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## WHEN CHARISMA IS NO LONGER ENOUGH. INSIGHTS ON POPULIST PARTIES' LEADERSHIP FROM THE (NORTHERN) LEAGUE

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### Abstract

Several scholars of populism have pointed out that populist parties rely very often on so-called charismatic leadership (Canovan, 1981; McDonnell, 2015). While the rise of populist parties in Europe in the last decade is quite evident and well-studied, what remains understudied is how this phenomenon interacts with other transformations that are currently shaping parties and party systems in European democracies. In particular, what is the interplay between the rise of populism, political leadership and personalization of politics? This link between populism and leadership could be understood in the light of the change occurring within party organizations, and internal party democratization in particular (Musella, 2015; Pogunkte and Webb, 2007; Karvonen, 2010; Scarrow et al. 2017). Following these studies underlining a close relationship between pop-

ulism, leadership and inclusive leadership selection methods, in this paper we aim at empirically exploring how the personalization and democratization of organizational patterns affect the role of the leader in populist parties. To what extent does the use of inclusive selection methods of party leaders within populist parties affect the scope of their organizational power and strengthens the party's personalization patterns? To explore this research question, we focus on a case study, the Lega Nord (LN) in Italy as an empirical illustration and we rely on original survey data, on aggregated electoral data as well as on primary and secondary data on party organizational rules.

**Keywords:** populism, party politics; primary elections; party leaders, intra-party democracy

## Introduction

The literature on populism is rather vast and heterogeneous (e.g. Taggart, 2004; 2000; 1995; Mudde, 2004; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017; Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2015; 2007; Mény and Surel, 2001). Yet, despite this large and prolific interest on populism, a shared definition is still missing. Is it an ideology? Or could it be understood as a communication style, or rather as a strategy? (Aalberg et al., 2015; Moffitt, 2014; Stanley, 2008; Jagers and Walgrave, 2007; Canovan, 2002). Although the literature debate is still unclear about the very nature of populism, when going through studies on this topic some common traits do emerge about the essential features of populism. All the definitions point to the fact that populism is structured on the contrast between the people, intended as a homogeneous entity, and the elites (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2015; Mudde, 2004; Taggart, 2000). According to populist view, the people are deprived of rights, powers and opportunities by political, economic, financial or intellectual elites which conspire in order to preserve their privileges. This Manichaeian distinction underpins the very idea of populism regardless of any ideological distinction (Mudde, 2004).

Another trait seems recurrent among populist movements and parties. According to most scholars, populist parties rely very often on so-called charismatic leadership (Canovan, 1981). McDonnell (2015) argues, in this regard, that for understanding the dynamics underlying the charisma of populist leadership it is necessary to take into consideration the relationship with their followers. The extraordinary qualities of the leader are recognized and put at the service of a mission, which defends the people against the elites. The bond with the supporters is built upon an emotional emphasis on this seminal task, and the authority of the leader is never challenged. Populist leaders adopt a direct and 'popular' communication style and strategy, exalting the proximity of the leader to the 'people' (De Lange and Art, 2011). The leader appears as the embodiment of the people's will on the basis of a direct and unmediated relationship with the citizens (Zaslave, 2008; Hawking, 2003). In this sense, social media has offered a fertile ground for the development and affirmation of populism. That is why the mediation role of journalism is not recognized by populists: traditional media are blamed for being part of the criticized elites. The leaders allow a direct and horizontal relationship with supporters, making the populists claims even more effective: they come from a leader that is close to 'the people' (Gerbaudo, 2018; Postill, 2018; Engesser et al., 2017).

