoli non è uno di quelli che sta lì —Calderoli insieme a Giorgetti, insieme a tutti i grandi amministratori che stanno in Lega—se stanno lì ci sarà un perché. Il militante, il militante quello storico, o quello un po' più pensante, diciamo così, ci pensa a queste cose eh? La tentazione c'è, delle volte, di mollare tutto. (Roberto, former regional councillor, longstanding)

So, if Calderoli remains [bangs hand on table] there is a reason. Calderoli is not one of those who remains there—Calderoli, along with Giorgetti, along with all the big administrators who are in the League— if they are there, there must be a reason. The militant, the longstanding one, or the one who is a little bit smarter, let's say, he thinks about these things, uh? Sometimes, you have the temptation to give everything up. (Roberto, former regional councillor, longstanding)

First, being for a long-time part of the organisation gives you the instrument to contain your negative emotions towards the party as you “are used to radical changes” – in other words, you know that you are not supposed to feel that bad when negative turns happen, and you don't take exaggerate conclusions. Second, if leaders like Giorgetti or Calderoli are still in the party “there must be a reason” – meaning again that your personal choice is not only personal but it's subordinate to that of leaders in the group that you recognize as models. Even if you still don't know what the reason is, there

must be one. Long-time members suppress (emotional rule) the temptation to “give everything up.” The base of the party *holds everything in place*:

Se posso permettermi di dire è la fortuna che abbiamo noi della Lega, di avere una base storica, una base fidelizzata, una base che permette alla Lega in tutto e per tutto di andare avanti. abbiamo visto anche col caso di Bossi, quello dei diamanti e tutto, se non c'era la base che teneva tutto ad oggi non saremmo qua. [...] Diciamo la base storica della Lega, non abbandona il partito, perché... È un partito, io lo definisco diverso dagli altri. (Giovanni, provincial commissioner, longstanding)

If I may say so, the fortune we have in the League is to have a long-standing, loyal base, a base that allows the League to go ahead in all respects. We have also seen it with Bossi's case, that of the diamonds and all, if there wasn't the base that held everything in place, we wouldn't be here today. [...] Let's say the long-standing base of the League doesn't abandon the party because... It's a party that I define as different from the others. (Giovanni, provincial commissioner, longstanding)

Giovanni explains that event in the toughest time, when the Bossi's Scandal of Diamonds happened the party on the ground remained loyal to the party (non-exiting). Again, long-standing members assume a mythical role in the discourses of members, that assign sacrality to rank-and file militance. The party is not like “the others.”

Non-exit and voice

Sometimes, frustration towards the party arrives to a point where you need to express your rage. But as we said, it is not customary for members of the party to criticize openly those who are higher in rank. Enrico, a member in the north area, recounts about the management of conflict inside the party. Several newspaper articles had been published recently, reporting openly intraparty conflicts. He explained to me that this was once very rare in the party. For a period, he was the person in charge of containing conflicts, sent on behalf of the party's provincial leadership to mediate when problems arose in sections.

Io ero per un periodo il jolly che va a risolvere i problemi nelle sezioni calde in cui letteralmente durante le riunioni si prendevano le sedie e se le lanciavano dietro! [...] io la prima volta sono rimasto così [occhi sbarrati] "Ma ragazzi, cosa state facendo?" Si menavano. Dico "vabbè fate, io sono un commissario appena arrivato. Non vi conosco neanche per nome. Non mettetemi in mezzo. Quando vi siete calmati, ne parliamo. Ho portato del vino" [ride] provando un attimo a [calmarli]...

Ok? Quella era l'abitudine. Dentro litigate anche furibonde, dai giornalisti con il naso sanguinante, l'occhio nero, si faceva un sorriso e [va tutto bene]. (Enrico, internal roles, longstanding)

For a while, I was the go-to problem solver in hot sections, in which during meetings, they would literally throw each other chairs! [...] the first time I was like this [eyes wide] "What are you guys doing?" They were beating each other up. I said "Whatever, I'm just a newly arrived commissioner. I don't even know you by name. Don't drag me into this. When you've calmed down, we'll talk about it. I brought some wine" [laughs] trying for a moment to [calm them down]...

Ok? That was the habit. Inside even furious fights, in front of journalists with a bloody nose, a black eye, you'd smile and [say it's ok]. (Enrico, internal roles, longstanding)

Enrico jokes about an episode in which he was sent to solve a problem in a section, and when he first entered the meeting he found members furiously arguing and throwing chairs at each other. But that was the habit: you can express your anger and argue in private, but you must not show to the public that something is going wrong in the party (display rule). In this sense, voicing is possible in the party, until it is not done in public.

Quella è sempre stata la regola. Ma perché c'erano i punti dove si poteva tirare la sedia. [...] prova a mettere una pentola a pressione senza la valvola, che succede. dopo esplode. Quello è successo a un certo punto dopo due anni [...] Chi è rimasto è arrabbiato e deve rispondere ai suoi elettori perché è un consigliere regionale, un sindaco, un consigliere comunale ma non può

That had always been the rule. But it was like this because there were occasions where you could throw the chair. [...] Try putting a pressure cooker without the valve on it. it explodes. That's what happened at some point after two years[...] Whoever is left is angry and has to answer to his voters because he is a regional councillor, a mayor, a city

dirti in faccia- anche solo mandarti a quel paese, e quindi lo fa tramite i giornali. Come hanno fatto tutti gli altri partiti e hanno visto che funziona.(Enrico, internal roles, longstanding)

councillor but he can't speak to your face, or even only tell you to fuck off, so he does it through the newspapers. They do it the way they do it in other parties and they saw that it works.(Enrico, internal roles, longstanding)

This kind of episodes were the rule, they serve as a “valve” to avoid the explosion of conflict. Now that the party has diminished the occasions to discuss – because of covid and because of the need to control the situation during the period of change— dissatisfied cadres who want to remain in the party but want to change the situation, fall back on talking to newspapers, using the same repertoires that are customary in other parties. As in chapter 3, “they want to blow everything up”. Breaking the habit of avoiding talking about intraparty problems in public becomes necessary because you can’t control your anger anymore, and the usual channels for communication are suspended to maintain control over a party that is changing. Party members thus borrow from the repertoires of other parties— *they do it in the way they do it in other parties*.

But voicing is not necessarily linked to anger; it can also be motivated by the desire for change. This is what Renato told me when I asked him if he thought that the party would be able to recover from this internal crisis:

il futuro è ignoto ad ognuno di noi, quindi hai due possibilità, di pensare che tutto è perso o di pensare che si può cambiare. [...] Se pensi che tutto è perso, allora cosa te ne frega? tutto perso, fregatene, lascia perdere, facciano quello che devono fare, tanto tu hai già deciso e tutto è perso. Oppure se pensi che qualcosa si può

the future is unknown to each of us, so you have two options, to think that all is lost or to think that you can change. [...] If you think all is lost, then what do you care? all lost, forget it, let them do what they have to do, you have already decided anyway, and all is lost. Or if you think something can be changed you obviously fight and face the

cambiare combatti e affronti ovviamente la situazione passo dopo passo per cercare di invertire e cambiare la situazione. Questo è stato lo spirito che mi ha coinvolto, e mi ha coinvolto fino ad oggi. (Renato, regional councillor, longstanding)

situation step by step to try to reverse and change it. This was the spirit that involved me, and has involved me to this day. (Renato, regional councillor, longstanding)

Foreseeing a possibility for change, Renato stays instead of leaving. Loyalty to his organisation also means that you still can see that things you don't like can be solved, and your voice matters for the organisation. The choice, then, is a matter of how you interpret the situation you are in and how irreparable are the problems that you see. Six months after this interview, Renato left the party and declared to newspapers that he did not like the idea common in his party that those who leave are traitors, as sometimes you must leave if you want to maintain integrity⁵⁹, switching from loyalty to the organisation to loyalty to his ideals.

Exit and Voice

As anticipated in Chapter 3, prominent members started going public with their dissensus, resigning from their offices at the regional level, protesting in newspapers, and getting expelled from the party in Lombardia⁶⁰, Veneto⁶¹, Piemonte⁶², Friuli⁶³,

⁵⁹ I won't quote the newspaper article to protect the anonymity of Renato and to avoid recognition of north area.

⁶⁰<https://www.ilgiorno.it/politica/regione-lombardia-dimissioni-consiglieri-lega-53a06882>
https://www.ansa.it/lombardia/notizie/2023/01/13/lombardia-lega-consiglieri-espulsi-non-ci-candidiamo-a-regionali_b6b18f54-22a6-4d55-92a6-5b59d6f56f39.html

⁶¹https://mattinopadova.gelocal.it/regione/2023/06/01/news/lega_veneto_espulsioni-12835481/
https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2024/03/07/news/da_re_espulsione_lega_salvini-422273386/

⁶²<https://www.torinoggi.it/2024/03/12/leggi-notizia/argomenti/politica-11/articolo/la-lega-in-regione-perde-i-pezzi-leone-lascia-partito-sempre-meno-legato-ai-territori.html>

⁶³https://www.ilgazzettino.it/nordest/pordenone/lega_ivo_moras_lascia_il_partito_cosa_e_successo-7643120.html

Liguria⁶⁴. Many of these members of the local leadership were long-standing members of the party and were the most reluctant to the nationalist turn. Some of them announced their new engagement in Forza Italia, which may sound ironic after we have seen the opposite process in the act. It was highly unlikely for there to be public conflict within the League. However, in all northern regions, there has been such conflict. This is especially noteworthy because the party does not typically allow public criticism and it is against speech norms that are strictly followed, as we saw in chapter 5.

