

TALLINN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

School of Business and Governance

Department of Law

Gabriella Abruzzo

**THE LEGA'S FLUCTUATING ELECTORAL RESULTS
THROUGH THE THEORIES OF POPULISM**

Master's Thesis

Programme INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND EUROPEAN-ASIAN STUDIES

Supervisor: Ton Notermans, PhD

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I hereby declare that I have compiled the paper independently and all works, important standpoints and data by other authors has been properly referenced and the same paper has not been previously presented for grading.

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Gabriella Abruzzo

(signature, date)

Student code: 172619TASM

Student e-mail address: abruzzo.gabriella@gmail.com

Supervisor: Ton Notermans:

The paper conforms to requirements in force

.....

(signature, date)

Chairman of the Defence Committee:

Permitted to the defence

.....

(name, signature, date)

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ABSTRACT. The thesis seeks to answer to what extent it is possible to explain the fluctuating electoral results of the Lega based on the theories of populism. In order to achieve this goal it is necessary to understand which theory of populism is more appropriate to illustrate the fluctuating results of the Italian Lega, distinguishing between demand and supply side. It will be explained which features, and circumstance allowed the Lega to survive for so long in the Italian political scenario, becoming the oldest party in Italy and participating in five governments. Through the formulation of some hypotheses, it will be shown that some assumptions, considered valid for populist and radical right-wing parties, are applicable to the Lega as well, while others are shown to be incorrect for the case of the Lega. The thesis concludes that to understand the Lega's fluctuating results, only one theory cannot be used, if a single theory is considered some of the results of the party are not fully explicable. The main findings of this thesis are that the identitarian theory is more appropriate to explain the electoral of the Lega; the Lega has shown to be able to govern and to increase its support during the time in government; the Italian political context and its electoral system are fundamental for Lega's success; the figure of the leader is central, but the Lega has shown the ability to survive following the original leader's retirement.

Keywords: Populism, radical right-wing parties, Lega (Nord), Italy

INTRODUCTION

After sitting for years in the Italian political back row, behind the omnipresent Berlusconi, the Lega finally conquered a seat in the first row, led by its leader Matteo Salvini. In the Italian national election of 2018, the Lega achieved the best electoral result of its history, establishing with the Movimento 5 Stelle (Five Stars Movement) a fully populist government. The history of the Lega has been characterized by fluctuating political fortunes, but the party has always managed to enter Parliament and joined a government coalition five times.

The purpose of this thesis is to understand the different phases of Lega history and its fluctuating electoral results based on the different debates and theories on populism and to illustrate which of them are better applicable to the Lega's case. The main focus will be whether the rise, temporary decline and renewed rise of the Lega can be explained through the analysis of the different theories of populism and it will be examined which of the theories is more appropriate for explaining the Lega's experience. It will be also interesting to find out whether the Lega presents some unique characteristics that differentiate the party from other populist parties.

The thesis will be divided in two main parts: the first will be mainly a literature review and a descriptive part, containing an overview of the Lega's history and of the debates and several thoughts on populism. The second part of the thesis will be more analytical; the focus will be on analyzing the Lega's case. Through a set of hypotheses, it will be examined which populist theory better explains the Lega's political results and which are the features and circumstances that make of the Lega a unique case, demonstrating that some of the assumption made on populist and radical right-wing parties, generally thought valid, are proven wrong by the Lega. Three hypothesis will be presented: the first wants to understand which, between the cultural and economic theory, is more appropriate to explain the Lega's success; the second hypothesis will analyze how the Lega took advantage from the Italian political situation and from the electoral system elaborated after the scandal of *Mani pulite*; and finally, the last hypothesis will show how the figure of the leader has been relevant of the history of the party.

1. THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

1.1. Definition of populism

During the past years, populist parties have been playing an increasingly central role in the elections, with some of them able to join governing coalitions. That is what happened in Austria, where the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ – Freedom Party of Austria) is part of the government with the Austrian People's Party, the first party in the last Austrian elections. In Greece, there has been the growth of Syriza since 2012, culminating in the victorious elections in 2015. In Italy, the Lega and the Movimento 5 Stelle established a government coalition formed exclusively by populist parties. Also, other populist parties achieved electoral success without getting to enter the government coalition: in the elections of 2016 in Spain Podemos turned out to be the third party in the Congress of Deputies; the Danish People's Party managed to reach the 16.7% during the period 2010-2015 (Doerschler e Jackson 2018). Even in those countries where populist parties did not manage to have many representatives, they still can exert pressure on the main parties, as happened with the UKIP influence over the political agenda in UK (Inglehart e Norris 2016).

An exact definition of the term populist remains slippery. Many attempts have been made to give an interpretation of the concept and to identify the parties and movements that can be categorized as populist (Inglehart e Norris 2016). To have a clearer idea it is helpful to refer to the definition given by Cas Mudde (2004, 543) that sees populism as an ideology which “considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups – the pure people versus the corrupt elite” (Mudde 2004), claiming also that politics should be the expression of the general will of the people (Kriesi e Pappas 2015). For Cas Mudde the populist ideology shares three core features: *anti-establishment*, *authoritarianism*, *nativism* (Mudde 2010). For Mudde populism is a “thin” ideology, originating from the vagueness and malleability of its core principles based on few political concepts (Mudde 2004). This thinness allows the populist to merge and mix with “thicker” ideologies, as conservatism or socialism (Kriesi e Pappas 2015). Tarchi (2003, 21) does not consider populism an ideology, but a mentality “related to the vision of social order, where at the base there is the innate belief in the virtue of the people, that is openly recalled as the primary source of legitimation of political action and government” (Tarchi 2003).

What seems a common element in the definitions of populism is the people, seen as pure, noble and honest that have to fight against the corrupted, dishonest and opportunistic political caste. When the populist representatives refer to the “good” and “pure” people, they are doing it with a nativist and xenophobic tone: the people are seen as a unitary and uniform whole in a state that excludes people coming from other countries and having other cultures (Inglehart e Norris 2016). Moreover, populist parties see the people as the unmediated source of power, underlining the importance of direct democracy. Thus, several of these parties share some common features such as the opposition to multiculturalism, with particular attention to the possible effects of Muslim immigration on European culture and values; from the economic point of view, they are critics of globalization, which is considered to be elite-driven and anti-democratic (Bartlett, Birdwell e McDonnell 2012).

In Europe, one of the main targets of populist criticism has been EU, with several of these parties identified as Eurosceptic. Furthermore, it can be added that populist parties use crisis – political, economic and cultural – as the fuel and source of their support (Jupskas 2015). With Europe hit by two massive crises – the Euro crisis and migrant crisis – it is not surprising that populist parties have flourished in recent time. Another definition considers populist a “party that champions short-term protection policies while hiding their long-term costs by using anti-elite rhetoric to manipulate beliefs” (Guiso, et al. 2017), indeed, populist politicians often promise myopic political programs that would appeal the electorate. These programs could have an immediate benefit for the population, but they could be detrimental in the future, e.g. lowering the age of retirement will allow more people to retire and to make jobs available; at the same time, it could cause an intergenerational inequality and a growth of the public debt due to the increasing share of inactive population.

It is commonly thought that due to their lack of experience and preparation they are not able to govern. It has been noticed that populist parties are usually unable to form a government of satisfactory quality, considering the tendency of populist parties to remove those figures that appear too independent or too relevant (Albertazzi & McDonnell 2005), beyond the leader of the party. For Reinhard Heinisch the central argument is that the populist features of the parties allow them to succeed in opposition and gain support during the election, but the same features are those that obstacle them in governing (Heinisch 2003). He identifies two reasons for their failure: first, they are partly de-institutionalized parties, oriented towards charismatic personalities that want to maintain the movement character (Van Kessel 2013); second, parties that normalize consequently become ordinary parties losing their *raison de être* and their electoral support (Heinisch 2003). The dilemma of populist party, once in government,

is the will of gaining visibility and influence but risking losing credibility and support by its hard-core supporters (Albertazzi & McDonnell 2005). This point is especially true for those populist parties that have an anti-establishment ideology at the core of their political propaganda for which the role in the opposition suits this attitude better. Populist parties are certainly against something – against globalization, EU, the elite, immigration – but it is difficult to identify what they are in favor of. Another reason for the failure is the unrealistic electoral program that hardly can be realized successfully

Even though, a general definition of populism can be delineated, harder times arrive in the description of populist parties due to the fact that it is not always easy to collocate the populist parties inside the traditional spectrum of left and right. It has to be considered that many populist parties declare themselves anti-establishment, pursuing their fight against the traditional political system and refusing the classification of the right-left spectrum. Under the name of populist, many parties and movements are gathered with different and even opposite ideological backgrounds and orientations (Gherghina e Soare 2013). However, numerous populist parties are identified as “radical right” or “the new right” (Bartlett, Birdwell e McDonnell 2012). Right wing-populist parties present themselves as the protectors of national heritage and native population (Doerschler e Jackson 2018).