This links between populism and leadership could be understood in the light of the transformations occurring within party organizations (Musella, 2015; Pogunkte and Webb, 2007; Karvonen, 2010). Within political parties characterized by weaker and more

flexible organizations, political leaders have become a crucial resource; they act as a cognitive shortcut for mobilizing support. The fading of ideologies has revealed the weakness of political parties, whose organizational structures are not focused anymore on political socialization and mobilization of supporters (Garzia, 2011). The leaders become the bond between citizens and parties, and this linkage is fed by a sense of loyalty not transferable to the party. This strong and personal connection led scholars to interpret as a risk for the party organization some of the inclusive procedures implemented for selecting party leaders (Katz and Mair, 1994). Open and closed primaries, in particular, have been seen as a viaticum for further strengthening party leaders. Indeed, offering a say to larger selectorates for candidates or leaders' selection indeed could lead to the development of plebiscitary dynamics, endangering the party structure. Being selected by an inclusive selectorate, in fact, implies that leaders have a direct legitimization that does not come from the organization, and this affects their responsive attitude towards the party. In other words, through primary elections party leaders may disengage from the control of party middle-level structures.

Following these studies underlining a close relationship between populism, leadership and inclusive selection methods, in this paper we aim at empirically exploring how personalization and democratization organizational patterns affect the role of the leader in populist parties. Our main research question is thus the following: to what extent does the use of inclusive selection methods of party leaders within populist parties affect the scope of their organizational power and strengthens the party's personalization patterns? Or, in other words: to what extent do primaries strengthen the role of the leader in a populist party, both in terms of personalization and scope of power?

To do so, we use the case of the Lega Nord (LN) as an empirical illustration and to provide a descriptive account of our main research question. It offers, indeed, a privileged perspective of analysis for our purposes. The Lega Nord represents the oldest party in Italy. After having survived the so-called First Republic, it went through the Second Republic unscathed and proved an uncommon organizational adaptability and survival capacity. In 2012, the party experienced a serious organizational crisis that required a change of leader (Albertazzi, 2016; McDonnell, 2015; Diamanti, 1996). Closed primaries were organized in order to facilitate the succession and dismiss the charismatic leadership of the founding father Umberto Bossi. A larger selectorate provided legitimacy to the new appointed leader, Matteo Salvini, enabling him to finalize the ideological and organizational transition towards a new party where regionalist claims faded in order to engage on full populist traits. It represents, thus, a very interesting case for understanding the interaction between populism, leadership and primaries.

In terms of methodology, while the approach chosen in this study is mostly exploratory and descriptive, we rely on three main sources of data: original survey data collected by the authors in 2013, aggregated electoral data presenting the result of LN primary elections by regional constituency, as well as primary and secondary data on party organizational rules (mostly from party internal regulations and press articles). For further information about the survey data used in this paper, please see footnote no.3.

The next section will offer an overview of the case study; the third section will detail the relevant party internal rules and will present the leadership races that appointed Matteo Salvini as the head of the party. It will also present survey data about the party members' feelings on the introduction of inclusive selection methods. The fourth section will pro-

vide an analysis of the role, powers and duties of the party leader within the LN. The paper then presents some concluding remarks in the last section.

### **The case of the (Northern) League**

As underlined by Musella and Webb (2015), Italy is an ideal case for the study of the personalization of politics. The centrality of political leaders and personalization of politics was indeed one of the main traits characterizing the so-called Second Republic (Musella, 2015; Pasquino, 2014; Calise, 2010). This approach also offers a paradigmatic perspective for scholarly analysis of populism. The processes of 'personalization of politics' emerging at the end of the 1990s were defined as a promised land for populism since they anticipated the phenomenon that is now affecting many democracies (Tarchi, 2015). The populism trait was present and vivid since the beginning of the Second Republic when the Tangentopoli scandals provided excellent fuel for the Manichean distinction between the people and the elites (the parties). Bossi and Berlusconi became paradigmatic examples of populist leadership (McDonnell, 2016; 2006: Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2015).

The last general elections held in 2018 resulted in a spectacular failure of mainstream parties which was combined with an impressive result achieved by populist parties. The M5S was able to increase its consensus gaining more than the 30% of the votes, while the LN under the leadership of Matteo Salvini increased from the 4.7% in 2013 to more than 17% in 2018 (Itanes, 2018). The two parties arranged a coalition government, even if with some difficulties. The government enjoyed a rather long honeymoon period, and even though the coalition emerged weakened after the first year in power, the LN has become the senior and most powerful partner of the coalition.