Two former members from the Nord I interviewed in the first months of 2022, agreed to meet in a bar together. They arrived with a bag full of documents about the Northern League e and the Independentist League⁶⁵, showing me with excitement many documents from the 80s and 90s so I could photograph them. They were very happy to tell me a lot of interesting stories about their early years in the Northern League, their experiences in the local area and the admiration they had for Bossi. When I met them, they had already left the party several years prior, when the party decided for a national turn, and they felt base militants were not involved enough in this change. One of the two was the party secretary in his town until a commissioner was appointed, as the section was too conflictual because they did not want the national turn. At first, they both decided to continue doing politics their way by campaigning for a different regional councillor, a candidate in a "lista civica" in the same coalition, as they were willing to support the regional candidate of the League but not the party with Salvini's name on it. They set up a gazebo in their town with big posters saying "operazione trasparenza,"

⁶⁴ https://www.ilsecoloxix.it/liguria/2024/03/19/news/riolfo_lascia_lega_liguria-14157886/

⁶⁵ See note 4, the name of the local league will not be stated.

attracting the curiosity of newspapers. The party sent an internal letter stating that it was forbidden to campaign for anyone outside the party. Some members of the party also confronted them while they were doing this campaign:

uno storico militante della Lega Nord, anche lui si è venduto alla Lega Salvini Premier, è venuto là a fare campagna e a dire “Ma no, ma come vi permettete?[...] State creando solo un danno d'immagine”

“no”, ho detto “noi cerchiamo di recuperare quella coerenza e quella dignità che secondo noi è scomparsa completamente.” (Aldo, Former Member)

A long-standing militant of the Northern League, who also sold out to the Lega Salvini Premier, came here to campaign and said “How dare you?[...] You are only creating damages to our image” “no”, I said, “we are trying to recover that coherence and dignity that in our opinion has disappeared completely.” (Aldo, Former Member)

Aldo and this group publicly go against the party, and face opposition from another member –the interviewee points out that he “sold out to the Lega Salvini Premier”, as those who don’t follow the same criteria are considered disloyal— who believe they are creating damage to “the image” of the party. The display rule emerges again, as the other member is not contesting their position per se but the way this position is expressed. The reason for violating that rule is “to recover coherence,” in other words, to be loyal to the ideas guiding their political activity. Here, the referent of loyalty is not the organisation but the ideals, which, in Aldo’s view are two completely different things, contrary to Federico’s example (page 227). Finally, they left the party, and in the next administrative election, they presented a new list with a symbol similar to the Lega Nord symbol to signal their desire to remain loyal to the regionalist party’s principles and to make fun of their opponents in the party.

[...] quando ci siamo presentati alle elezioni abbiamo deciso di registrare proprio questo simbolo qui. [...] il

[...] when we stood for election we decided to register this very symbol here. [...] The symbol was contested by

simbolo ci è stato contestato dalla commissione elettorale provinciale e bocciato in prima istanza. Abbiamo dovuto [andare lì a dire] “sì, ma in realtà non è Alberto Giussano questo, è un guerriero che ci assomiglia però non lo è. E se sta notando, l'animale qui non è il leone. E poi c'è la spada sulla sinistra non sulla destra, è invertito. Insomma, alla fine abbiamo presentato ricorso e abbiamo avuto ragione. (Franco, Former Member)

the provincial electoral commission and rejected in the first instance. We had to [go there and say], "Yes, but in reality, this is not Alberto Giussano, this is a warrior who looks like him, but he is not him. And if you notice, the animal here is not the lion. And then there is the sword on the left, not on the right, it's reversed. I mean, in the end, we legally appealed, and we were right. (Franco, Former Member)

Exit and non-voice

Among those who decided to leave, many quit quietly. This is the case, for example, of a member I interviewed in the centre in the first months of 2022, when I met him one year later, he just told me his priorities and ideas had changed, and he had decided to leave the party. He was still on good terms with other members and sometimes “just goes to say hello” at events in his small town. This was also the case for members at the beginning of this chapter, who gradually avoided participating in party activities, notwithstanding the disapproval of the party organizer. Another member in the northern region refused to meet for an interview as he was not comfortable speaking negatively about the party. The display rule emerges again, as talking badly about the party is still something a good militant would not do, even when is not a militant anymore.

Someone, like Antonio, just wanted to participate but did not find what he hoped for in the party:

Io ho pagato regolarmente la tessera, ho continuato a pagare regolarmente la tessera. Poi niente. Nel momento in cui c'è stata la pandemia non non si è fatto più sentire nessuno dire regionali,

I paid regularly for the membership. Then nothing. During the pandemic, no one contacted me anymore from the regional or provincial level. They all drifted away. And then there were the

provinciali. Cioè si sono allontanati tutti e niente io poi ci ci sono stati le le le comunali e credevo qual che qua qualcuno di loro si facesse vedere? per vedere, anche per vedere se candidare qualcuno della lega sì o no. Allora [...] ho visto che loro non si sono fatti proprio vedere per niente, niente, niente. E così ho deciso di candidarmi alle comunali con una lista civica di destra. Loro non si sono mai fatti vedere e allora da lì ho deciso di di allontanarmi proprio dalla Lega e diciamo anche dalla politica. [...]

I politici [in paese] fino al l'ottantasette venivano, si facevano vedere. Poi non si sono fatti vedere più i politici a livello nazionale. A livello regionale vengono in campagna elettorale, ma non più di (Antonio, former municipal secretary)

municipal elections, and I thought some of them would show up here to see, even to see whether to candidate someone from the league or not. Then I saw that they didn't show up at all, nothing, nothing. And so, I decided to run for the municipal elections with a right-wing civic list. They never showed up, and that's when I decided to move away from the League and, let's say, also from politics. [...]

Politicians came [in town] until '87, they showed up. Then politicians at the national level didn't show up any more. Those at the regional level come during the electoral campaign, but no more than that (Antonio, former municipal secretary)

Antonio wanted to be part of the party, and he expected to be contacted by local leaders and to be involved in the party activities. His expectation was to be part of an organisation with an ample rank-and-file base. In another line of this interview, he told me he had imagined having a physical place to meet with other members and to build a group. He became a secretary in his small town. Nevertheless, the COVID-19 period constituted a period of crisis for organisations that did not maintain contact with newly acquired members of the party. This confirmed Antonio's negative ideas about politics: politicians never showed up in his town since 1987, and the end of the first republic was the end of capillary party organisations. When even during the electoral period nobody called him, he decided to participate in elections without waiting for them.

Era un desiderio che mi volevo candidare, me lo sono tolto. Il desiderio è come uno che vuole portare la Ferrari. Ho portato la Ferrari, ho visto come si guida, ho visto che non è cosa mia, mi sono tirato fuori. (Antonio, former municipal secretary)

It was a whim of mine to be a candidate, and I did it. The whim is like someone who wants to drive a Ferrari. I drove the Ferrari, I saw how to drive it, I saw that it's not my thing, I called myself out. (Antonio, former municipal secretary)

What should a true militant do?

What we have seen is that militants combine parts of their symbolic repertoires, group styles and habits to justify their decision to remain or leave the party.

Loyalty in the League	
Non-exit – Non-voice A true militant waits and sees what happens, controls his instincts to go away, remains in the party, and trusts older leaders, as they know better how to interpret the situation.	Non-exit – Voice A true militant remains loyal to both the party and his ideals. He needs to find a way to support the party, and if not, it's acceptable to voice dissent, even violating speech norms.
Exit – Non-voice A true militant still follows the rules of the party even when he don't want to be part of it anymore.	Exit – Voice A true militant remains loyal to his ideals and quits when he thinks it is not possible to save the party.

Table 9

Table 9 is a summary of what being a Loyal member of the League means for member who chose different ways of displaying or not displaying dissatisfaction. These elements relate to what we have seen in the previous chapter, in particularly regarding the sacrality assigned to rank-and-file militance –here evoked through the idea of the *true militant* or *old militant*— and regarding speech norms, and the opportunity or not to voice your dissent in public and private spaces. While some any of these element could be found in other organisations, they constitute together the league's models around loyalty. As we already saw, militants frequently cite moral imperatives that a loyal member should follow, but these models are fragmented and sometimes

contradictory. Emotional rules prescribe what are the right feelings to feel in regards to intraparty conflict: in each of the options, militants justify their decisions, appealing to higher-order ideas around justice, endurance, and loyalty. Loyalty can be directed toward the organisation, toward leaders, or toward party ideology, and more infrequently to oneself, as many of the leghisti interviewed have roles in local administrations and they think of their work as beneficial to those who voted for them. Speech norms in the party show in situations of conflict, sometimes even after a militant has left the party. Frequent reference to what a real member would do signals the existence of models for loyalty that members use to evaluate their actions and those of others. As too many were voicing their discontent in public, the central party could no longer avoid congress.