For the explanation of the success of populism, the literature identifies two sides: the demand and the supply side (Guiso, et al. 2017). The demand side focuses on the fears and desires of the people, from whom the politicians try to get the votes; people facing economic difficulties are the highest tempted by the short-term protection and in a situation of crisis they will be the most probable in losing trust in the political system (Guiso, et al. 2017). The supply side focus on the opportunities that the politicians have to capitalize the grievances of the people (Guiso, et al. 2017), to whom they present as their “savior” against the elite.

1.2. The demand side

Regarding the demand side, used for the explanation of populist parties success, two streams are identifiable: one related to identitarian issues - through which populist leaders try to catch the voters’

favor using cultural values, for example claiming that foreign immigration, in particular Muslim ones, will damage the culture of the native people; the second stream is related to economic issues, such as inequality, unemployment, high taxation – usually regarding this issue the enemy are the corrupted elite, mostly politicians and the immigrants, guilty of stealing the jobs of the native people, but also a phenomenon such as globalization. Following the categories of Inglehart and Norris, the two theories of economic insecurity and cultural backlash will be presented, adding other vision on the theories in order to create a more complete theoretical review.

1.2.1. Economic insecurity

Inglehart and Norris claim that the most widely used theory to explain the support for populist parties is the *economic insecurity* perspective, this theory is related to the changes occurring in the society in post-industrial economies. According to this perspective, increasing economic insecurity and inequality has fed the resentment of people towards the political elites. This has caused that a portion of society, the most economically vulnerable one, has become attracted to the anti-establishment, xenophobic, nativism positions of the populist parties (Inglehart e Norris 2016).

Also other authors relate the success of populist parties to economic reasons. From the economic point of view, globalization is the biggest enemy of populists. Globalization creates economic insecurity and inequality among people within a country and among different countries, producing resentment against the elite and claiming protectionist policies to favor national economy (Rodrik 2017). This situation will produce “winners” and losers”, the latter will vote for the populist right parties (Mudde 2010), that are seen by the “losers” as the only one that fight for their interests against the “winners”. The Euro crisis is seen as one of the factors that sustained the growth of populist parties in the last decade. In this context, populist leaders arose to protect the powerless people, victims of the crisis, against the powerful and wealthy elite, at fault in the situation (Kriesi e Pappas 2015). Indeed, in several European countries the crisis, that was born as an economic one, evolved into a political crisis, contributing to the erosion of the existing party system (Kriesi e Pappas 2015).

Also immigration can be included in the economic theory, to the extent that it is seen as contributing to the economic insecurity perceived by the native population, in addition to creating new competition

in the labor market, the newcomers are the receivers of the state funds and they are perceived as the new priority of the government (Doerschler & Jackson 2018).

1.2.2. Identitarian theory

According to Inglehart and Norris, the *cultural backlash* thesis explains the support as a reaction of a portion of the population, once the predominant, to progressive value change (Inglehart e Norris 2016). Based on the *silent revolution* theory of value changes of Inglehart, it argues that the introduction of new values, such as cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism, provoked a counter-revolutionary backlash among the older generations, white men, less educated people, rejecting the new values and defending the traditional ones. This part of the population constitutes a pool of supporters for populist parties, these are the people that feel they are becoming stranger in their own country due to the rise of new values (Inglehart e Norris 2016). According to Inglehart's and Norris' studies, the cultural backlash thesis, combined with other social and demographic factors, represents the best theory to explain the popular support for populist parties.

Also Cas Mudde emphasizes the cultural aspect. He theorizes that nativism is a key element of the of right-wing populist parties, an identitarian ideology that claims that a state should be populated exclusively by native people and the others, the non-natives, are considered a threat for the integrity and homogeneity of the original population (Mudde 2010). Usually, this ideology leads to “anti-European” and “anti-Islamic” stance (Doerschler e Jackson 2018). People that identify themselves as native, members of the majority group, can negatively responds to multicultural policies, they have the feeling of giving up their values for making room to the culture and lifestyle of the newcomers, part of the minority (Doerschler e Jackson 2018). Rooduijn (2018), in his analysis of 15 European populist parties, shows that the immigration is a common and relevant element for the populist right-wing parties, explaining how people with an anti-immigration attitude tend to vote for right-wing populist parties (Rooduijn 2018). However, not all immigrants are considered the same by the populist propaganda. It is not the immigration *per se* that influences the choice of the voters but exclusively the one related to people from Muslim countries, the immigration from Western or EU countries becomes irrelevant in relation to the success of populism (Guiso, et al. 2017).

1.2.3. Concluding points on identitarian and economic theories

Inglehart and Norris consider the cultural backlash theory the more prominent in the explanation for the spread and success of populist parties (Inglehart e Norris 2016) than economic factors. For some scholars this stance has to be considered incorrect, indeed, Inglehart and Norris fail to analyze the effects of the shocks to economic insecurity on the voters' decision (Guiso, et al. 2017). However, the division between economic inequality and cultural backlash theories may be considered to some extent artificial (Inglehart e Norris 2016) and a clear division line cannot be marked. Some aspects of the economic perspective can influence the cultural backlash and vice versa. In some situation one aspect can be more prominent than another but not excludes it. If we consider the immigration phenomenon, it can be considered as aspect of both theories. From the economic point of view, immigrants are seen as jobs stealers and privileged receivers of state aids, making the native people more economically insecure. From the cultural point of view, immigrants, especially those coming from Muslim countries, are a threat for the European culture and values.

1.3. The supply side

The supply side focuses on the opportunities that the political context offers for a party to succeed (Muis e Immerzeel 2017). Indeed, in the supply side, we find the electoral system of a state, that is fundamental to determine whether a party will be successful and the political space available for a party to enter the political scene, and the figure of a charismatic leader, able to capture the attention of the media and of the constituency.

1.3.1. The electoral system and the political space

The electoral system is one of the factors that determine the success of populist parties and facilitate or obstacle their access to the political stage. The theory said that the proportional system favors populist parties – or new parties - meanwhile the majoritarian one makes more difficult the access to the Parliament for them. The case of the Netherlands and United Kingdom perfectly correspond to the

theory: the first, represent a case of pure proportional facilitating the entry to the Parliament for populist parties and, the latter, a pure case of majoritarian obstructing this entry.

The British populist party, the UKIP, has always performed quite well in the European elections (proportional system), however, it has never repeated the same performances at national level. The party has never managed to enter into the British parliament disadvantaged by the British electoral system, a classical example of a majoritarian FPTP system, that does not give the possibility for smaller parties to get inside the parliament, favoring a two parties system. The British system, purely majoritarian, is the most unfavorable for a new party for entering the Parliament (Muis e Immerzeel 2017). While in the Netherlands, the PVV (Party for Freedom) entered the Parliament for four times and it was part of the Dutch government in 2010. The PVV is favored by the Dutch purely proportional system, that allows more and smaller parties to enter the Parliament.

Within these pure electoral systems, Italy is hard to collocate: after 1993, the establishment of a majoritarian system, mixed with proportional elements, actually favored populist parties to enter the Parliament. With the electoral law of 1993, the *Mattarellum*, small parties could enter the Parliament thanks to the quarter of the spots of the lower Chamber assigned through proportional system, and to remain relevant, in the formation of coalition, thanks to the vote in the uninominal list in which the voters can choose their favorite party (D'Alimonte e Chiaramonte 1993). All the electoral laws established in Italy from 1993 onwards were created with the intent to favor political alliances and alternation to avoid the dominion of one party. The intent was to avoid what happened with the proportional system during the First Republic, the supremacy of the political scene by one party, the Christian Democracy.

The entry space refers to the available space in the political scene (Guiso, et al. 2017). The more is the space the easier is for a party to enter the political scene and to reach success. The Italian political scene at beginning of the 90s is an emblematic example of it. Between 1991 and 1994, the three main parties that have dominated the political scene since the end of WWII – the Italian Communist Party, the Christian Democracy and the Italian Socialist Party – have all disappeared, leaving an enormous space for new party to emerge and succeed.

1.3.2. Charismatic leader

The figure of a charismatic leader is a central factor for the electoral success of populist parties, especially right-wing parties, with the consequence for the party to have a weak internal party structure (Van der Brug e Mughan 2007). The decisions of this kind of parties are highly influenced, if not totally taken, by the leader that shapes the party based on his ideology. Populist leaders are able to create a strong relationship between the leaders and the supporters, often considered the only one able to lead the fight against the elite. This structure makes the populist parties fragile, especially in the case of the change of the leadership or retirement of the leader. Indeed, it is commonly thought that the parties with a strong personalist leadership and weak organization are unlikely to remain in power after the leader's succession (Vercesi 2015), the theoretical literature claims that it is hard for a party to survive following the change in its leadership or, at least, it will decrease its relevance (Vercesi 2015), making the destiny of the leader and of the party intrinsically tied.