Finally, Italy could be considered as a laboratory concerning the implementation of inclusive procedures for selecting candidates and party leaders. Since 2005, when citizens, for the first-time, were invited to have a say on the Prime Ministerial candidate for the center-left coalition, primaries became a routine procedure for several parties (Venturino, 2007). Moreover, since then, more than 1000 primaries have been held at national, regional and local level (Venturino, 2017). In particular, the birth of the Partito Democratico in 2007 represented an official recognition of the value of primaries (Bordandini et al., 2008). The party, indeed, within its statute defines open primaries, allowing both members and sympathizers to participate in the internal ballot, as the main method for selecting candidates and the party leader (Venturino, 2015). For a long time, primaries seemed to be peculiar to the centre-left. It was even quite obvious, since the other parties were personal, so the nomination process was entirely managed by the party leader and there was no need (or sense) for promoting leadership races. Things changed with the entrance of the M5S within the political system. It promoted closed primaries, among registered party members, for selecting their candidates at national, regional and local levels (Lanzone and Rombi, 2014). At that point, the ownership of inclusive procedures simply disappeared for the left-wing area. Primaries were eventually something used transversally among all parties.

Therefore, it was no surprise that eventually the LN decided to use closed primaries in order to solve the leadership and organizational crisis affecting the party after a scandal concerning the misuse of public funds. It was the easiest and most effective tool for providing new legitimacy to a new generation of *leghisti*. While primaries are nowadays

widely used in political parties, not only populist ones, as a tool for internal democratization, there seems to be an emerging interrelation between personalization, populism and primaries. From this point of view, considering the LN as a case study for exploring the impact of leadership selection modes and organizational setting on populist leaders seems particularly relevant.

The LN has been defined as a regional populist party as it combined, since its creation, regionalist demands with a populist trait (Biorcio, 1991). The harsh opinion of national elites, which were criticized for depriving the Northern regions in order to feed their electoral strongholds in Southern Italy, was the cornerstone of the LN's rhetoric (Albertazzi, 2007). In addition, it fits in perfectly with the populist logic. The LN is a peculiar party, which demonstrated an unusual ability to react to external challenges. As a Janus-biface, the party has been and still is capable of serving in government while maintaining its populist and anti-elitist approach, even though it was precisely part of the elite ruling the country. The ambivalent nature of the party was supported, back in the 90s and 2000s, by the presence of a charismatic leader, Umberto Bossi, acting as a guarantor of the party strategies and actions (Albertazzi, 2016). The uncontested authority of its leadership allowed the party to overcome several crises during the Second Republic. Therefore, the end of Bossi's leadership in 2012 due to a combination of health and judicial issues represented the most endangering challenge for the party survival (McDonnell, 2015).

The transition phase ruled by Roberto Maroni, who was acting as the interim leader, offered a window of opportunity for a young generation of Leghisti demanding renewal within the party. But how to remove the founding father without overturning the party? Primaries were the answer. They were not included within the party statute, yet they have been introduced for providing legitimacy to the new leader. The plebiscitary risk evocated by Katz and Mair (1994) finds empirical expression with the LN primaries in 2013. Matteo Salvini easily won the competition obtaining enough support for reshaping the party. Under Salvini's leadership the party changed both in organizational and ideological terms. A parallel organization named 'Noi con Salvini' was founded with the aim to expand the party's presence in the South, and it was promoted as a direct expression of the new party leader.

Whilst the old and northern party organization resisted and maintained its routine in mobilizing supporters and party members at local level, the new, flexible organization in the South is still lacking territorial structures and thus uses social media as the main channel of mobilization (Diamanti, 2017). Through his Facebook page, Matteo Salvini sets and builds a strong connection with supporters (Bobba, 2015). Outside the Northern strongholds, the Lega Nord is basically a virtual organization: there is only the leader (Albertazzi et al., 2018).

The organizational re-designing of the party is combined with an ideological transformation. Under the leadership of Matteo Salvini, the party weakened the emphasis on the regional demands in order to support nativist nationalism claims. The removal of the "Northern" adjective in the party's name is actually something more than a rhetorical strategy. Not by coincidence, the party logo for 2018 Italian general elections dismissed the word 'Northern' in order to make explicit reference to the leader. The Northern interests are left aside to embrace a sovereigntist approach, typical of extreme-right populist parties. The party changed its face, and – at least apparently – its soul: it is the League (Lega) now, without the North (Nord).