[Uscire sui giornali] è estremamente anomalo ed è contrario a tutti i dettami in lega [...] quella è stata la valvola che ha fatto scattare “Okay, i congressi, bisogna fare i congressi”. (Enrico, internal roles, longstanding)

[To go public on newspapers] It is extremely anomalous and is contrary to all the dictates in the league [...] that was the valve that triggered “OK, congresses, you we need to have congresses.” (Enrico, internal roles, longstanding)

7. Time for a Party Conference

I was first informed about the imminence of the party conference in 2021. Lorenzo invited me to join him on a Tuesday morning while he was "on the field" doing a political stall in a neighbourhood market. He had a foldable table, a flag, and a printed form with the party logo. He stopped every passerby, asking if they had any problems to report to the League, and collected phone numbers with the promise that he would personally solve their issue and call them back, whether it was a ruined sidewalk, a streetlamp, or any problem with unsafe zones in the neighbourhood. He was alone and told me he had set up the stall alone because if he waited for the party, it would take a long time before they took the initiative to organise something. He told me the party only woke up 6 months before the vote, not understanding that continuity is crucial if you want to build an opposition to the centre-left. Indeed, the opposition seemed very hard to build. In the 2 hours spent together at the market, most people refused to talk with him or mocked his party, not because he was doing politics in general but because he was doing politics with the League in a traditionally left-leaning zone. After a series of discouraging No's, an elderly man stopped by and told him proudly he was Leghista as he was originally from Veneto, or better, from Vicenza. Lorenzo was finally happy to talk with someone on his side and asked if he lived in the neighbourhood, and the man said yes. "Then you are a little bit from this City too!" Lorenzo said. The old man looked at him severely and said, "Never. I am from Vicenza first, and then from Veneto", disgusted by a conception of belonging that did not rely on origins. He added, "My nephew feels that he is from this city, but he does not understand anything." Lorenzo

was floored but did not give up. “Do you like living here? Have you got any problems to report to the League?”. The old man said he liked living in the city, the neighbourhood was safe and well served by services, and he had nothing wrong to say about the administration, leaving Lorenzo defeated: even self-declared Leghisti liked the centre-left administration, and the opposition was indeed challenging to build. It is not easy to be a leghista in this region of leftists, Lorenzo told me. In his opinion, this was especially true because the party itself did not take the possibility of winning there seriously and consequently did not work effectively on the ground. As often was the case with my interviewees, he adopted an ironic stance from the start when discussing the organisation. He laughed about their challenges and organisational issues but did not show anger or overtly criticise his superiors. He said emphatically that his side was likely to succeed at the party conference, not necessarily his candidacy, but the side that thinks that the party must work systematically to build the party on the ground in this region rather than just appearing sporadically for elections. The conference, he told me, had last been held in 2012 but will be held very soon⁶⁶. It was only a matter of months. Lorenzo smirked, leading me to believe he was not very happy about the current situation in the organisation, and he hoped for reparation at the conference.

The conference continued to be a central topic in the interviews during the three years of this research. Almost every interviewee I got the chance to meet said the conference would be held within 2 to 6 months, assuring me that, shortly, the party was going to put an end to this prolonged period of change. They often referred to this period as a

⁶⁶ We will see this is only partially true: a congress was held in 2019 that did not involve a complete renovation of party structures but rather only a ratification of the decision to change the party's name.

transitory phase and mentioned the uncertainty caused by having provisional commissioners guiding their political action. It made me think that the organisation was in a transitory stage, in which it was not the same party anymore but also not definitively a new party. Despite their optimistic view that the conference would be held soon, it has not occurred even after three years. While some progress has been made with the structural closure of this process of change—the conference has started, and the local and regional levels all voted their secretaries beginning in 2022, so the new local structure is already in place from the municipal to the regional level—the party has still not held a national conference, resulting in a lack of symbolic closure and growing discontent against the party leaders as the party lost his electoral consensus and nobody paid for the situation.

As we briefly anticipated in Chapter 1, the starts or ends of processes are a matter not only of how we as scholars decide to trace temporal limits relying on our understanding of the series of events that lead to change but also a matter of how members of the group itself recall events, trajectories, and causes and place them in a coherent narrative. While an event is happening, members do not only anticipate what are the next steps in an event, but they also retrace what has already happened in retrospect, reinterpreting the past steps as part of a coherent path (see Wagner-Pacifici 2017). In this case, different interviewees place the start in 2012, when Salvini was elected as Secretary, in 2014, when *Noi con Salvini* was founded, or in 2019, when the party gained its electoral peak and changed its name to *Lega Salvini Premier*. Yet, the end of this process is almost always placed in the future, and the process is described as ongoing. We will see that militants describe the conference as the salvific moment that will restore, once and for all, the good functioning of the party. Starting from Turner's

1982) account of rituals and social drama, in this final chapter of this thesis, we will focus on time, rituals, and closures. The League's culture places importance on the conference ritual as a means to legitimise leaders and re-establish order. When there are no conferences, like in this case, change seems temporary and suspended, and members themselves urge for a party conference to be held. We will also see that the delay of the conference also delayed the eruption of unresolved contradictions within the party, initially promoting formal unity but also, in the long term, gradual disconnection and disenchantment with the organisation.

Ritual Events

Rituals mark the passing of time and the transition from one phase to another. In parties, at least in those who have some form of member participation, conferences are the quintessential ritual. They are often considered in party politics literature as a window to study change (see chap. 1), as in conferences, factions are particularly visible, intentions are publicly declared, and speeches offer a rich opportunity to observe how intra-party discussions are publicly performed. Sociology recognises the existence of a symbolic dimension in the production of order, and in sociological accounts, party conferences have been studied as ceremonies and public rituals in which power relations are symbolically performed. They are organisational devices that serve multiple purposes, both internal and external: the renovation of leadership and political lines, the resolution of controversies, the consolidation of collective belonging, the reconnection of the leadership with grassroots organisations or with particular sectors of society, and the reaffirmation of leadership legitimacy. Moreover, the conferences give the possibility of publicly producing interpretations on the current

political situation and showing the party's strength to political allies and enemies (Navarini 1999:533). In this sense, party conferences are both periodical liturgies of a party and markers of phases of change in the party (Kertzer 1996).

In this regard, Victor Turner's contribution (Turner 1957, 1964, 1982) on rituals, symbolism, and crises can be useful in addressing the problem of change. The anthropologist considers crises as "social dramas" in which structural contradictions and conflicts are performed. They are articulated in 4 phases: the *breach* of an important relation that rules the internal functioning of a group, the *crisis* in which different factions emerge and contrasting themes are mentioned more frequently. In this phase, symbols are reinterpreted by different factions to serve their understanding of objects of conflict. In the *redress* phase, forms of sanction and compensation related to the conflict are performed through ritual to re-establish order, as ritual, according to Turner, has the purpose of controlling tensions in the social structure and their dramatisation. In the fourth phase, the group *reintegrate* or decides on a drastic rupture, a *schism*. In dramas, factions perform highly symbolic actions and battle over the possibility of defining the boundaries of the group and identitarian symbols. They play *mnemonic strategies* to legitimate themselves as the true members of a group, the true heirs of a political tradition, and the legitimate bearer of symbols interpreting the past of the group in a way that places them in that position (Cossu 2004). If we look through this lens at the crisis that invested the party, we can consider the breach phase the moment in which the party moved from regionalism to nationalism and opened to southern Italy. In the phase of the crisis, the different factions of the party tried to interpret the symbolic repertoire in their favour. We have seen in chapters 4-5 that different subgroups of the party –regional groups, factions or different waves of

entrance in the party— while relying on the same cultural structures, differently articulate similar concepts, attributing meanings that resonates with their previous beliefs and expectations towards the party and claiming that their interpretation is the legitimate one. Examples of that are the multiple attempts by regional leaders and longstanding parliamentary members to claim to be the “real” leghisti and bring back attention to regional issues with speeches, the foundation of a faction called “Comitato Nord”⁶⁷ (Northern Committee), public call to avoid voting candidates that do not represent the “real” line of the party⁶⁸ and symbolic actions like bringing a giant regional flag on stage in Pontida⁶⁹ for several years in a row. Redress and reintegration have still not fully occurred. We will see in the next paragraphs what the effect of postponing the conference on the organisation itself was: a long period of suspension and the expectation that the anticipated conference would put an end to the whole crisis and the whole process of change.

Time and Events

According to Tavory and Eliasoph (2013:911), actors are involved in three modes of future coordination: *protention*, meaning the anticipation of the short-term future –what is the immediate following action to expect in a situation or the immediate next sound you will hear or sensation you will feel; *trajectories*, meaning explicitly or implicitly

⁶⁷https://www.corriere.it/politica/22_ottobre_01/lega-bossi-fonda-comitato-nord-rilanciare-progetto-autonomista-52cf32f0-41ad-11ed-b75b-b72dca12f1fd.shtml

⁶⁸https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2024/05/02/news/zaia_contro_vanacci_lega_elezioni_europee-422805165/

⁶⁹<https://www.bergamonews.it/2023/09/17/luca-zaia-dal-pratone-di-pontida-lautonomia-e-la-fine-del-parassitismo/630384/>

treating action as part of an unfolding process, both with intentional projects (Mische 2009) or acting within culturally expected narratives; *Temporal landscapes and plans*, meaning naturalised ideas about how the future will unfold inevitably, such as calendars (Zerubavel 2003) or plans, bureaucratic organisation of time as schoolyears or career steps.⁷⁰

In this chapter, we are focusing predominantly on trajectories, as this element emerged the most in the way in which members of the party talk about the entire process of party change and the highly anticipated party conference. Actors place themselves within trajectories, assumptions about where they are going in the future and what the most predictable sequence of events is. Following Andrew Abbot's musical metaphor (Abbott 2001), sounds become meaningful when part of an overarching theme or motif that the listener recognises as music, as part of a coherent sequence. In this sense, single moments and events are interpreted by actors as part of a temporal sequence, a *narrative pattern* (Abbott 2001:241), a recognisable story that has a beginning, a middle and an end. Narrative approaches have been employed in studies of rituals, spectacles, political dramas and scandals. Studies such as those of Robin Wagner-Pacifici (Wagner-Pacifici 1986, 2017) emphasise how actors and spectators make sense of events and eventful periods, acting and feeling according to how they imagine circumstances to be part of a coherent story. Moreover, actors also modify those stories *while* the event is happening, adjusting their understanding of situations while the event

⁷⁰ John Hall (1999, 2016) presents another way of conceptualizing temporalities and futures based on the domains in which futures operate: formal organisation, competition, utopia, and community (earlier named diachronic, synchronic, strategic and eternal temporalities). Tavory and Eliasoph's conceptualisation focuses on different ways of coordinating future events rather than different time domains.

is unfolding (Wagner-Pacifici 2017) building narratives as post-hoc explanations of what has already happened but also as scripts to act according to their anticipation. Events are “restless” (Wagner-Pacifici 2010) as “actions and interpretations unfold across time, space, diverse media, and variably receptive publics” (2010:1371), and their meaning and interpretation are never completely settled, even if they appear unmovable—what the author calls *event eddy*. They are reinterpreted over time; their memory is inevitably situated in the moment in which actors perform the mnemonic *practice* (Olick and Robbins 1998). Different audiences and groups can place events along different trajectories, agreeing and disagreeing about what that event is “a part of” (Tavory and Eliasoph 2013:914). Moreover, events break linear time⁷¹ and create a space of uncertainty and reinterpretation of reality. They are perceived by actors as turning points as “societies require a cognitive and perceptual apparatus to integrate ruptures into linear time, epochal time, directional time, prefigured time” (Wagner-Pacifici 2010:32). Not all events, though, are turning points. Abbott (2001:245) underlines that the idea of a turning point is a narrative concept, meaning that actors recognise an event as a turning point when they interpret that point as a change of direction from the expected trajectory. Sometimes, events do not challenge the imagined direction in which things are developing. Moreover, despite the fact actors do use events to make sense of time and trajectories and many historians do use a

⁷¹ This is similar to Sewell’s account of events (1996)(1996), conceived as “(1) a ramified sequence of occurrences that (2) is recognised as notable by contemporaries, and that (3) results in a durable transformation of structures”. According to Sewell, events are rare and present a high level of contingency. He explicitly excludes ceremonies, as he argues that they don’t result in the transformation of structures. In this case, we are talking of events of smaller dimensions and smaller contingency. I argue that events of a smaller level, do produce a change in structures of a smaller level. Conferences do change meso structures, as they change the structuration of an organisation both in material and symbolic ways.

counterfactual logic to show that single events can change the course of history, political patterns are not determined by single, dramatic events, single figures or single contingencies (see Collins 2007).