1.4. Concluding points

In the last decades, the populism has found a fertile soil in Europe. Despite of the spread of this kind of party a univocal definition on the term is and its characteristic is hard to elaborate. However, some common elements can be identified such as their vision of the people, considered intrinsically pure and their fight against the corrupted elite. Starting from that, it is possible to distinguish the demand and the supply side related to populism. On one side, there is what people request related to identitarian and economic issues that will be used by the parties to catch the favor of the people; on the other side, the opportunities that the political scene offers to the political parties. Following these theoretical elements, it is possible to have a clearer idea on how populist party can arrive to electoral success.

2. THE LEGA'S CASE

2.1. The Lega and the Italian populist scene

The Italian political scene is considered by many scholars a fertile ground for populist parties. If the Berlusconi's governments between 2001 and 2014 are categorized under the populist family (Bobba e Legnante 2018), Italy has a long experience of populist governments, culminating with the one of 2018, constituted by two parties clearly identifiable as populist parties. Moreover, the populist scenario of Italy is more peculiar and complex than in the other Western countries. First, populist parties in Italy have been in part functional for the Italian democratic process – they helped in the disintegration of the First Republic and in the creation of the party system of the Second Republic (Verbeek e Zaslove 2015); second, populist parties have emerged as reaction to other populist parties – the Movimento 5 Stelle appeared to challenge parties, such as those of Berlusconi, also considered populist parties. Finally, anti-populist parties have to challenge an enemy with many different faces and ideologies, that have in common the goal of rejecting the traditional political system (Verbeek e Zaslove 2015). In Italy the demand for populism was met by a wide supply of populist parties (Verbeek e Zaslove 2015) of various nature - from the far-right party, the Lega, with xenophobic, anti-establishment, secessionist themes in their political agenda; to the more moderate pro-market right-wing parties of Berlusconi (Forza Italia, Casa delle Libertà, Popolo della Libertà); finally arriving at the M5S, the Italian populist party most difficult to situate in the left-right political spectrum, with elements of their political agenda coming from both left and right but fundamentally anti-establishment (Corbetta e Vignati 2013). Furthermore, Italy is one of the few Western European countries which has had majority governments with populist radical right participation (Mudde 2013).

The Lega Nord (Northern League) appeared on the Italian political scene at the end of the 80s, making the Lega the oldest party currently in the Italian Parliament. Being founded initially as a coalition, in 1991 the Lega officially turned into a party, after the merger of different regional “leagues” spread across Northern Italy under the leadership of Umberto Bossi, the founder of the biggest of these leagues the Lega Lombarda (Albertazzi, McDonnell & Newell 2011). The official name of the party is Lega Nord per l'indipendenza della Padania (Northern League for the independence of Padania) – and it still remain unchanged despite of the change of political turn made by the Lega – shows the

initial and main intention of the party: the independence, or at least autonomy, of Padania from the rest of the Peninsula. The party was presented as the protector and only savior of the people of the North, whose wealth and earnings were stolen from the corrupted political caste in Rome and by the Southern Italian people (Albertazzi, McDonnell & Newell 2011). Between the 1989 and 1992, the Lega grew its electoral relevance achieving good results in the 1989 European elections, with 6.4 %, and in 1992 national election reaching 8.7%. In 1994, after gaining 8.4% at the national elections, the Lega had the first government experience that turned out to be a failure, with the party leaving the center-right government alliance (Ruzza 2004), putting in place, after seven months in office, the “*ribaltone*” (the big overturn), toppling the first Berlusconi’s government. After this experience, in the 1996 electoral campaign, the Lega adopted the strategy of running alone, without any coalition, achieving its best electoral results with 10.1% of the votes. The center-left won the elections and the Lega remained politically isolated and returned in some ways to its initial character of protest movement (Ruzza 2004). Despite the disappointing results of 2001 elections, the Lega joined the right-wing coalition government, recognizing that isolation was not a viable and fruitful political strategy (Ruzza 2004). From its second period in government (2001-2005), the two main pillars of the Lega political program were northern autonomy and restriction of immigration from outside the EU (Albertazzi, McDonnell & Newell 2011). In 2008, the Lega entered again into a government coalition with Berlusconi, lasting until November 2011. The government resignation was provoked by the financial crisis that hit Italy in the summer of 2011 (Bartlett, Birdwell, & McDonnell 2012). The Berlusconi Cabinet was replaced by the technocratic Monti Cabinet, provoking a fracture in Berlusconi’s party, favorable to the new government, and the Lega, which was the fiercest opponent of the technocratic government (Bartlett, Birdwell, & McDonnell 2012). In the 2013, the Lega returned to the unsatisfying electoral results pre-2008 government. Finally, in the last election of 2018, the party has managed to achieve the best electoral results in its history.

The Lega’s results are characterized by fluctuation throughout its history (Figure 1). The party has traditionally received a constant proportion of votes - around the 4% - of “frozen” ideological votes (Vercesi 2015). In other words, the vote of those people that continue to vote for the Lega even when the party changes its political agenda or accomplished not so fruitful actions, more for a sense of belonging rather than based on opinions. The positive fluctuation above that threshold are related to different factors (Vercesi 2015).

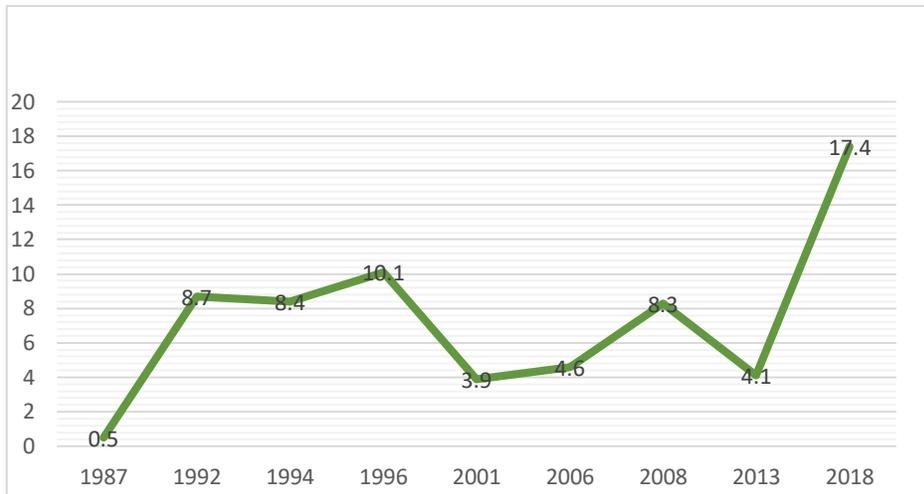


Figure 1. Lega's electoral results in the national elections (%)

Source: data of the Ministry of the Interior *In 1987 the Lega was still Lega Lombarda

Apart from the success of the Lega's ideology, other factors have to be considered in the analysis of the success of the Lega. Tarchi describes the Lega as a populist party based on protest and identification, and he identifies different factors for the rise of the party:

1. historical reasons, the historical changes occurred in the 90s in Italy, the declining attractiveness of the two parties that had dominated the Italian political since the end of WWII, the Christian Democratic and the Communist party, that allowed the creation of a new party system and a wide political space;
2. economic changes, the end of the "golden age" of the 80s that consequently increased the number of immigrant people coming from poorest countries and the feeling of economic insecurity;
3. the wide spread corruption of Italian politics, thought a characteristic of the First Republic (Tarchi 2003).

To these elements, a fourth one can be added, namely the figure of the leader, that has played a fundamental role in the rise and development of the Lega. These factors have been the fuel for the Italian populist parties in the last two decades.

2.2. Hypotheses

Based on these theories and debates, it is possible to formulate hypotheses on the fluctuating electoral fortune of the Lega in order to test whether these theories can be proven valid or not. The hypotheses will be tested through the analysis of previous literature on the Lega, the analysis of the data, the electoral results and polls of voting intentions. The data, such as those related to unemployment and immigration, will be useful to understand the relevance of a certain topic in the Lega's rhetoric. Furthermore, the electoral results and the polls of voting intentions will give a concrete view of the Lega's support. It has been also analyzed how the Italian electoral system in general and the single electoral laws have influenced the electoral results of the Lega.

H1. The native and cultural backlash theory has more influence than the economic inequality theory on the political success of Lega.

H2. The Lega achieved political success and visibility thanks to the Italian electoral system established after the Mani pulite scandal.

H3. The electoral fortune of the Lega heavily relies on the figure of the leader.

2.3. Theories of populism on the Lega's political success

H1. The native and cultural backlash theory has more influence than the economic inequality theory on the political success of Lega.

Different phases are recognizable in the Lega history in which the party changes the strength and relevance of its strategy and ideology, achieving time after time different electoral results. The ideology and main political statements of the Lega remains more or less identical through its political life, partially mutating some of the them when the party decided to expand its electorate to all Italian Peninsula. This is the reason why for this analysis will be useful to divide the Lega history in different phase.