A deep transformation has taken place within the party, but it is not just a consequence of a renewal in leadership. The party has redefined its very organization, starting with the rules for selecting the new party leader. This paper aims precisely to clarify whether and to what extent the plebiscitary value of primary elections may have contributed to give legitimacy to the new leader, providing him the authority to implement further organizational changes.

### **The selection of a new leader: from Bossi to Salvini**

As often happens with populist parties, its founding father Umberto Bossi led the Northern League seamlessly since its inception in 1989 until 2012, and no competition for the leadership was ever organized. From an electoral point of view, after countless ups and downs throughout its history, the Northern League won a remarkable 8.3 per cent in the 2008 parliamentary election and entered as a junior partner in the right-wing coalition government led by Silvio Berlusconi. In the following years, the party gained further successes in second-order – European and local – elections. However, in November 2011, the *annus horribilis* of the Northern League began. The Berlusconi government imploded and then proceeded to be replaced by the Monti cabinet, with the party relegated to opposition. After few months Umberto Bossi, several members of his family and associates of his entourage came under investigation because of fraudulent activities regarding party finances. In April 2012, Bossi was forced to resign as party leader, and a temporary, collective leadership formed by Roberto Maroni, Roberto Calderoli and Manuela Dal Lago was put in charge until the next congress. The latter took place in July, when Maroni was elected as the new party leader. During the Election Day on 24 February 2013, while the Northern League received a discouraging result in the parliamentary election, Maroni was chosen as the regional president of Lombardy. As Maroni had pledged to do, in September he left the party leadership, meanwhile launching the race for the new leadership.

Unquestionably, the League's party leader wielded an unbounded power, largely due to the predominance of informal practices on formal rules. However, the party statute imposed a three-year term and a leader selection by a delegates' convention, a traditional solution in the Italian political landscape (Sandri et al. 2014). Approaching the 2013 leader selection, with an effective competition expected for the first time, the method of choice had been entirely innovated with a derogation from what was set by the statute. Precisely, the selectorate was enlarged from convention delegates to party members, introducing the practice of closed primary elections within the party organizational structures for the first time. Moreover, plurality was adopted as the internal ballot's electoral system, and candidates were required to have been enrolled for at least 10 years and endorsed by at least 1,000 members. It should be also noted that only a portion of party members were eligible to vote. The party statute in fact distinguishes between 'supporter' and 'activist' members, the latter being enrolled for no less than 12 months (McDonnell and Vampa 2016: 111). Only activists could endorse and vote for primaries' candidates.

The 2013 leader selection was launched with urgency in the context of a crisis within the party; thus the changes in the rules were not implemented through a reform of the 2012 statute. Rather, they have been ratified with the guidelines for the 2013 congress<sup>1</sup>. It

1 Cfr. Regolamento del Congresso Federale Straordinario del 15 Dicembre 2013, art. 9–10.

is worth underlining that the 2015 and 2017 statutes were concise regarding leader selection, avoiding explicit references to the primaries. As a consequence, the rules for the 2017 primaries were more detailed within the congress guidelines, which recognized the party convention having a final say therefore adopting a mixed selectorate<sup>2</sup>. In any case, considering that the 2017 statute changed the name of the party in *Lega per Salvini premier*, it seems that informal practices still prevail on formal rules. Overall, the party leadership incumbent or endorsed candidate running -in the closed primaries is not subject to any effective competition from other potential candidates. If so, seen from this angle, the new League led by Salvini is very similar to Bossi's old Northern League.