If this is true for big events, the kind that affects different social groups for long periods ahead, it is also true for smaller groups and smaller events. Events in which members of a group have participated provide examples for their ongoing action, constituting a shared basis for future plans (Tavory and Eliasoph 2013). Several studies in the field of social movements address this topic: Della Porta talks about *eventful protest* (Della Porta 2008) to refer to the idea that protest events themselves contribute to the transformation of the very movement that performs them as they have relevant cognitive affective and relational consequences. A growing body of literature focuses on symbolism, memory, and time and their relevance for movements (for a review of this literature, see Daphi and Zamponi 2001). The memory of past events provides symbolic resources and points of orientation to frame situations (Baumgarten 2017; Smit, Heinrich, and Broersma 2018), help in building identity and commitment (Daphi 2017; Farthing and Kohl 2013; Fine 2020; Gongaware 2011) or shaping their repertoires (Zamponi 2018).

I argue that just like large-scale events, even smaller-scale events are significant for group members to trace their groups' trajectories. To do so, I will focus on an event that has not happened yet: the League Party conference. Leghisti's anticipation of a conference that never arrives implicitly shows the importance of a closure event to close a trajectory of change. As Wagner-Pacifici would put it: "One is interested in studying things that have not happened or silence because we have been in a certain

sense educated to anticipate them, to expect certain events, and that anticipation is already constitutive of certain types of images and discourse” (Wagner-Pacifici in Cossu 2010). Moreover, the fact the organisation was previously organised as a mass party, contribute to the relevance attributed to this kind of ritual, as members are believed to be relevant for the party and must be consulted in relevant decisions as indicated in the party statutes.

A conference that never arrives

Why this conference was postponed

What happens when processes of change are not accompanied by ritual moments that allow for redress and reintegration? The League's transformation was not accompanied by a conference to officialise change. After the first election of Salvini in 2014, the party held party congresses in 2015, 2017 and 2019, where they approved the inclusion of other regions in the party and changed their name in Lega Salvini Premier. As we saw in chapter 3, when the party officially changed its name, they set up a new organisation without dismantling the previous one, allowing them to bypass the need for a complete conference as they were not in violation of the previous bylaws due to the existence of a second legal entity. According to some of my interviewees, it was postponed because of a series of obstacles, such as the COVID-19 pandemic that did not allow people to meet in person and elections that did not allow the conference to be organised.

In teoria a maggio in tutta la provincia si può iniziare con i congressi, poi purtroppo... diciamo che la pandemia oltre aver segnato, diciamo

In theory, we can begin holding conferences in all provinces starting in May. Let's be honest: the pandemic has affected not only the lives of

sinceramente, la vita degli Italiani, anche la vita di un partito, non sembra, ma è stata molto segnata. (Giovanni, provincial commissioner, longstanding)

Si erano dati una deadline ma col fatto che è stata prorogata per il periodo di emergenza è slittata in avanti. E poi sicuramente non si faranno a ridosso delle elezioni quindi... (Anna, Militant, new member)

Sono stati bloccati col covid per un po'. Dopo perché ci sono le elezioni di qua, le elezioni di là, e questo e quello. E intanto questo è. (Silvia, MP, 2nd wave)

Italians but also the life of the party. It may not seem so, but it has been greatly impacted. (Giovanni, provincial commissioner, longstanding)

They had set a deadline, but due to the extended emergency period, it was postponed. Also, it's certain that the conference won't be held close to the elections, so... (Anna, Militant, new member)

They were stopped by the covid for a while. Afterwards, there were elections here, elections there, and so on and so forth. Meanwhile, this is it. (Silvia, MP, 2nd wave)

An external event (COVID-19 pandemic) and a series of other political events (Elections) concurred in the scheduling of the conference. Conferences, especially in a mass-party organisation that has multiple levels, take time, as every local group and every level of the party should conduct their local conference before the national one can occur. The close rhythm of electoral appointments, government successions, and political events is faster than the time needed for internal discussion and for the solidification of the organisational structure. As Andrea would put it, if you don't warm up enough, you get cramps:

Non si aveva mai tempo di discutere di queste cose qua, perché c'era sempre una campagna elettorale da fare e c'è sempre una sfida da vincere. [...] sempre in battaglia, sempre a correre, sempre a correre e ti ha fatto massimizzare quelle che erano le vittorie che potessi mai avere. Dopodiché a un certo punto ti vengono i crampi perché non ti sei riscaldato abbastanza. (Andrea, Youth

We never had time to discuss these things because there was always an electoral campaign to do, and there is always a challenge to win. [...] always in battle, always running, always running, and it made you maximise the victories you could ever have. Then, at a certain point, you get cramps because you didn't warm up enough. (Andrea, Youth Movement regional secretary, youth wing)

Movement regional secretary, youth wing)

The rapid success of the party in terms of electoral results occurred alongside a profound transformation. The party remained in a state of liminality where changes had already started but were not openly discussed. This lack of discussion caused several problems, including the party's inability to sustain its initial success in the long run due to an electoral consensus that outweighed its actual organisational strength. Times of organisation and times of electoral success were not aligned. In this scenario, the national leadership did not postpone the conference voluntarily but rather due to frequent obstacles and electoral events that left little time for a party conference.

A second line of thought is that of those who think the conference was postponed intentionally. The national leadership “intentionally kept the local organisations laid down” (see p. 195) to avoid internal conflict. In their view, the party “froze” the conferences to avoid entryism, as the organisation was growing very fast and did not want to lose control over the branches in such a delicate time. They had “more seats than asses”, and they grew faster than they could control (fieldnotes Nov. 2022). In this scenario, the party leadership initially prevents being overwhelmed by the sudden growth of consensus by postponing the conference. However, they maintain this control for an extended period, which hampers regular internal democracy in the organisation, leading to the exclusion of not just newcomers but even long-time members from decision-making. As ritual events are highly emotional and symbolically charged, they can challenge the status quo in organisations, leading to conflicts, effervescence, and disorder (Pfaff and Yang 2001). For this reason, the party has

decided to postpone any potentially conflictual situations. This element is well emphasised in the following quote by Enrico:

È uno stress estremo, quindi secondo me c'è stato il tentativo di rimandarlo in un momento in cui era meno stress. In più, man mano che passava il tempo, il vertice vedeva diminuire il suo consenso. E chi è il cretino che se non era convinto che tutto andava bene prima, dice "vabbè, lo faccio dopo", quando sono convinto che qualcosa andrà male? (Enrico, internal roles, longstanding)

It is an extreme stress, so there was, in my opinion, an attempt to postpone the conference to a time when it was less stressful. However, over time, the leadership lost consensus. If someone wasn't convinced before, who would be foolish enough to say, "Whatever, I'll do it later" when they become convinced that something will go wrong? (Enrico, internal roles, longstanding)

A conference is an "extreme stress" for an organisation, even when intraparty relations are not particularly conflictual. The leadership of the organisation initially thought a "less stressful" time would come to do a conference. Thus, they waited for the internal situation to be more settled.⁷² However, as the leadership of the organisation gradually lost consensus, over time the idea of a conference became less plausible as nobody would organize a conference with the risk of losing ground and legitimation.

We can't definitively determine whether the first option, the second option, or a combination of both played a significant role in the decision to postpone the conference. Nevertheless, the prolonged postponement of the conference kept the organisation in a state of uncertainty.

⁷² Something to notice is that the party organ in charge, the "Congresso Federale," currently partially consists of nominated commissioners, as we saw in Chapter 3. The numbers are in favour of the current leadership, which can decide to postpone the conference without considering the opinion of the internal minorities on this matter. Moreover, some members of this organ who are well-known regionalists were expelled in the last months because they publicly went against the party line.

Suspension

As the party maintains the imagery of a mass party, and the organisation it's central in the culture of the League, this prolonged period of change is not well seen by members. The structure, the leadership and the ability to perform well in the electoral campaign in their eyes depends on whether or not the party has gone through the party conference. In the following quotes, Silvia and Federico, two members of two different areas, express a similar concept: only a conference can bring the structure of the party "in place".