2.3.1. Early days: supremacy of economic stance (1989-1994)

In the first phase of its political life, the success of the Lega – still limited to the Northern Italian regions, in particular the North-East – is fundamentally economic driven with the economic grievance felt the most relevant and urgent. In that period, the people in the North were afraid that the years of the economic boom of the 80s were coming to an end (Giordano 2000). In its first national electoral campaigns of the early 90s (1992 and 1994), the reason for the success of Lega has to be found in its pro-market position. This is due to the composition of the Lega's constituency composed of the small, medium-sized business, artisans and independent farmer (Verbeek e Zaslove 2015, Biorcio 1999). Indeed, the success of the elections was determined by the congruence between the needs of the electorates, small and medium entrepreneurs and businessmen of the Northern regions, and the will of the party to start economic policies in order to favor the economy of the North.

However, the economic claims that the Lega used for its political propaganda are not the same of those outlined in the theoretical sections and usually attributed to populist parties. A populist party attracts and wants to protect those people that have been left out from the globalization and the economic insecurity that comes from it, so people that are usually unemployed or that have a difficult economic situation. The voters of the Lega are not those people, even though part of the working-class (Beirich e Woods 2000), they are part of the wealthiest area of Italy where unemployment cannot be considered a problem. Their will is to protect their wealth and prosperity from the poorer regions of Italy, to reorganize distribution of the wealth in a way that will increase inequality between the Northern and the Southern part of the country. The different economic situation between North and South is clearly evident from the data of unemployment rate (1993-2018) with the unemployment rate of the South double of the Northern one and it is evident that Northern people are not the losers of the globalization, with the unemployment always remaining below the EU average (Figure 2).

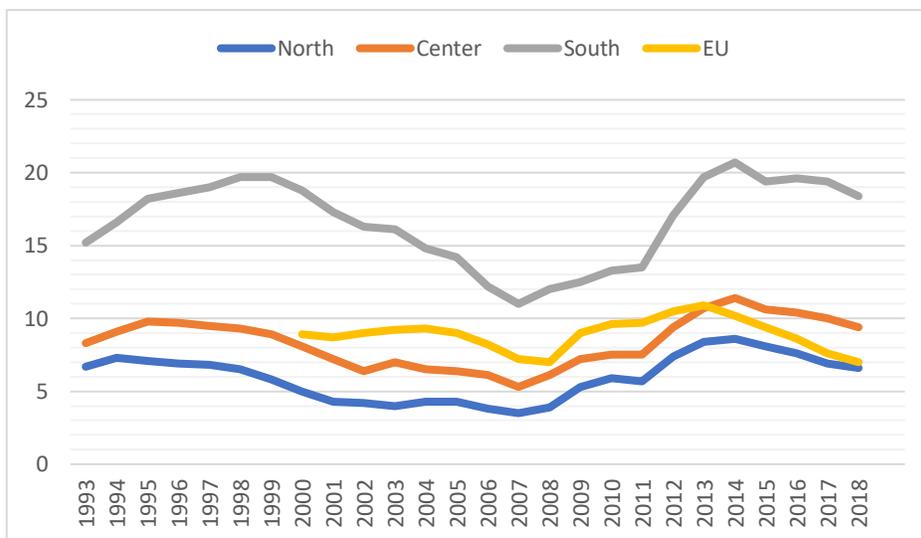


Figure 2. Italy and EU unemployment rate

Source: data from Istat (Italy); Eurostat (EU) * Istat divides Italy in North (Liguria, Lombardy, Piedmont, Valle d’Aosta, Emilia-Romagna, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Trentino-Alto Adige, Veneto), Center (Lazio, Marche, Tuscany, Umbria), South (Abruzzo, Basilicata, Calabria, Campania, Molise, Puglia, Sardinia, Sicily)

In this period, the Lega could not rely on identitarian themes simply because there was no Northern identity. The Lega created an awareness for the Northern identity and the party can be considered the founder and developer of this identity. The so reclaimed “*Padania*” is a product a political identity-building process (Brunazzo e Roux, *The Lega Nord: From Regional Protest to National Government* 2013). The Lega wanted to construct a Northern identity related to the Padania region to dignify and legitimize the economic claims (Giordano 2000, Ruzza 2004). The Lega was supporting the idea of a state-drive and unequal redistribution of geographical resources between the Northern and Southern regions (Ruzza 2004), increasing the feeling that the wealth and earnings of the Northern people are being robbed by the central power, defined by them as *Roma Ladrona* (thief Rome) and by the lazy Southern people. In the creation of a new Northern identity, the Lega was also helped by the lack of a unified Italian identity. Bossi considered the Italian identity not a natural product of the unification process started during the *Risorgimento*, but as invention based on socio-economic interests (Spektorowski 2003).

Moreover, its anti-immigrant policy were less emphasized and evident in this early phase (Verbeek e Zaslove 2015). Even though migration phenomenon towards Italy started at the end of the 80s (Reyneri 1998), it could not be considered so relevant to build an electoral campaign on this issue.

Figure 3 can give us an idea of the immigration phenomenon of those years. It shows how the number of the asylum seekers coming to Italy was low at the beginning of the 90s and the majority of them were European. The anomalous numbers of 1991 are related to the episode of the Vlora, a cargo ship loaded with around twenty thousand people from Albania that landed on the coast of the city of Bari on the 8th of August 1991.

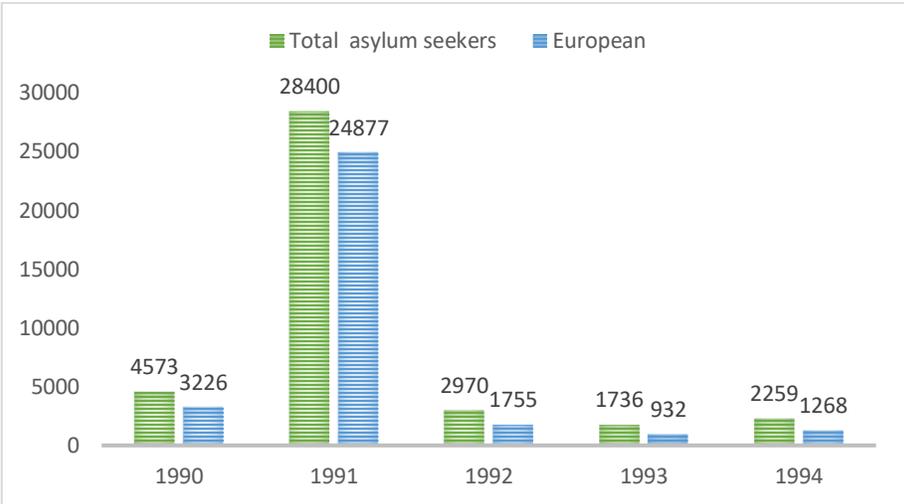


Figure 3. Asylum seekers arriving in Italy (1990-1994)
Source: data from the Ministry of the Interior

2.3.2. Electoral success (1995-1996)

After the fall of the coalition government in December 1994, the Lega changed its strategy for the next electoral campaign and to put more emphasis on the identitarian ideology. Relying on the economic stances for the protection of the North was not viable and electorally profitable, this happened consequently to the entry of Berlusconi on the political scene. The values of the Lega of entrepreneurship, efficiency and free market, wide spread in Northern Italy (Morlino 1996), were also shared by Berlusconi party - *Forza Italia*, the strongest and largest right-wing party in that moment. The Lega took the decision to emphasize its Padania identity, increasingly turning into a nativist and anti-immigration party (Verbeek e Zaslove 2015). Moreover, for the elections of 1996 the Lega changed its traditional constituency, formed by small and medium entrepreneurs, collecting new voters among the workers of the North, particularly worried about taxation, immigration and inefficiency of the central government, becoming in this way the biggest working-class party in Italy

(Beirich e Woods 2000). The strategy of the successful 1996 election was basically running alone separated from other parties, highlighting the secessionist claims for an independent North, critics towards other parties and leaders, presenting element of populist parties such as nativism and anti-establishment statements (Albertazzi, McDonnell & Newell 2011). This strategy was adopted as a consequence of the previous government experience when the party decided to put in place the *ribaltone* (the big overturn). The so-called *ribaltone* refers to the decision of the Lega to topple the Berlusconi's government, due to a *lex ad personam* wanted by Berlusconi, the Lega started to consider him unsustainable and the alliance with him against the principle of honesty of the Lega, theme used by the party to draw a line between them and the parties of the First Republic involved in the *Mani Pulite* scandal. Indeed, the party decided to renounce power in order to maintain its ideology related to honesty. The 1996 turned out to be the best electoral result so far with the 10.1% of the votes gained, but this time remaining outside the government due to the victory of center-left.