**Table 1.** Results of the 2013 and 2017 primaries for the Northern League leadership

	2013 closed primaries		2017 closed primaries	
Region	Matteo Salvini	Umberto Bossi	Matteo Salvini	Giovanni Fava
Valle d'Aosta	80	20	100	0
Piemonte	83	17	87	13
Liguria	91	9	95	5
Lombardia	79	21	78	22
Trentino-Alto Adige	72	28	75	25
Veneto	84	16	91	9
Friuli-Venezia Giulia	90	10	87	13
Emilia-Romagna	66	34	67	33
Toscana	89	11	83	17
Marche	86	14	83	17
Umbria	67	33	95	5
<i>Italy</i>	<i>81.7</i>	<i>18.3</i>	<i>82.7</i>	<i>17.3</i>
N	8,162	1,833	6,636	1,388
Valid votes	9,995		8,024	
Invalid votes	226		0	
Turnout	10,221		8,024	

Note: values are percentages.

Source: Northern League.

The new sets of rules have been so far used on two occasions, in 2013 and 2017, and in both cases two candidates contested the leadership (See Table 1). In the first case Umberto Bossi, looking for a restoration of his previous role, was challenged by the younger Matteo Salvini, then a 40-year-old member of the European parliament. In the second race Salvini as the incumbent leader easily prevailed on the then current member of the Lombardy regional government and former MP, Giovanni Fava. The results of these two races, reported in Table 1, clearly show the recurrent lack of competition often associated with inclusive selectorates (Kenig 2008).

2 Cfr. Regolamento del Congresso Federale Ordinario del 21 maggio 2017, art. 10–13.

While the mixed selectorate added in 2017 marked only a minor adjustment in comparison with the preexisting rules, the closed primaries adopted in 2013 signalled a remarkable makeover of the party's practices. Hence, the first experience with primaries in 2013 is the best case for studying the members' reactions to the rules change.

**Table 2.** The attitudes about the primaries of the Northern League's members, 2014

How much do you agree with the following statements?	Strongly Disagree, Disagree	Agree, Strongly Agree	N
Primaries should be open to sympathizers, even if they are not formally enrolled	54	46	4,308
Primaries have improved my overall evaluation of the party	36	64	4,303
Primaries promote political turnover	24	76	4,355
Primaries enhance internal factionalism	65	35	4,299
The Northern League should organize coalition primaries for selecting the next Prime Minister candidate	25	75	4,244
The Northern League should use primaries for selecting candidates for parliamentary elections	19	81	4,299
The Northern League should use primaries for selecting candidates for local elections	24	76	4,244

Note: values are percentages.

Source: C&LS – Candidate and Leader Selection.

Table 2 reports the findings of a survey of Northern League's membership<sup>3</sup>. First of all, respondents are quite evenly divided about the use of closed versus open primaries, with a small prevalence of those advocating the former. The support for open primaries could perhaps be a consequence of their recurrent use by many Italian left-wing parties, which has transformed them into a familiar feature of Italian politics. More realistically, open primaries could be seen as a useful tool for promoting democratic ideals, such as participation and political involvement, which are at the core of the rhetorical appeals of all parties. Instead, most respondents are strongly skewed in support of primaries because of the improvement they guarantee to bring to the party image and the supposed potential

3 Data has been collected through a web-based survey, accomplished by sending by email the proposal to the interviewees to fill in a questionnaire uploaded on line. The web-based survey of the LN's enrolled members was conducted immediately after the party organized a closed primary election for selecting the party leader in December 2013. The questionnaire was sent electronically by the party central office to a sample constituted of all LN members who provided their email address upon their enrolment. Overall, 5,129 questionnaires were collected from 10 February to 10 March 2014. Unfortunately, since the survey was managed directly by the party central offices on the basis of a very strict overseeing procedure, we are not able to estimate the response rate. Nevertheless, according to the LN website, in 2013 the LN declared an enrolment total of 12,000 members. Thus, we can estimate that our responses generate a population frame coverage of 42.8%. However, given that the central offices of the party drew the sample and refused to divulge the sample size, we cannot estimate the response rate.



for elites' renewal. They are also confident that primaries contribute to solving problems rather than fueling internal conflicts. Finally, party members strongly advocate primaries for selecting candidates to all public offices, either Prime Ministerial posts, or national representatives, or local government roles. This is intriguing information, since Northern League as a rule picks up all its candidates by making use of an extremely centralized and exclusive procedure.