Io avrei avuto piacere di farli prima che partisse la campagna elettorale. Perché così tu avevi già il congresso fatto, avevi un referente, avevi la sezione, avevi la struttura. (Silvia, MP, 2nd wave)

Dal momento che hai una struttura di persone che si sono candidate —e quindi hanno la volontà di portare avanti qualcosa—e sono state legittimate dai propri tesserati, secondo me ci sarà un altro ritmo operativo. (Federico, provincial secretary youth wing, youth wing)

I would have preferred to have them completed before the start of the electoral campaign, as that way we would have had the conference done, a clear referent, the sections, and the structure in place. (Silvia, MP, 2nd wave)

Once you have a structure of people who have proposed themselves as candidates—and therefore have the will to do something— and have been legitimised by their own members, I believe there will be another operational rhythm. (Federico, provincial secretary youth wing, youth wing)

Silvia emphasizes that prioritising the electoral campaign over the conference leads to arriving unprepared for the campaign. The sequence of events does not align with her expectations for navigating the end of the crisis period. It would have been better to proceed through the conference before the elections. Following the wrong order makes it challenging to establish a clear structure and be adequately prepared.

The second quote emphasizes legitimation. According to Federico's words the conference will lead to the election of legitimate secretaries and board members and will improve "operational rhythm" –with reference again to temporality, exiting from a phase of stagnation. Once the conference is done the new leadership will be committed and will have formal recognition from other party members. This element was also present in the quotation in page 125, where Federico described how the presence of external commissioners damages the party as someone coming from the outside is not able to work effectively during elections and is not recognised by local members as legitimate in the absence of a party conference to confer him authority.

In both quotes, we can see that the conference is foreseen as a turning point, the point in the future from which things will be completely different. The conference serves both an organisational and symbolic function, as it reinforces both the structure and the legitimation of the structure. The ritual moment is seen by members, exactly like in Turner's account, as a possibility to repair the crisis in the party. Otherwise, the change "is slow in coming"

Io spero sempre in un cambiamento, ma qua vedo che- che tarda ad arrivare. Tutti quanti speriamo in un passo indietro da parte di Salvini, e che ci rimetta un attimo sui binari. Perché adesso andremo a Congresso con le sezioni, poi successivamente con il regionale, e poi con il nazionale. Con il nazionale si vedrà chi verrà confermato, perché poi è il segretario che darà la linea politica nuova, poi si valuterà. (Francesco, municipal party secretary, 2nd wave)

I always hope for a change, but here I see that it is slow in coming. we all hope that Salvini will take a step back and put us back on track. Now, we will do the party conference at the section level, then the regional, and then the national. With the national, we will see who will be confirmed as secretary because it will be the secretary who will give the new political line, and then we will evaluate. (Francesco, municipal party secretary, 2nd wave)

Francesco expresses a desire for change and again emphasizes a temporal element, saying that the change “is slow in coming”—it is not happening in the time he had anticipated. The conference’s process will lead to the resolution of this phase of waiting and uncertainty. A new leader will be elected, and this leader will set the “political line”, following again a top-down approach that reflects the tradition of democratic-centralism. According to the party’s culture, the leader cannot be openly contested; it is Salvini who must “take a step back” rather than the base destitute him to take the party “back on track”.

On the same line, Roberto thinks that Salvini is not following what rituality prescribes in this case. When asked if Salvini should resign from his office he says ironically:

Salvini dovrebbe fare il gesto. Dovrebbe fare il gesto. [sogghigna] dire “guardate c’è stata una bolla, sono un po’ in caduta libera, detto internamente io sono anche disposto ad andare al congresso, metterci qualcun altro di affidabile dei nostri. Ovvio che deve essere dei nostri” e probabilmente gli direbbero- ma è anche un gesto politico, no? — “andiamo avanti, vai avanti, andiamo avanti.” Son sicuro che gli direbbero così. (Roberto, former regional councillor, longstanding)

Salvini should make a *gesture*⁷³. He should make a *gesture* [he grins] he should say “Look, it’s been a bubble, I’m freefalling but am also willing to call the party conference and go for a new secretary and appoint someone else we trust. Of course it has to be one of us” and they would probably say to him –it’s also a political *gesture*, isn’t it? — “Go on, Go on, Go on.” I’m sure they would tell him that. (Roberto, former regional councillor, longstanding)

According to Roberto, Salvini should at least make the gesture of stepping down from his position as secretary. It’s not necessary for him to actually leave the position, but

⁷³ something said or done by way of formality or courtesy, as a symbol or token, or for its effect on the attitudes of others. (merriam-webster dictionary)

he should symbolically acknowledge that he's not performing well as a secretary. A resignation is an act of surrender (Wagner-Pacifici 2005), and even apologies and requests for public forgiveness (Cerulo and Ruane 2014). Resigning would allow Salvini to lose his status so that the party could re-legitimize him by asking him to remain. This would be a form of redress that, again, is not happening in the times foreseen by members of the party, as many of them feel that Salvini did not take responsibility in public for the choices that led to the electoral fall.

When it comes to the national secretary, party members have varying opinions that align with different factions and interpretations seen in previous chapters. Some members believe that Salvini should be replaced, while others, especially those who supported the nationalist direction, think the party should support him during this uncertain time.

Matteo Salvini ha sempre e solo dato perché è una delle persone forse più buone che io abbia mai incontrato, proprio ha una bontà d'animo di un leader nazionale che ha sempre dato. In questo momento, forse di grande difficoltà della Lega eravamo noi che dovevamo dare a lui (Mara, MP, 2nd wave)

Matteo Salvini has always and only given because he is perhaps one of the best people I have ever met, he has the goodness of heart of a national leader who has always given. At this time, perhaps of great difficulty for the League, we were the ones who had to give to him (Mara, MP, 2nd wave)

Mara is very positive toward Salvini, who she sees as a great leader, and she thinks the party should not turn its back on him in this period of great difficulties. In less enthusiastic terms, Andrea points to the responsibilities of other apical members in the party:

Quindi chi oggi dice è colpa di Salvini... lo dice chi lo ha spinto a prendere la decisione che è stata la causa di

So, whoever today says it is Salvini's fault... are the same persons who pushed him to make the decision that

questo tracollo. Cioè, la loro soluzione è quella di metterci quello che avrebbe fatto la stessa cosa. (Andrea, Youth Movement regional secretary, youth wing)

caused this collapse. I mean, their solution is to appoint the same person who would have made the same decision. (Andrea, Youth Movement regional secretary, youth wing)

Andrea thinks Salvini is a scapegoat, as paradoxically those who criticize him are as involved as he is in the things that caused the crisis (in this view, joining Draghi's government) and are the same that are seen as possible alternatives to him.

Those who want Salvini's resignation debate a possible substitute. Although some names are mentioned more than others –Zaia, Fedriga, or Giorgetti seem to be the favourites—many agree that there is not a suitable option yet.

[non apprezzo Salvini ma] Riconosco anche che non ci sono però altri leader nel partito. Certo non ce ne sono. Perché Giorgetti non è un leader e ogni volta che c'è stato bisogno –e occasioni ne ha avute per emergere come leader—lui ha fatto un passo indietro. Non è un leader Zaia che anche lui non ha fatto solo un passo, ma due passi indietro. [...] al momento, comunque, nel bene e nel male, io ritengo che Salvini rimanga l'unico leader che la Lega possa presentare. (Silvano, city councillor, new member)

[I don't like Salvini, but] I also recognize that there are no other leaders in the party. Of course, there are none. Giorgetti is not a leader. Every time there has been a need for him to emerge as a leader – and he had several opportunities to do so – he has taken a step backward. Zaia is not a leader. He, too, has not just taken one step but two steps back. At the moment, for better or for worse, I believe that Salvini remains the only leader that the League can present. (Silvano, city councillor, new member)

Io penso che Giorgetti non rappresenti quello che era il partito e altre figure come Salvini lo al momento non ne- ci ho pensato e non mi vengono proprio in mente. Ma non solo a me, anche a gente che è dentro il partito a livelli un po' più, un po' più alto di me ecco. [...] il Congresso nazionale ci sarà a fine anno, quindi c'è un po' di tempo per ricavare una figura. (Francesco, municipal party secretary, 2nd wave)

I don't think Giorgetti represents what the party used to be, and I've considered it, but other figures like Salvini don't really come to mind. But not only to me, also to people who are at a higher level within the party than I am. [...] The national conference will take place at the end of the year, so there's still some time to come up with a suitable option. (Francesco, municipal party secretary, 2nd wave)

Both quotes report a lack of alternative leadership within the League party, with Salvini perceived as the only viable leader at the moment. Other potential leaders are not currently emerging as strong alternatives: on one hand, a leader that is well known for his regionalist positions could not aspire to become the secretary of the new party, on the other, a nationalist leader would not encounter the favour of those who would prefer a throwback to regionalist positions. Moreover, the high centralisation of power and hyper-exposure of Salvini as the national leader did not allow for the formation of a credible succession in the last years, as potential competitors did not have the numbers in the party or the mediatic echo of Salvini. The time for making this significant decision, which will change the course of the party, is postponed to the party conference, underlining again that members anticipate this event as the crucial turning point that will change the fate of the party.

The conference and the trajectory of the party

As we have seen in several of the quotes in the last section, the conference is always imminent according to leghisti. They refer to the idea that it will happen briefly or that the first phases have already started, and there is still hope for the party to get back on track as the final event of the conference will end their sufferings. This element reconnects with what we have seen in the first part of this chapter about trajectories and events: members imagine that the final event of this period will happen in a specific timeframe that they anticipate. This element is particularly explicit in this passage of the interview with Renato:

Forse l'unico punto scuro che vedo è il tempo. Anzi, se volessimo dire ognuno di noi proprio perché la vita non è eterna, ha come punto nero il tempo.