2.3.3. Electoral decline (1996-2006)

Following the elections of 1996, the Lega maintained its themes and strategies becoming gradually more radical regarding its identitarian claims (Ruzza 2004), shifting from the demand for the Northern autonomy and federalism to claims for separatism, culminating with the symbolic declaration of independence of Padania in 1996 (Giordano 2000). The radicalization had terrible consequence on the electoral results. It is generally thought that when the ideology of a party becomes too radical, the party runs the risk of losing credibility (Van Kessel 2013), and this is what actually happened to the Lega. In 2001 the Lega faced its lowest point in popularity in its history gaining 3.9% in the national elections. This strategy gave the Lega the opportunity to maintain its traditional consistency, the already mentioned "frozen" electorate, but not the support it acquired in the mid-90s (Ruzza 2004). Therefore, on one hand, the emphasis on the identitarian element allowed the Lega to achieve good results in the elections of 1996, on the other, the radicalization of this aspect had detrimental results in 2001. The radicalization strategy and the desire of creating an independent Padania attracted the attention of the media – usually for its folkloristic manifestations - but not of the voters, decreasing its electoral appeal (Albertazzi & McDonnell 2005).

Also the campaign against non-EU immigration has proven to be not so successful. The Lega was opposing immigration on the belief that it is a threat to the culture and security of the Northern Italian

people, but at the same time industrialist of the Northern-East were claiming for larger visa quotas and more immigrant labor (Albertazzi & McDonnell 2005). Thus, in that moment the stances of the Lega and of its territorial constituency base were not coinciding, with the inevitable consequence of the Lega losing votes and support, with the Lega still refusing to recognize that immigration was economically necessary, especially for the Northern regions (Albertazzi & McDonnell 2005). In this case, the demand of the Northern voters did not face the support and favor of the party, that seemed at that moment more interested in its anti-immigrant propaganda than in the needs of Northern entrepreneurs. These factors caused the failing results of 2001 elections. The table shows as the decline of the votes in the national elections of 2001 was homogenous in all the districts where the Lega presented the electoral list, losing more than half of the votes, compared to the election of 1996, also in regional strongholds as Lombardy and Veneto (Table 1). The same decline occurred in the regional elections of 2000, losing voters in every region (Table 2).

Region	1994	1996	2001	2006
National	8.4	10.1	3.9	4.6
Piedmont 1	11.8	13.8	4.2	4.3
Piedmont 2	19	22	7.8	8.5
Lombardy 1	17.4	16.8	7.5	7.7
Lombardy 2	28.2	35.8	17.9	16.1
Lombardy 3	22.6	21.1	8.6	9.8
Veneto 1	20.8	26.9	9.7	11.6
Veneto 2	22.8	32.8	11.1	10.4
Liguria	11.4	10.2	3.9	3.7
Trentino-Alto Adige	7.5	13.2	3.7	4.5
Friuli Venezia Giulia	16.9	23.2	8.2	7.2
Emilia-Romagna	6.4	7.2	2.6	3.9
Tuscany	2.1	1.8	1	1.1

Table 1. Lega's results in national election (1994-2006) divided per electoral districts of Northern Italy (%)

Source: data from the Ministry of the Interior *the yellow slots indicate an opposing tendency of votes compared to the national one

Region	1995	2000
Piedmont	9.9	7.5
Lombardy	17.7	15.4
Veneto	16.7	12
Liguria	6.5	4.3
Emilia Romagna	3.4	3.3

Table 2. Lega's results in regional elections (1995-2000) (%)
Source: Data of the Ministry of the Interior

The Lega, even though having gathered less votes - 3.9% versus the 8.4% of 1994 – was able to cover a more relevant political role in its second period in the government thanks to the privileged relationship between Bossi and Berlusconi (Albertazzi & McDonnell 2005) and obtaining strategically important ministries.

The electoral results of the next election of 2006 grew a little bit but not significantly, but this time the center-left coalition would form the government. However, the votes continued growing also in the 2008 elections. During this period the Lega did not make any relevant change to its political agenda, the most significant explanation for the increase of the votes of the Lega can be identify in the visibility that the Lega gained during the time in government.

2.3.4. The Euro crisis (2008-2012)

In 2010, Italy had to face the deepest and longest recession in its history in the context of the Euro crisis (Guiso, et al. 2017). At the beginning of the crisis, Lega was in the government coalition with Berlusconi. In the next elections of 2013, the Lega was not able to use the crisis theme in its favor recording one of its lowest electoral results. Although people were feeling frustrated towards the political elite and losing faith in the political parties, the Lega was losing support, while the new kid on the block, the Movimento 5 Stelle, became the largest party in Italy (Guiso, et al. 2017). Moreover, in the electoral program of 2013, the crisis is not mentioned, a part dedicated to the EU and a possible reform of it is present but not much is said (Electoral Program 2013).

Another explanation for the missed capitalization of the economic crisis could be the attitude of the Lega towards the European Union. Although, the party is known to be Eurosceptic, it had an ambiguous and variable relationship with EU and European integration (Bartlett, Birdwell, & McDonnell 2012). The attitude towards Europe changed during the years: while claiming the independence for the North, Lega was thinking of being excluded from European integration and prosperity because of the corrupted central power of Rome and the underdeveloped South. Moreover, the party was thinking that a more integrated Europe could give the possibility for greater regional expression at supranational level (Bartlett, Birdwell, & McDonnell 2012). The Lega was afraid that Italy would be excluded from the common currency and consequently that Northern Italy would be excluded by the European economic development and integration (Brunazzo & Gilbert 2017). The change of the attitude towards EU occurred in 1999 when Italy successfully joined the European Monetary Union (EMU) (Albertazzi, McDonnell & Newell 2011) and EU refused to recognize Padania as an independent nation (Brunazzo & Gilbert 2017). During the period in government, between the 2001 and 2006, the Lega was critical towards the EU especially on two points: first, lack of reliability; second, the negative impact of the introduction of the Euro was claiming to have on the economy of the North and its export (Albertazzi, McDonnell & Newell 2011). Furthermore, the EU is accused of promoting globalization and not doing enough to prevent the arrival of immigrants that threaten the common Christian roots of European people (Bartlett, Birdwell, & McDonnell 2012). However, at the beginning of the European Great Recession of 2008, the Lega did not believe the EU responsible for the event, the economic crisis was seen as an international and global crisis (Pirro & Kessel 2018).

2.3.5. From regionalism to nationalism (2013-...)

A turn in the position towards EU occurred when Matteo Salvini became the secretary of the party. The view toward EU changed: the Union lost reliability, a reform of the treaties was necessary, bring back people at the center of the European project. Furthermore, the Lega was claiming that the economic and financial crisis was due to the Italian membership to the Monetary Union, therefore, the party was supporting the necessity to regain national primacy regarding monetary and fiscal matters, everything summarized in the slogan: “Out of the Euro. Now!” (Pirro & Kessel 2018).

Despite the disappointing results of 2013 election, the votes of the party started to grow again and in 2014 the Lega managed to reach positive results both in the local elections, gaining 17.8% in Veneto and 20.2% in Liguria, and European elections (6.2%) (Vercesi 2015). The economic element becomes relevant again but this time the battle is not anymore Northern Italy vs. Southern Italy but Italy vs. EU. The Lega switched from regionalism to nationalism identifying some common enemy such as the EU, the immigrants and the political caste; this shift from regionalism to nationalism is considered a unique case among the Western parties (Albertazzi, Giovannini & Seddone 2018). If once the enemy was Rome defined “*ladrona*” (thief), guilty of stealing the wealth from the productive Northern-Eastern Italy, now it is EU and Brussel that disadvantage the Italian economy and growth; if in the past, the problem was represented by the lazy Southern people that needed the economic support of the North to survive, after the change of the political orientation, the immigrants are the threat that come here to steal the jobs of the Italian people (Madron e Franzi 2015), in the Lega’s narrative Muslims and Islam are identified as a threat to European culture, values and integrity (Bartlett, Birdwell e McDonnell 2012). Right before the general election of 2018, Salvini decided officially that the Lega is no more a regional party but a national one through the changing of the logo: from which the words “Nord” and “Padania” disappear, and they are replaced by the name of the leader Salvini, personalizing the party and the electoral campaign (Il Giornale 2017). However, the official name of the party remains Lega Nord for the Independence of Padania. When the Lega decided to expand at national level it became politically unsustainable to exclude part of the population, the Southern one, highly dissatisfied and in more need of a political change. This time, Salvini realized that the North separatism and independentism claims could not let the Lega develop and he has been able to capitalize the migrant crisis that Europe has been facing since 2015. Lega already in 2013 was denouncing a boom of immigration, calling for more collaboration among the European countries, although independently from Brussels (Pirro & Kessel 2018). However, later Lega will accuse the EU not to be involved enough in the immigrant issue, claiming for a revision of the Dublin Regulation (Pirro & Kessel 2018). In 2015, with the escalation of terrorist attack the immigrant crisis gained new relevance, thus the Lega connected the immigrant crisis with security and cultural revendication (Pirro & Kessel 2018). The growing relevance of the immigration topic is evident comparing the electoral program of 2013 and 2018. In the latter, immigration became one of the main points of the Lega’s agenda with particular attention to Muslim immigration and closed harbors policy, meanwhile in the program of 2013 a small part of the section was dedicated to safety (Lega 2013; Lega 2018).