### **The role of the party leader from Bossi to Salvini**

Until the transition in 1993–1994 from the First to the Second Republic, almost all 'First Republic' Italian parties and the Lega too, assigned full power to party secretaries as the organizational leaders of the party. Moreover, in the last twenty years there has been a trend towards the concentration of decision-making powers in the hands of the leader of the party in parliament and/or in government. This has been particularly noticeable among right-wing parties (Venturino 2010, Massari 2015). For instance, during his tenure as party secretary of the LN (1989–2012), Umberto Bossi was unquestioned leader of the party well before he obtained ministerial posts, but still kept a tight rein on ministerial posts for federal reforms (2008–11). Under Bossi, the party leadership combined public office and party mandates and this somewhat blurred the distinction between the party in public office and the party in central office. However, under the new leadership of Salvini, the extra-parliamentary party organization and the PCO (party in central office) retain a crucial role within the new Lega, even during the period of Salvini's participation in the Conte I government (June 2018–August 2019). Thus, the real difference between the leadership of Bossi and of Salvini in terms of their situation within the party organization lies in the centrality of the extra-parliamentary party organization, which is stronger under Salvini's rule and was weaker under Bossi's leadership.

In order to highlight how the LN organizational settings differed from those of mainstream parties, since the end of the 1980s Bossi favoured the term 'federal secretary' in order to call attention to the political goals of his party, acknowledging the (back then) regionalist features of the party. Also, the LN has, for decades, kept its 'founding father' as party leader<sup>4</sup>. The centrality of the LN leaders can be discerned in several aspects of the party's internal life. In line with traditional patterns of Italian politics, the leaders of LN are not usually the parliamentary leaders of their respective parties. Regardless of this limitation, they – Bossi until 2012, Salvini since 2013 – all enjoy unconditional media dominance, they are the party's main asset in personally gathering electoral support, they wield tight control on the extremely centralized process of candidate selection, and, finally, they counter potential factionalism by forcing out any opponents. They have created a strictly controlled party whose main goal is the promotion of their own public and personal careers (Sandri, Seddone and Venturino 2014).

Still, the LN is based on a long-standing organizational model that – to different extents – goes back to the mass-party ideal-type. Even if Bossi and now Salvini are charismatic leaders exerting a tight reign over the party, the LN is well organized both at national and local levels, with a strong organizational penetration on the ground. This holds not only in the Northern regions, aka its 'Padania' strongholds, but also in central Italy

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4 The Statute recognizes formally Umberto Bossi as the founding father of the party, article 14.

regions, albeit – as noted above – not in the South. Overall, the legitimacy of the leader is related to the body that selects him (only male leaders have been elected up to now). As explained above, the LN has chosen, since 2013, to hold internal ballots (closed primaries) to select its leader even if the party statutes still say otherwise (selection by delegate to party congress, article 15 of the 2015 & 2017 statutes). In practice, the size of selectorate bodies can vary. Only few thousand members of LN voted in the internal ballot in 2013 (10,221) and 2017 (8,024).

The ‘ultimate principals’ of the LN leaders are their selectorates. This means that the ‘ultimate principals’ of the LN leaders have changed significantly since 2013, because the party has since 2013 held closed primary elections for selecting its leader. In practice the ultimate principals are now the members, even though the party internal regulations were changed only in 2017 to accommodate the new leadership selection method. This means that a relevant organizational change has recently affected the role of the party leader, because the legitimacy of the leader is related to the body that selects him and this body has changed. The leadership selectorate and its ‘ultimate principal’ was until 2013 the federal congress of the party, and now is the party membership. This means that if both leaders, Bossi and then Salvini, are legitimated by their selectorate, the adoption of closed primaries made a substantial difference in the way the party works, in the way leaders exert their power and are legitimized by the base. The relevance of the charisma of the leader has now therefore waned, because his power is now legitimated by the broad body that selected him and gave him his mandate.

However, if rules for selecting new leaders are formally enshrined in the party’s constitutions, they are not always strictly followed. At least formally, the length of the LN leader tenure is 3 years and there are no term limits detailed in the statutes (in terms of number of consecutive mandates).