Perhaps the only dark spot I see is time. To be honest, each of us, precisely because life is not eternal, has time as a dark spot. This means

Cioè le cose o le riesci a fare in determinati tempi oppure non è che viviamo qui in eterno, ecco. [...] non possiamo pensare che la battaglia per cambiare il sistema cambiare insomma l'organizzazione del partito sia infinita. Deve avere ovviamente un lasso di tempo ben descritto, che io ritengo sia –forse se dico quest'anno è anche troppo oltre, ma sia entro i primi sei mesi di quest'anno, perché oltre secondo me rischiamo di non avere più tempo per recuperare. Rischiamo di non avere più lo spazio e ovviamente il tempo per riorganizzarci, ristabilire una rotta e iniziare a costruire, ovviamente, il messaggio in modo che la gente possa riconsegnarti la fiducia. (Renato, regional councillor, longstanding)

either you can do things in a certain timeframe, or you can't do them, we don't live here forever, that's it. [...] we cannot think that the battle to change the system, to change the organisation of the party, as endless. It must obviously have a well-described time frame, which I think is - maybe if I say this year is even too far, but it must be within the first six months of this year because beyond that, I think we risk running out of time to catch up. We risk no longer having the space and obviously the time to reorganise, to re-establish a route and to start building, obviously, the message so that people can trust us again. (Renato, regional councillor, longstanding)

Renato is thinking about the issue of time. He believes that the conference should take place within 6 months from the interview because it will take time to reorganize. He is concerned that if the conference does not happen within this timeframe, it will be difficult to regain the trust of members and voters. Renato stresses the urgency of this turning point, emphasising that the trajectory of the party will not change if the conference does not happen within a reasonable amount of time. His insistence on the idea of a “right time” mirrors the quotes we have already seen, in which change is “slow in coming” and the conference should be done before elections to allow for reorganisation, as it is the ritual event that will put an end to all the period of change. The Ritual is an occasion for reflection and for a new order for the future of the structure. This element is also present in this quote from Andrea:

Secondo me bisognerebbe fermarsi un attimo successivamente alla formazione del governo, capire che è il momento per il partito di riflettere [...]

In my opinion, after the government is formed, the party should understand we need to take a moment to reflect [...] the party must come together and

il partito deve riunirsi e capire che è necessario ricostituirsi, rifondarsi e far partire quella che è una ricostituente del partito dal basso verso l'alto. Uno, perché comunque è necessario rinnovarsi. È sempre necessario fermarsi e dire cosa siamo, cosa siamo stati, cosa vogliamo diventare. E due, anche perché il partito ha un bisogno vitale adesso di sapere chi è perché altrimenti non sai dove andare. (Andrea, Youth Movement regional secretary, youth wing)

understand that it is necessary to reconstitute itself, to re-found itself, and to start a reconstitution of the party from the bottom up. First, because in any case, it is necessary to renew ourselves. It is always necessary to stop and say what we are, what we have been, and what we want to become. Secondly, the party now has a vital need to know who it is, otherwise, they won't know where to go. (Andrea, Youth Movement regional secretary, youth wing)

Here, the congress is seen as a pause from everyday activities, a separate moment in time in which it's possible to discuss and reconstruct the party. It is also a space for renovation and for future coordinating, a space to reflect on the trajectory the party went through in the past and should take in the future. In the future, as foreseen by Andrea, the party will for sure reconcile; as foreseen by Renato, the party could reconcile only if the conference is done within a certain time. More than six months have passed since the interview with Renato happened, the conference was not done, and he left the party. The national conference is planned for September. As Enrico suggests, saying exactly what we would expect from Turner, we will see if the party will go towards a reconciliation or a schism.

In questa situazione il congresso è la miccia per far saltare il banco. Ripeto, anche in una situazione fantastica sarebbe uno stress test. [...] Quindi i congressi vedremo se saranno di rottura o di rinascita. (Enrico, internal roles, longstanding)

In this situation, the conference is the fuse to blow the bank. I repeat, even in a fantastic situation it would be a stress test. [...] So the conferences we will see whether they will be of rupture or rebirth. (Enrico, internal roles, longstanding)

Conclusions

The lack of a closing ritual event does not allow for the party to exit from a stage of suspension, as members of the party interpret the change phase as endless, the conflict as unsolved, and the wrongs not repaid. Actors involved in processes trace the beginning and the ends relying on stories, using events as starts and ends. The lack of the proper and expected event that will end the story makes the actors feel that the end never arrived, and the process is ongoing. When the congressional phase started, and Salvini's majority won in most cities and at most levels, making clear that a throwback to the old league was not possible anymore. Among the defeated in Congress, many left the party, silently or voicing, and bringing with them their close circles of militants and voters. As this happened at a subnational level, these decisions had only limited resonance, as local politics rarely make the news. They thus opted for a schism. Others, instead, remained in the party, as the local congresses ended the commissioner's situation and allowed at least for clarity in structures and hierarchies, and they believe the party do not need improvements or it's going to improve in the near future once this conflictual period has ended. Of course, the multiplicity inside the party remained, as conferences do establish ritually rights and wrongs, but as we have seen in this thesis, it is not sufficient to establish a decision for the decision to become effective at all levels in the party and for the member to adapt to the new situation. Cultural processes in the everyday life of organisations work for longer times with respect to political decisions and political events; traces of the past remain in the organisation longer than their leader anticipated. The national conference has been announced for September. We will see if, on that occasion, this process will have an

end. The issue of leadership and the future direction of the party continue to be subjects of intense discussion and contention among its members.

8. Conclusions

During the lengthy and unfinished period of the League's transformation from the Northern League to the Lega Salvini premier, the party underwent a phase of cultural transformation. This transformation initially supported electoral growth and pushed the party towards European radical-right groups, with which it now has more in common than before. However, party change involves not just announcing change, but also implementing this intention within the party. The rapid increase in consensus did not correspond to a similarly rapid change within the party. As a result, the newly acquired consensus and growth faded, and there was also an erosion of the party's internal cohesion in traditional areas of consensus. However, the party is now more organised than before in non-traditional areas: in the centre-north, the party is now more structured than before, and in the south, even without a proper structure, now exists a political leadership that is loyal to Salvini's leadership. Cultural change in organisations follows slower paths than political decisions and electoral competitions, leading to a series of contradictions between the public presence of the party and the practices and beliefs of members, who remain anchored to the memory of previous cultural structures and previous repertoires of action within the party.

In Chapter 3, we have seen that the party had to adopt different strategies in different areas due to the different degrees of previous presence of the party and the habitual patterns of artistic participation in the area. The party initially attempted to export their organisational practices south, trying to overcome the symbolic obstacles posed by the previous boundaries of the party, who despised southern citizens, and the difficulties

posed by having more electoral consensus than what is manageable by a small presence on the ground. As the attempt failed, they were forced to adapt their patterns of action to prevalent patterns of democratic practice in the area and rely on existing patronage networks, but in doing so, they risked losing control over the party, so they decided to tighten top-down control, with the consequence of not building an independent leadership south. However, the party now has a series of members who, even if initially coming from previous party experiences, have been in the party since 2014 and thus are loyal to the central leadership of the party and fully involved in internal equilibriums. In the centre, the party was able to grow its presence, well using the (limited) pre-existing resources during the phase of peak consensus for the party leader in 2018-2019. Due to the entrance of militants in waves, party members hold stratified ideological positions that reflect the dominant position of the national party in that period and compose a mosaic of different beliefs both on ideological terms and in terms of how the party should be organised. In the North, the party initially continued to work normally, as the local party leadership was more relevant than the national one and regional cultural and material structures prevailed over the new line of the party. As the organisation changed its name, commissaries were nominated, with the promise of a forthcoming party convention. Instead, the convention is postponed to maintain control over a party that was becoming more and more conflictual.

In the Pontida Interlude I, we have seen how the party maintained elements of regionalism and nationalism in their public ceremonies. The mise en scene and the speeches reflected a combination of elements from past repertoires and new repertoires, which are combined by politician on stage to signal their personal position on the topic of change, but also to reframe traditional positions of the party in ways that

allow for new articulations of boundaries, new alliances and the inclusion of elements coming from the international arena of far-right politics.

Chapter 4 shows that ideological articulation differs in different zones considered. Elements of Nationalism and Regionalism, ideas around the Mass party model, and ways of organising political activities form different patterns, meanings, and characteristics in different areas, from different local idiocultures that are compatible but not coincident and reflect local group history and local contexts. If at the national level, leaders often adopt flexible and vague positions to appeal to diverse electorates, at the local level, maintaining multiple positions allowed for different local practices to be pursued in different contexts. In the North, members think that every region in Italy should be federalist to pursue their identitarian and economic needs of the territory, the mass party practices and the territory itself are often overlapped in militants' speeches. In the South, federalism is just a way to organize the relations between the regions and the state, but the nation is still the prevalent form of identification and the link with the national leader is prevalent in their everyday activity. In the centre, stratified membership leads to multiple interpretations on the topic. As the party avoided conventions for long periods, they did not necessarily need to reach a consensus on ideological issues. Moreover, in members' words, ideas on regionalism/nationalism and ideas on the mass party organisation appear frequently together, suggesting a connection between the two. Organisational methods are seen as the obvious correspondence to ideological stances, and unwanted changes in practices are often described as a violation of abstract principles.

In Chapter 5, we have looked at the group style of the league, meaning habitual ways in which the party members interact inside the party, putting in practice cultural structures in their everyday interactions. We have seen that members coming from different career trajectories –longstanding, newcomers and party switchers—enter into conflict as their interactional expectations inside the party are violated, as members hold mismatched expectations about what is an appropriate or non-appropriate way to act inside the party. Group Boundaries, Group Bonds and Speech norms prescribe how a *real leghista* should or should not act in the context of the organisation, as they are shared repertoires. Organisational changes and new members challenge these interactional norms, requiring improvisation and creative interpretation. As the party's political culture changes at a slower pace than the rapidity of the electoral peak a sudden boom in militants unsettles intra-party relations.

In Interlude II, we have seen how militants perceive the imminent electoral debacle during the 2022 electoral campaign. Fratelli d'Italia's imminent victory fuels local conflicts between the two radical right formations and internal conflicts in the party.