The evolution of Lega's policies has been certainly effective. The current political position and claims cannot be considered moderate and it is still identifiable as a far-right party, but now it is able to catch voters in every corner of Italy (Table 3). The Lega improved its electoral results in every region in the South and Center of Italy – with the exception of one of the districts in Sicily, where the Lega achieved a better result in 2006.

Region	2006	2008	2018
Umbria	0.8	0.6	20.2
Marche	1	0.7	17.3
Lazio 1	0.2	0.1	11.6
Lazio 2	0.3	0.3	16.4
Abruzzo	0.5	0.2	13
Molise	0.2	0.2	16.1
Campania 1	0.1	0.2	2.9
Campania 2	0.2	0.4	5.8
Apulia	0.7	0.07	6.2
Basilicata	0.9	0.1	6.3
Calabria	0.8	0.2	5.6
Sicily 1	2.1	0.2	5.2
Sicily 2	6.5	0.2	5
Sardinia	0.4	0.1	10.8

Table 3. Lega's results in national election (2006-2018) divided per electoral districts of Southern Italy (%)

Source: data from the Ministry of the Interior

However still the Lega remains predominantly a Northern party. It is also interesting to analyze the socio-economic conditions of the possible Lega's voters. It is possible to have an idea of this through the comparison of the votes per regions and factors, such as the unemployment rate, the GDP and the school drop-out (in order to have an idea of the level of education). What emerges from the analysis is that in the three regions where the Lega got the highest number of votes are also among those that have the lowest unemployment rate and highest level of education and income; moreover, the regions where the Lega got less votes are those with the highest level of unemployment and lowest education and income. This contradicts the theory according to which the people that tend to vote for populist parties are usually people with low income, low level of education and unemployed. However, it is

necessary to remember that in the Italian regions with worst socio-economic situation, the votes of the people went to the other populist party, the M5S (Table 4). In this election, the Lega's constituency was formed by almost the 50% of small businessmen, artisans and workers, the traditional constituency (Ipsos 2018). Comparing the intention of vote of the 90s and the vote of the last elections if 2018 based on social sectors division, it is possible to see that the main difference is between the voters of 1998 and 2018 (Table 5).

Region	Lega's vote (%)	Unemployment	GDP pro capita	School drop-out
Valle d'Aosta	17.7	8.3	35200	X
Piedmont	23	8.2	30300	0.8
Lombardy	27.8	6.1	38200	0.7
Liguria	21	9.8	31900	0.9
Trentino Alto-Adige	19.2	3.8	39200	X
Veneto	32.1	7.4	33100	0.6
Friuli Venezia Giulia	26.7	7.9	31000	0.7
Emilia-Romagna	20.5	6.3	35300	0.5
Tuscany	17.4	7.8	30500	0.7
Umbria	20.4	9.1	24300	0.7
Marche	17.4	8.3	26600	0.5
Lazio	16.4	11.3	32900	1
Abruzzo	17.1	9.2	24400	0.7
Molise	9.7	12.3	19500	0.6
Campania	3.8	20.3	18200	1
Puglia	6.7	15.8	18000	0.7
Basilicata	7.5	12.9	20800	0.6
Calabria	6.1	22.3	17100	1
Sicily	5.5	21.7	17400	1.3
Sardinia	10.9	16.9	20300	0.9
Italy	17.4	10.5	28500	0.8

Table 4. Comparison of Lega's votes (%) (2018) and socio-economic factors
Source: data from the Ministry of the Interior (votes), Istat (unemployment 2018, GDP 2017), MIUR (school drop-out 2017)

Social sector	1991	1994	1996	1998	2018
Upper class	14	15.8	12.4	16.8	12.9

Businessmen, artisans	24	26.5	23.9	31.3	23.6
Employees, teachers	13.3	16	18.8	21.7	14.5
Workers	16.6	21.4	31.2	38.5	23.8
Unemployed	21.4	17	21	12.5	18.2
Students	14.6	16	18.2	16.6	15
Housewives	10.7	14.2	21.6	16.1	19.8
Pensioners	10.7	15.1	13.8	14.4	14.6

Table 5. Intention of vote for the Lega (%) (1991-1998), votes for the Lega (%) (2018)
Source: data from Eurisko (1991); Abacus (1994, 1996, 1998); Ipsos (2018)

While in the other elections the voters seem more homogenously spread in the different social sectors, with the businessmen and workers always remaining the main sources of the constituency base, in 1998 these two sectors were heavily predominant compared to the others and the number of the unemployed people heavily decreased. Furthermore, someone may expect that with its Southern turn of the Lega there will be a change in the constituency, the data shows that the situation is quite complicated. If the intention of vote of businessmen and workers in 2018 decreased in comparison to those of 1998 and for the workers of 1996, they remain more or less the same to those of the intention of vote of 1991 and 1994. Moreover, the opening to South might suggest an increase of the votes from the unemployed people, due to the high unemployment rate of Southern Italy, but that is not what data shows. The percentage of the unemployed people voting for the Lega decrease compared to 1991 and 1996.

2.3.6. Concluding points

The division in different periods is useful to understand how the identarian and economic theories are both helpful for the explanation of the success or decline of the Lega, with different weight and relevance over time, depending also on the Italian situation. In the initial moment the Lega was more concentrated on economic topics, however they are not the usual one of the populist parties. Thus, if the Lega's voter were appealed by the party policies, the success of those policies cannot be ascribed to the economic insecurity theory. From 1996 onwards, the cultural backlash and nativism comes in handier to understand the fluctuation of the electoral results of the Lega, with its lowest point in the moment of radicalization and its highest coinciding with the decision of the party to switch from regionalism to nationalism. In the middle of these two phases, the Euro crisis is located, with the Lega

again putting more emphasis on the economic aspects that in a first moment did not produce a real benefit for the party but with the arrival of Salvini gained new relevance.

It has to be highlighted that one of the theories prevails on the other, the other does not disappear but becomes less predominant. In the last electoral campaign, the Lega was obviously mentioning economic claims, such as the reform of the pension system, the adoption of the flat tax; however, the determining element for its fruitful election, the engine towards the formation of the government coalition has to be found the Lega's anti-immigrant stance, this so show also by the coverage that the argument had on the social media, in particular the one of Salvini (Ipsos 2018). The determining relevance of anti-immigration theme can be understood through the analysis of polls regarding the "closed harbor" policy. 63% of Italian citizens agree with the policy, more impressive is that 94% of Lega's voters are supportive of it (SWG 2018).

It is also interesting to see how the same issue of immigration, not just changes its relevance over time, but was perceived in a different way by the Lega electorate and the party. At first, in a period like the beginning of the 90s, when the immigration phenomenon was not urgent in Italy and by some Northern entrepreneurs considered an economic necessity, the Lega, that was mentioning it as something detrimental for Northern Italian identity and values, was not able to use this topic as the driver of its electoral campaign. From 2014 onwards, when the migration crisis escalated, the anti-immigration propaganda can be optimally used by the Lega.

While it is possible to explain the electoral success of the Lega considering the demand side, choosing the best strategy and the most relevant topic in a specific moment, the same cannot be said analyzing the elections with disappointing results. Except for the moment of radicalization, that consequently brought a reduction of the votes, it seems that the decrease of the success of the Lega has been caused by other factors, not related to the theories previously analyzed and, thus, not attributable to the change of relevance of identitarian or economic claims. Two seem the reasons that can explain the decrease in the support of the Lega: first, the corruption scandal that involved the previous leader of the Lega, Bossi; second, the presence of a competitor, in the 90s Berlusconi that was the one at "stealing" voters to the Lega with his policies on economic aspects similar to those of the Lega, in the 2000s, the arrival of the M5S, the newest populist party, made Lega lose votes. The new party, similar to the Lega for its populist attitude especially against the corrupted establishment, has been able to catch votes in every Italian region, unlike the Lega. According to the analysis of Tronconi, the M5S, in the election

of 2013, gained many votes at the expense of the Lega, especially in city such as Milan and Brescia (Tronconi 2013).

2.4. The Lega and the Italian electoral system

H2. Lega achieved political success and visibility thanks to the Italian electoral system established after the *Mani pulite* scandal.