In Chapter 6, I have tried to rethink Hirschman's model of Exit, Voice and Loyalty through the lenses of Hochschild sociology of emotions. In the chapter we saw how the prolonged phase of conflict inside the party led to discontent. This discontent is felt and expressed through feeling rules that prescribe appropriate ways to feel and act toward negative emotions. Actors mobilize different loyalty models to justify their decision to exit the party or remain, voice their discontent, or remain silent. As indications about what constitutes a *loyal member* are stratified, contradictory, and complexly organised, conflicting interpretations of what is adequate arise in different situations.

In Chapter 7, we see that the absence of a closing ritual event prevents the party from moving out of a state of suspension. This causes party members to see the transition as never-ending, the conflict as unresolved, and the injustices as unaddressed. We have seen the role of events as markers of the start and end of temporal trajectories and how an expected but never-arrived party conference is seen as the utopic moment in which every conflict will be solved, and the organisation will start a new phase. The external conditions of COVID-19 and the necessity to maintain control over a conflictual organisation lead the leadership to postpone the *redress* of conflict, and a sense of undefinition and unfinishedness evidence this the members attribute to the whole process of party change.

The number of interviews poses limitations to the results of this study, especially for the south zone. However, this study contributes to our understanding of party organisations and culture in political interaction. Firstly, it offers insights into the local-level dynamics within Salvini's League during the electoral peak and subsequent decline. Abrupt change has proven destructive for internal cohesion, as the organisation was not able to keep pace with the changes in the political context and in the position of the party itself in this context. Given the frequent cycles of peaks and falls in the Italian context, future research could investigate similar dynamics in other party formations to understand the potential impact of sudden changes on organisations themselves. Additionally, it contributes to the study of radical-right parties, particularly focusing on local intra-party dynamics, an area not extensively covered in the literature on this type of party. As the focus of this research was intensively on intraparty dynamics, it could be an interesting line of research to look at differences in repertoires of local action towards the external world. Secondly, this

research examines party change as a process with a sociological perspective, introducing analytical elements not commonly considered by party politics scholarship, such as attention to local levels and the significance of cultural dynamics in processes of party change. It explores how national changes permeate the party's everyday life, encountering opposition and generating intra-party contradictions and conflicts, as well as differentiated dynamics in different locales. As only one case is not enough to produce a model to include political culture in studies of party change, further research is needed in this direction, but the application of sociological categories to the study of parties seems to me an underexplored path to get inside on these dynamics. Thirdly, this study contributes to the sociological study of the link between culture and political action beyond the League's specific case, drawing attention to repertoires of political action and maintaining an approach attentive to theorisation. This dissertation concerns political organisations, their weakness, and their mechanisms. It's about members of organisations that play their games, adapt to new conditions and resist decisions they don't share, and continue their daily habits of militancy. It is about how people act to change their organisation and end up losing power over them. At the beginning of my journey, I had hoped to gain insight into how they managed to succeed and flourish despite a process that eroded their organisational culture. At the end of this journey, I am looking at a story of a conflict and failures and disengagements. Party organisations are not dissimilar to other forms of political organisations. Organisational change, resistance to change, crises, and ceremonies are only a fraction of the topics we can explore by looking at cultures of parties and their members.

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Appendix 1: Interview guide

Temi

1. Il percorso politico della persona: quando e perché ha iniziato a partecipare alle attività della Lega, quale è stata la sua esperienza nel partito e il percorso personale di militanza, come si vede in futuro nel partito
2. Il percorso della sezione: eventi salienti della storia della sezione, attività che portano avanti localmente, prospettive future per la sezione e per la politica locale.
3. Il percorso della Lega: come interpreta il cambiamento avvenuto negli scorsi anni, le scelte prese negli ultimi anni dall'organizzazione, e quali sono le priorità per il partito per il futuro.

Domande:

Parte 1:

- Domande demografiche: età, professione, sesso etc.
- Quando hai cominciato a interessarti di politica e perché, eventuali precedenti esperienze in altri partiti o associazioni
- Conoscevi qualcuno nel partito prima di entrare, c'è qualcuno che è entrato nel partito con te
- Quale è stata la tua prima impressione del partito e cosa ti ha spinto a rimanere
- Riesci a identificare un episodio o un momento in cui sei passato da essere simpatizzante a sentirti un militante vero e proprio
- Come è cambiato il tuo ruolo o le attività che svolgi nel tempo
- Pensi che le tue idee siano simili o diverse rispetto a quando sei entrato
- Cosa ti piacerebbe fare in futuro
- Pensi che fare politica ti abbia aiutato o svantaggiato in altri ambiti della vita

- Cosa ne pensano la tua famiglia e i tuoi amici della tua militanza

Parte 2:

- Come era la tua sezione/ la sezione della giovanile quando hai iniziato ad avvicinarti
- Descrivimi gli altri membri del tuo gruppo
- Ci sono persone che hanno iniziato a fare politica molto tempo fa, persone nuove, più o meno persone negli ultimi anni (prima/dopo Salvini, prima/dopo il covid)
- C'è qualcuno di fondamentale senza il quale non potrebbe esistere la tua sezione, c'è qualcuno che ti ha insegnato delle cose importanti
- Che tipo di attività organizzate sul territorio
- Quali sono le cose che avete fatto di cui sei più orgoglioso e le cose che invece non ti hanno trovato d'accordo
- Cosa pensi dovrete fare in futuro localmente
- Pensi che stiate andando bene o dovrete cambiare strategia

Parte 3:

- Come sarebbe il tuo partito ideale? La Lega ci si avvicina?
- Quali sono gli alleati sia a livello nazionale che a livello europeo
- Cosa ti piace o non ti piace del tuo partito
- Chi sono le figure politiche che apprezzi di più e perché
- Conosci persone in altre regioni? Partecipi alla vita di partito a livello regionale o nazionale?
- Cosa ne pensi in generale dei cambiamenti avvenuti negli ultimi anni
- Quale direzione dovrebbe prendere secondo te la Lega in futuro

Appendix 2: Prospect of collected data.

	North	Centre-North	South	Other
Interviews	7 interviews with recordings (one with two members together)	7 interviews with recordings 2 without recordings, only notes	3 interviews	1 without recordings from another region in the south 2 interviews with informants, non-members of the party
Fieldnotes		Electoral campaign 2022 and local events	-	Pontida's Rally 2022 State funeral of a former party secretary
Facebook Posts	Official posts from 2017 to 2023. Selected posts of local leaders' profiles related to main national and local events.	Official posts from 2017 to 2023. Selected posts of local leaders' profiles related to main national and local events.	Official posts from 2017 to 2023. Selected posts of local leaders' profiles related to main national and local events.	
Newspapers	Selected articles in Local newspaper 2020-2024	Selected articles in Local newspapers 2020-2024	Selected articles in Local newspapers 2020-2024	National newspapers 2017-2023 for main national events.

Table 10: Prospect of collected data.

Appendix 3: First Contacts Table

Additional informations only on actual respondents are provided in appendix 6

n.	data di primo contatto	Ruolo	Zona	Primo contatto	Drop	Intervista
1	30/10/2021	Informatori non membri, documentario lega	CN	mail		Non membri
2	27/10/2021	consigliere comunale	CN	Conoscente in comune		Non Registrato
3	17/11/2021	consigliere comunale	CN	mail ufficiale		no
4	18/11/2021	consigliere comunale	CN	mail ufficiale		no
5	14/02/2022	sezione	CN	mail sezione		no
6	08/03/2022	Ex consigliere provinciale	N	Cognoscente in comune, uscito dal partito, non disponibile ad una intervista	X	no
7	04/04/2022	ex segretario comunale	N	Conoscente in comune, uscito dal partito molto prima del periodo di interesse di questa tesi	X	no
8	01/04/2022	consigliere comunale	CN	mail ufficiale		si
9	10/04/2022	consigliere comunale	CN	saltato intermediario	X	no
10	30/04/2022	segretario comunale	CN	tramite int 7		si
11	02/05/2022	commissario provinciale	CN	tramite int 9		si
12	09/05/2022	consigliere comunale	CN	incontrato sul campo		Non Registrato
13	09/05/2022	ex consigliere regionale	CN	incontrato sul campo		si
14	10/05/2022	responsabile organizzativo	CN	incontrato sul campo inizialmente disponibile ma poi non sono riuscita a fissare una data	X	no
15	18/05/2022	Militante con ruoli interni a livello provinciale	CN	incontrato sul campo		si
16	03/06/2022	consigliere comunale	S	inizialmente disponibile, non ha mai più risposto dopo il primo tentativo	X	in corso

17	31/05/2022		N	intermediario	
18	28/06/2022	consigliere comunale	N	tramite 17	si
19	31/05/2022		N	intermediario	
20	03/06/2022	ex coordinatore provinciale	CN	tramite int 10, non ho ricevuto risposta	no
21	30/08/2022	ex assessore	N	Conoscente in comune	si
22	28/09/2022	parlamentare	CN	incontrato a pontida	si
23	05/10/2022	parlamentare	S	incontrato a pontida, disponibile a solo intervista online	si
24	28/09/2022	Segretario giovanile	CN	incontrato sul campo	si
25	28/09/2022	ex membro Lega Nord	N	tramite int 21	Si, insieme
26	28/09/2022	ex membro Lega Nord	N	tramite int 21	Si, insieme
27		simpatizzante	CN	incontrato sul campo, non registrato	Non Registrato
28		simpatizzante	CN	incontrato sul campo, non membro	Escluso
29	05/10/2022	segretario regionale	N	mail ufficiale	no
30	05/10/2022	sindaco	CN	mail ufficiale	no
31	06/10/2022	consigliere comunale	N	mail ufficiale comune	no
32	07/10/2022	sezione	N	lega online	no
33	07/10/2022	Sez. giovanile	N	mail sezione	no
34	19/10/2022	Giornalista locale		Informatore non membro	Non membro
35	19/10/2022	consigliere comunale	N	mail ufficiale comune	si
36	19/10/2022	Sez giovanile	N	mail sezione	no
37	24/10/2022	consigliere regionale	S	mail ufficiale comune	no
38	31/10/2022	consigliere comunale	S	mail ufficiale comune	no
39	06/12/2022	membro di lungo corso con incarichi interni	N	Conoscente in comune	si
40	02/11/2022	giovanile	N	mail sezione	no
41	02/11/2022	consigliere comunale	N	mail ufficiale	no
42	08/11/2022	Segretario giovanile	N	tramite int 24, inizialmente disponibile non ha più risposto ai messaggi	X no
43	08/11/2022	Ex segretario giovanile	N	tramite int 24	no
44	01/12/2022	Segretario comunale giovanile	N	tramite 42	si
45	20/01/2023	consigliere regionale	N	tramite int 39	si

46	26/01/2023	consigliere comunale	S	Conoscente in comune		si
47	02/02/2023	segretario comunale	N	mail ufficiale		no
48	06/02/2023	ex segretario comunale	S	Conoscente in comune		si
49	28/02/2023	consigliere comunale	S	mail ufficiale		no
50	07/07/2023		N	mail ufficiale		no
51	07/07/2023	lega giovani	S	mail sezione, tentativo di cambiare regione per il sud		no
52	08/05/2023	segretario regionale	S	mail ufficiale, tentativo di cambiare regione per il sud		no
53	31/07/2023	sezione	S	mail sezione, tentativo di cambiare regione per il sud		no
54	31/07/2023	consigliere regionale	S	mail ufficiale, tentativo di cambiare regione per il sud		no
55	31/07/2023	sezione	S	mail sezione, tentativo di cambiare regione per il sud		no
56	31/07/2023	Sez giovanile	S	mail sezione, tentativo di cambiare regione per il sud		no
57	01/08/2023	consigliere regionale	S	mail ufficiale, tentativo di cambiare regione per il sud		no
58	20/09/2023	responsabile regionale	S	incontrato a Pontida, non ha mai risposto al mio secondo tentativo di contatto	X	no
59	21/09/2023	consigliere regionale	S	incontrato a Pontida, non ha mai risposto al mio secondo tentativo di contatto	X	no
60	22/09/2023	consigliere regionale	S	incontrato a Pontida, non ha mai risposto al mio secondo tentativo di contatto	X	no
61	23/09/2023	Responsabile regionale	S	incontrato a Pontida, non ha mai risposto al mio secondo tentativo di contatto	X	no
62	24/09/2023	membro	S	incontrato a Pontida, non ha mai risposto al mio secondo tentativo di contatto	X	no
63	25/09/2023	responsabile regionale	S	incontrato a Pontida, non ha mai risposto al mio secondo tentativo di contatto	X	no
64	26/09/2023	sezione	S	facebook		no
65	26/09/2023	sezione	S	facebook		no

66	26/09/2023	sezione	S	facebook	no
67	26/09/2023	Sez giovanile	S	facebook	no
68	26/09/2023	Sez Giovanile	S	facebook	no
69	26/09/2023	sezione	S	facebook	no
70	26/09/2023	sezione	S	facebook	no

Appendix 4: Esempio di mail di primo contatto

Gentile [_____],

Mi chiamo Ghita Bordieri e lavoro per l'Università di Genova. Sto conducendo una ricerca sulle dinamiche di cambiamento all'interno delle organizzazioni politiche, in particolare sulla Lega.

Sto contattando militanti ed eletti in varie zone d'Italia per farmi raccontare delle loro esperienze e delle loro idee su questo argomento e ho pensato di contattarla in qualità di [RUOLO] per avere qualche informazione sulle attività portate avanti in [Regione o Città]. Sarebbe disponibile per una intervista nelle prossime settimane?

Preferirei fare un incontro dal vivo, ma posso adattarmi alle sue esigenze e ai suoi impegni anche per una chiamata online. L'intervista sarà in forma anonima e verrà utilizzata da me solo ai fini della ricerca. Allego una breve presentazione della ricerca per ulteriori informazioni.

Cordiali saluti,

Ghita Bordieri

(Adattata con informazioni rilevanti es. chi mi ha dato il contatto o una proposta di data per incontri)

Appendix 5: Presentazione ricerca

Inviato su richiesta, non ho anticipato le domande a tutti gli intervistati.



Ricerca su dinamiche di cambiamento organizzativo nella Lega

Ghita Bordieri - Dottorato in Scienze Sociali - Università di Genova

La ricerca si propone di indagare come in un partito in cui è in corso un mutamento simbolico, ideologico e strutturale i suoi membri diano senso al cambiamento e portino avanti le proprie attività quotidiane di militanza. Quello Lega è un caso studio particolarmente interessante per studiare questo tema perché si tratta di un partito longevo che ha subito un cambiamento profondo in un periodo di tempo relativamente breve.

A questo proposito sto contattando militanti e dirigenti del partito e della giovanile in varie zone d'Italia per farli raccontare le loro esperienze e quando possibile per partecipare alle attività che organizzano sul territorio. Le informazioni raccolte vengono utilizzate solo ai fini della ricerca e vengono anonimizzate, in modo da consentire riservatezza e libertà di esprimersi ai partecipanti. La tecnica utilizzata è quella dell'intervista semi-strutturata, che lascia ampio margine all'intervistato di parlare di quello che preferisce in relazione al tema.

La conversazione si svilupperà su tre principali temi:

1. Il percorso politico della persona: quando e perché ha iniziato a partecipare alle attività della Lega, quale è stata la sua esperienza nel partito e il percorso personale di militanza, come si vede in futuro nel partito
2. Il percorso della sezione: eventi salienti della storia della sezione, attività che portano avanti localmente, prospettive future per la sezione e per la politica locale.
3. Il percorso della Lega: come interpreta il cambiamento avvenuto negli scorsi anni, le scelte prese negli ultimi anni dall'organizzazione, e quali sono le priorità per il partito per il futuro.

Domande indicative:

Parte 1:

- Domande demografiche: età, professione, sesso etc.
- Quando hai cominciato a interessarti di politica e perché, eventuali precedenti esperienze in altri partiti o associazioni
- Conoscevi qualcuno nel partito prima di entrare, c'è qualcuno che è entrato nel partito con te
- Quale è stata la tua prima impressione del partito e cosa ti ha spinto a rimanere
- Riesci a identificare un episodio o un momento in cui sei passato da essere simpatizzante a sentirti un militante vero e proprio
- Come è cambiato il tuo ruolo o le attività che svolgi nel tempo
- Pensi che le tue idee siano simili o diverse rispetto a quando sei entrato
- Cosa ti piacerebbe fare in futuro
- Pensi che fare politica ti abbia aiutato o svantaggiato in altri ambiti della vita
- Cosa ne pensano la tua famiglia e i tuoi amici della tua militanza

Parte 2:

- Come era la tua sezione/ la sezione della giovanile quando hai iniziato ad avvicinarti
- Descrivimi gli altri membri del tuo gruppo
- Ci sono persone che hanno iniziato a fare politica molto tempo fa, persone nuove, più o meno persone negli ultimi anni (prima/dopo Salvini, prima/dopo il covid)
- C'è qualcuno di fondamentale senza il quale non potrebbe esistere la tua sezione, c'è qualcuno che ti ha insegnato delle cose importanti
- Che tipo di attività organizzate sul territorio
- Quali sono le cose che avete fatto di cui sei più orgoglioso e le cose che invece non ti hanno trovato d'accordo
- Cosa pensi dovrete fare in futuro localmente
- Pensi che stiate andando bene o dovrete cambiare strategia

Parte 3:

- Come sarebbe il tuo partito ideale? La Lega ci si avvicina?
- Quali sono gli alleati sia a livello nazionale che a livello europeo
- Cosa ti piace o non ti piace del tuo partito
- Chi sono le figure politiche che apprezzi di più e perché
- Conosci persone in altre regioni? Partecipi alla vita di partito a livello regionale o nazionale?
- Cosa ne pensi in generale dei cambiamenti avvenuti negli ultimi anni
- Quale direzione dovrebbe prendere secondo te la Lega in futuro

Appendix 6: Pseudonyms and Information on respondents

Pseudonym	n ⁷⁴	Role	Seniority	Zone	Gender	Age
--	1	Non-members, journalists		CN	M,M,M	40-50
Lorenzo	2	City councillor	New member	CN	M	32
Marco	8	City councillor	2 nd Wave	CN	M	25
Francesco	10	Municipal secretary	2 nd Wave	CN	M	41
Giovanni	11	Provincial Commissioner	Longstanding	CN	M	36
Sara	12	City Councillor	New Member	CN	F	≈50
Roberto	13	Former regional councillor	Longstanding	CN	M	53
Anna	15	Militant, internal roles at the provincial level	New Member	CN	F	33
Claudio	18	City councillor	Youth Wing	N	M	23
Nicolò	21	Former <i>assessore</i> ⁷⁵	Longstanding	N	M	43
Silvia	22	MP	2 nd wave	CN	F	55
Mara	23	MP	2 nd wave	S	F	47
Andrea	24	Youth movement regional secretary	Youth Wing	CN	M	24
Aldo	25	Former Member	Former	N	M	≈60
Franco	26	Former Member	Former	N	M	≈60
Dario	27	supporter	New Member	CN	M	≈30
--	34	Local journalist			M	≈40

⁷⁴ Numbers assigned according to the order of first contact as in Appendix 4

⁷⁵ An Assessore is a member of the government in a city, province or region and is not necessarily an elected councillor, because it is appointed by the mayor, provincial governor or regional governor. They are usually in charge of a specific sector of governance i.e. social services, urban development etc.

Silvano	35	City councillor		N	M	69
			New Member			
Enrico	39	Longstanding member with organisational roles in the party	Longstanding	N	M	≈35
Federico	44	Youth movement provincial secretary	Youth Wing	N	M	22
Renato	45	Regional councillor	Longstanding	N	M	51
Giorgio	46	City councillor	New Member	S	M	34
Antonio	48	Former municipal secretary	Former	S	M	≈50

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