The political success that the Lega met at the beginning of the 90s was favored by a rapidly changing Italian political context (Ruzza 2004), the political scandal of *Mani pulite* (Clean Hands) that disintegrated the Italian political system established after World War II. On the one hand, Lega had more room for gaining voters, on the other hand the political scandal undermines the public's faith in their politician (Ivarsflaten 2008). This vote, given to a right-wing populist parties, not always means an agreement with the party's policies, but it can express the disagreement towards the traditional politics, creator of the scandals (Ivarsflaten 2008), indeed producing a protest vote. However, even if the political scandal cannot be considered the actual reason of the rise of the Lega in the 90s, it can be seen as the opportunity for them to emerge, this allowed the party to join its first coalition government in 1994 with Forza Italia, the party of Berlusconi, lasted less than one year. In the context of *Mani pulite*, the Lega had the possibility to play another card: the moralization of politics, presenting itself as the party of the honest people against the corrupted political class, characteristic of the First Republic (Verbeek e Zaslove 2015) (Beirich e Woods 2000). The Lega supported anti-corruption actions and seemed clean and not corrupted party (Verbeek e Zaslove 2015), fighting against the central power (Beirich e Woods 2000). Moreover, the end of the First Republic increased the distance between the parties and the voters and produced a fertile ground for the birth of populist parties (Verbeek e Zaslove 2015), creating a wider entrance space for the new emerging parties. The changes in the Italian political started before the case of *Mani Pulite*, already in the mid-80s local lists were flourishing in the elections – with still limited appeal and relevance – as a consequence of discontent and dissatisfaction (Morlino 1996), among them the Lega Nord.

In these years many changes have occurred: disappearance of almost all existing parties and creation of new ones, establishment of new electoral systems at all level of government, the imposition of electoral bipolarism on what remained a multiparty system (Albertazzi, McDonnell & Newell 2011).

These changes created a situation in which a broad center-right or center-left coalition was necessary to win the elections: Italy moved from a party system characterized by the *conventio ad excludendum* (agreement to exclude), present during the First Republic, with that system, parties such as the Communist party and extremist parties were kept out from the formation of the government, to a *coercitio ad includendum* (coercion to include) of the Second Republic, through which all parties could potentially establish a coalition and gained governmental relevance (Albertazzi, McDonnell & Newell 2011). This brought the consequence that also the extremist, radical and anti-system parties could participate in government.

It is necessary to remember that in Italy is not possible to talk about a fixed electoral system. Since 1993 the Italian electoral system has adopted four different electoral laws (Chiaramonte e D’Alimonte 2018) that have been created by the coalition in power to create an advantage on the other parties for the following election. Indeed, we find the *Mattarellum*, the *Porcellum*, the *Italicum* and the current *Rosatellum bis* (Table 6). None of them is pure majoritarian or proportional, they are basically mixed system with changing degrees of majoritarian and proportional. Thus, it cannot be said that the Lega has always the same chance during this period, but it changes consequently to the electoral law in force.

	Functioning	Period	Lega’s results
Electoral law of 1946	Pure proportional: - lower Chamber: seats assigned on national base; - Senate: seats assigned on regional base; - electoral threshold: 300.000 votes (for the lower Chamber)	1946-1992	1992: 8.7 %
<i>Mattarellum</i>	Majoritarian with proportional elements: - majoritarian = 75% of the seats of the Parliament. - proportional = 25% of the seats of the Senate assigned through “scorporo” mechanism; 25% of the seats of the lower Chamber assigned through closed lists. - electoral threshold of 4% for the lower Chamber.	1993-2005	1994: 8.4% 1996: 10.1% 2001: 3.9%

<i>Porcellum</i>	Proportional with majoritarian bonus, closed lists and electoral threshold.	2005-2015 (for the lower Chamber) 2005-2017 (for the Senate)	2006: 4.6% 2008: 8.3% 2013: 4.1%
<i>Italicum</i>	Majoritarian with potential two-round system, majoritarian bonus, electoral threshold and 100 plurinominal colleges “blocked” top candidate.	2015-2017 (exclusively for the lower Chamber)	Never applied
<i>Rosatellum bis</i>	Mixed system: - majoritarian: 37% of the seats of the lower Chamber and Senate - proportional: 61% of the seats of the Chamber (allocation on national level) and Senate (allocation on regional level) - proportional: 2% destined to the citizens living abroad.	2017- ...	2018: 17.4%

Table 6. Italian electoral laws (1946-2018)

Source: Compiled by the author

In 1993 there is the transition from a pure proportional system to a more majoritarian one. This law, called *Mattarellum*, favored bipolarism but not a two-party system in order to ensure the alternation in governing between two parties or coalitions. The intention in the elections of 1994 was to reduce the number of the parties in Parliament, as a consequence of the majoritarian component present in the law (Morlino 1996). In theory, the transaction to majoritarian should not favor the entry into the Parliament of a party like the Lega, however this did not happen for three reasons: first, the effect of the proportional component of the law; second, the territorial and regional fragmentation of votes; lastly, the agreement between the party lists on the distribution of single-member districts (Morlino 1996).

In this scenario, Lega Nord managed to be part of government coalition of 1994 led by Berlusconi. After the election of 1996, the *Mattarellum* produced the hoped for results. It is possible to identify two developments: first, a reinforcement of the bipolar nature of the Italian party system; second, for the first time in Italy there is an alteration between the left and right (Verbeek e Zaslove 2015). This situation was further reinforced with the election of 2001. The Italian political system was at the same time bipolar and fragmented; this meant that the Berlusconi’s party, Forza Italia (FI), needed the Lega as a coalition partner in order to collect more votes in the North and form a right-wing coalition; at

the same time, the Lega needed FI to compensate the decline of its electoral result (Verbeek e Zaslove 2015). The Lega formed a political alliance with the Casa delle Libertà (House of Freedom) of Berlusconi and other right-wing parties that stayed in power from 2001 to 2005 (Albertazzi, McDonnell & Newell 2011), becoming the most enduring government in the history of the Republic (Albertazzi & McDonnell 2005). In the political scenario pre-Mani Pulite, the Lega could hardly have a relevant role on the Italian political stage, with the scene dominated by the Christian Democracy and the Communist party, with little room for other parties, especially the more radical. The multiple participation in the government coalition could not be possible in the electoral system of the First Republic and in its political context.

Regarding the impact of the latest electoral law, it has made the representation in the Parliament more proportional than majoritarian (Chiaramonte e D'Alimonte 2018). If purely proportional the Lega could get into the Parliament without any alliance (as happened in 1996), but with the new electoral system both center-left and center-right were pushed to form coalitions in order to support common candidates in SMDs (majoritarian) (Paparo 2018). However, the Italian political scene is not bipolar any more but tripolar (Paparo 2018). Neither the center-left nor the center-right coalition reached the number needed for the creation of the government, this brought the Lega to join the M5S – out from any coalition during the electoral campaign - and to leave the center-right coalition. Furthermore, the adoption of the *Rosatellum bis* was necessary to avoid going to the elections with two different electoral laws for the two Chambers, due to the fact that both the *Porcellum* and the *Italicum* were judged partially unconstitutional by the Italian Constitutional Court.

The *Mattarellum* and the *Rosatellum bis* both pushed the parties to change their attitude in the electoral campaign build coalitions in order to win the elections (Chiaramonte e D'Alimonte 2018). These changes do not seem to have a big impact on the electoral outcome of the Lega achieving similar results with different electoral laws – as in 1992 and 1994 – and at the same achieving really different results with the same electoral law – as in 1996 and 2001. In the elections of 1992 and 1994, two different electoral laws applied: in the first proportional and in the second majoritarian. The Lega achieved similar results with just 0.3% of difference between the elections. Indeed, in the first election the party was more favored by the political earthquakes that was hitting Italy, with the Lega portrayed as the party of the honest people, in the second elections, with the major pre-scandals parties dissolved and a new electoral law created with the intention of favoring the formation of coalition government and alternation in power, the Lega was actually helped in its success by the new electoral system. But

the surprising results was the one of 1996, when the Lega decided to run alone achieving good electoral results, due to the fact the majoritarian system disadvantage those parties that adopt the running alone strategy (Giordano 2000).

In other words, the political scene appeared in Italy after the scandal of Mani pulite offered a large space of entrance for new and small parties and the adoption of a majoritarian electoral system mixed with elements of proportional gave them the opportunity to enter into the Parliament and government, increasing their visibility, relevance and influence. However, the mutating electoral laws elaborated during the period of the Second Republic do not seem to have an important impact of the electoral outcome.

Here another question could arise, the Lega participates in the election with pure proportional electoral system and with a mixed one, but never with a pure majoritarian: would the Lega have also emerged in a purely majoritarian system? The answer could be yes, the Lega could enter into the Parliament, but it would not be able to get into the government. It is true that pure majoritarian favors a two-party system, however, it is also true that this can change when a party with a strong regional support is present, e.g. the Scottish National Party in UK. In this scenario, the Lega would probably remain a purely protest and anti-establishment party, without the possibility to influence national politics and becoming relevant just at regional level.

2.5. The figure of the leader

H3. The electoral fortune of the Lega heavily relies on the figure of the leader.

Populist parties are generally led by charismatic leaders (Chiapponi 2013) and the Lega is no exception, with the two prominent figures of Bossi and Salvini who led the Lega and determined its features, choosing the main points of the political agenda and having a significant weight in taking decisions. In the case of a personalized party, the figure of the leader and his charisma is one of the aspects that can determinate the success or failure of a populist parties. The leaders of the Lega, from Bossi to Salvini, have been able to gather the attention of the media around the core policies of the party, always underlining their position of outsider compared to the political establishment (Bobba & Legnante 2018).

In the first part of the Lega's history, the central figure of the party was Umberto Bossi. With his actions and decisions, he determined the fortunes of the Lega for more than two decades. Master of the Lega's destiny, he was also decisive in determining the Lega's lack of success. The reason for the collapse in the votes, at the end of the 90s and beginning of 2000s, is to be attributed to an internal reason of the party, not related to its nature of populist party, but due to the behavior of his leader, Bossi. Bossi was determining in two ways: first, the decision of Bossi to become more radical, alienating the most moderate part of the Lega constituency; second, due to an illness that forced the leader to take distance from the political life, decreasing the visibility and relevance of the party, missing the most prominent and powerful figure. Bossi is also the one that decides the attitude of the party towards EU. After a pro-EU attitude in the early stage of the Lega's life, the situation changed when Italy joined the Monetary Union, signing in this way refusal of EU to recognize Padania as an independent nation. Consequently, Bossi introduced the Euro-skeptical theme claiming that this Union would not bring stability, democracy and equal economic benefits, it will be the Union of the big capitalists, not of the people, not of the artisans nor the small entrepreneurs, concluding that "if Europe does not recognize Padania, Padania cannot recognize itself in Europe" (Bossi 1998). The history repeats again in 2012 when a corruption scandal emerged involving Bossi, his family and his "magic circle", with failing electoral results in 2013. With the emergence of the scandal seemed to have betrayed one of the core claim of populist parties: being the honest people that fights against the corrupted political elite. Anyway, this decline was just temporary, people lost trust in Bossi and his family, that used public funds for private purposes (Chiapponi 2013). The period following the Bossi scandal was characterized by the struggle for a new identity, unsatisfactory electoral results and decline in the party membership (Vercesi 2015). Even though an initial difficult period after the change of the leadership, the Lega proved this theory wrong, in the period after Bossi leadership the Lega made a decisive step toward institutionalization (Vercesi 2015), improving the internal structure of the party and making it more stable and more likely to survive in his absence. The Bossi scandal has a double face: on one hand, the Lega had to face a decrease of the votes; on the other hand, the scandal allowed Salvini to become the new secretary of the party, leading it to electoral success.

Bossi has shown the behavior, typical of several populist leader, to remove those members of the party who appeared of becoming too visible and thus putting at risk its position as focal point of the party (Albertazzi & McDonnell 2005). The loss of the new intellectuals, members of the party, was significantly relevant. Those that were thinking that it could be possible to change the movement from

the inside, but they realized that the ideology of the Lega was entirely shaped by Bossi (Ruzza 2004), the voice of the leader was the only relevant in the party. Emblematic of the power of Bossi is the maxim “the Lega is Bossi and Bossi is the Lega” (Albertazzi & McDonnell 2005). For McDonnell, Bossi represent the prototype of the populist leader, especially for the emotional attachment between him and his supporters (McDonnell 2015). Considering the importance of the figure of Bossi is surprising the survival of the party, no one was considered at his level in the Lega both for political ability and emotional relation with the Lega’s supporters (McDonnell 2015). But the election of the new secretary of the party, Matteo Salvini, gives new impetus to the Lega.

It is under Salvini that the most important change of the Lega occurred: the party abandons its separatist and pro-North claims to develop into a classical nationalist radical right-wing party (Paparo 2018), successful strategy considering the Italian national election of 2018. Again it is the decision of the leader at determining the destiny of the party. The strongest and most influential political figure now in Italy, Salvini is called by his voters “the Captain”, haranguing the crowd with the slogan “Italians first!”. Salvini is able to understand the mood of the citizens, to communicate, usually through social media, in a way that catches the attention of both his supporters and opponents. He wants to present himself as the man of the people, an image that it is continually portrayed through his social media channel restlessly updated. His opponents accused him, with good reason, to be racist, claiming the necessity to dismantle Europe, to close harbors and borders, supporting the incompatibility between Islam and Western society (Madron & Franzi 2015). Salvini has been able to surf the wave of populism that is overwhelming the Western world, finding himself on the same side of Trump, Le Pen and the British supporters of the Brexit (Madron & Franzi 2015). This attitude has been maintained throughout the electoral campaign and the months in the government. The Lega is again proof of personalization of politics, with the party built around the figure of its leaders (Verbeek e Zaslove 2015). Maxim used for Bossi is easily recyclable for Salvini “the Lega is Salvini and Salvini is the Lega” and in this moment, no figure inside and outside the party are able to concentrate the attention as he does and be so electorally appealing for the constituency. During this period in government, Salvini has the tendency of going beyond its institutional power, probably motivated by the people support that his actions and speeches. This tendency is proved by sentence of the Tribunal of Catania, Salvini was accused of abuse of his ministerial powers preventing the *Diciotti*, a ship of the Italian Coast Guard, from docking at the Italian harbors and of kidnapping of the immigrants on

board the ship (Tribunal of Catania 2018). Recently, the same situation occurred again with the block for the ship Alan Kurdi of the NGO *Mediterranea* to dock.

The moves of the leaders have so far influenced the fortunes of the party both negatively and positively, from its lowest success to its highest results. In this characteristic is nothing new, the Lega is similar to any other party with a strong leader. However, unlike strongly personalized populist parties, the Lega did manage to survive and remain relevant following the Bossi's retirement finding a strong leader in Matteo Salvini that brought the party to its definitive achievement. In Italy, the opposite, and more common, example is recognizable in Berlusconi who led ultra-personalized parties that are intrinsically unable to survive without their leader.

CONCLUSION

The thesis aims to understand the factors that can explain the rise, temporary decline and renewed rise of the Lega based on different theories of populism. The findings of the thesis show that the Lega presents similar characteristics of other populist parties. However, unique features are presents and those have determined, at times, the electoral support for the Lega with the presence, as well, of favorable external conditions that helped the Lega in its rise. In the fluctuation electoral fortunes of the Lega many factors have determined its success or failure. These factors have been of different kinds: the choice of the themes of the political agenda, the electoral system and the figure of its leaders. Regarding the first factor, the Lega seems to confirm the vision of Inglehart and Norris according to whom the cultural backlash theory is more relevant in the explanation of populist success compared to the economic theory. However, in the Lega's discourse, even though the cultural thematics are those that drove the success of the Lega, the economic stances have always been relevant, in particular in the early stage of its history. But in the findings emerges something interesting that differ from the usual populist party rhetoric. Indeed, the economic theme used by the Lega is not the same used by the other populist parties, thus the theory of economic insecurity is not totally applicable to the Lega, at least in the early stage. Later on the party shows a Euro-skeptical and anti-euro attitude that clearly part of the populist catalogue about economic claims.

Considering the electoral system, in the early stage of its political life the Lega was favored by the Italian political scene and the adoption of a new majoritarian electoral system, mixed with proportional elements, that favors the formation of coalition and the alternation in government. The Lega has participated in the elections with four different electoral laws (the *Italicum* has never been used), each of them with different degree of proportional and majoritarian elements, however, these changes do not seem an influential factor in the determining the electoral outcome of the party. Thus, although the Lega entered in the Italian political scene in a propitious moment and this has been confirmed to be a factor that support the political rise of the Lega, the fact that an electoral law contains more majoritarian or more proportional do not appear relevant in the explanation of the fluctuating electoral results of the Lega. Finally, the figure of the leader, as in several populist parties, has been central in the success of the Lega. Both leaders, Bossi and Salvini, have been able to capture the attention of the media and to haranguing the crowd with their charisma. However, this strong personalization of the party, intrinsic in numerous populist parties, proved to be a downfall in some moments of the history of the Lega, but it has never determined the disintegration of the party.

Finally, the thesis comes to the conclusion that to have a clear and complete idea for the rise, temporary decline and renewed rise of the Lega, it is not possible to look just at one element but it is necessary to look at the complete picture, including internal element of the party – the decision of the political agenda, e.g. putting more emphasis on one element than another or the importance of the leader – and external element to the party – the political scenario in which the party is located or the presence of political competitors. The Lega's case confirms some of the theories of populism but at the same time presents some peculiarities. Indeed, the most interesting elements here are those that seem recognizable just in the Lega's case: first, the economic topics used by the Lega in its early stage that do not fall under the category of economic inequality; second, the largest increase in votes occurred after the change of the leadership, contrasting the believe that claims the personalized parties, as many populist parties are, are not able to survive after the retirement of the leader. In this element, it has to be considered the fact that the Lega has manage to find a new leader that shown to be charismatic as much as Bossi and that has been able to change the Lega's discourse in a way to attract a widest constituency. Indeed, the Lega did not just survive but it considerably increase its support and its relevance in the Italian political scene.

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