In terms of requisites for candidacy, seniority, as a condition to be eligible as a leadership candidate, has never been incorporated into the LN internal rules. The Lega’s most recent statutes require that prospective candidates should be party members, but the LN has never formally set an age limit for its leader, and the same goes for gender alternation. In terms of rules governing candidacy, the LN statutes do not require that their prospective candidates possess some kind of formal endorsement in order to participate in the leadership race. As for deselection rules, no removal procedure is provided for by the party statutes of the new Lega. The same goes for the 1989–2012 LN organizational form.

This relative stability in terms of organizational settings (still based on the model of the mass party) has resulted in an increasingly central role for the leader, both in terms of duties and powers, on the one hand, and in terms of control over the party in central office. The analysis we present below shows that the powers of the leader have increased with the 2015 party statute change. This seems to suggest that the change of leadership from Bossi to Salvini was accompanied by a change in the way the leadership power is exerted within the party, in particular in the sense of an even greater centralization of powers in the hand of the extra-parliamentary party leader.

Salvini’s successful strategy of renovating a personal party has brought about a radical mutation of the LN programs and political positions, constituting a rare case in which a personalistic party remains strong beyond a change in its leadership (Vercesi, 2015).

More specifically, in the LN new statutes, it is the party executive (federal council) that decides if and when leadership selections can be held and pre-selects the aspiring candi-

dates that can run in the internal elections. The internal ballot was run by the party congress, according to the previous version of the statute, and in the new version of the party convention rules, by membership vote since the 2017 selection (article 13 of the party statute and LN 2017 congress guidelines, art. 10–13). The federal council is composed of 30 members representing the PCO (party in central office) at national and provincial levels, plus some representatives of the PPO (party in public office) but without voting rights. Therefore, the authority of the agent that decides whether or not to call for a new leadership selection is quite concentrated. Also, most of the members of the federal council are appointed by the leader himself and Salvini has managed to establish his rule within the dominant coalition in the party and had already silenced internal opposition during his first mandate. His re-election was set to be a coronation, and the challenger was allowed to run mainly to increase the legitimacy of the mandate of the winning candidate by avoiding such a hollow internal election. Even before Salvini's reign, the scope of powers of the party leader was quite broad, and he could exert extensive patronage over party's internal mandates. Moreover, the leader-controlled federal council is also responsible for defining the detailed rules for candidacy in leadership internal ballots and exerts a tight control over the formation of electoral lists for local, regional, national and European elections (articles 12 & 13 of the 2015 statutes).

The types of control that can be exerted by other party bodies over the leader, once he is in office, are quite weak in the LN, since several internal organs are directly appointed by the leader, namely the deputy leader and the secretary-general (administrative secretary). The leader, though, appoints the LN executive committee members. However, 13 of them are chosen by the party congress (art. 15 of LN 2015 statutes). In both parties, the leader of the parliamentary group (whose mandate is distinct from that of the party leader) is appointed by the PPO itself. Nevertheless, of course the party leader often has a big say in who is chosen by the group. Similarly, the LN policy spokesperson is usually selected by the party central office. The same goes for the party organ responsible for proposing changes to party rules, and both bodies are kept tightly under the control of the leader.

In addition, who are the members that select the LN leader? What is their role in this leader-centred organization? In terms of age criteria, the LN requires its prospective members to be legal adults endowed with voting rights, and that they do not belong to other parties or political movements. The two other conditions (probationary period or sponsorship by other current party members) are also part of the complex conditions to be satisfied in order to become a LN member. In fact, the central organs of LN attentively investigate each admission application through three different levels of evaluation and require not only that a prospective member does not belong to other parties or to associations not approved by the party, but also that they endure a probationary period. In terms of procedure, the LN recruits individual members via their local branches. However, the LN sometimes provides the opportunity to register as a member at another level (such as the level or regional branches).

In highly stratarchical, personal parties such as the LN, the organizational reach of the party is quite broad because membership is conceived mainly as an instrument of electoral mobilization and party organizational unity is guaranteed by the fact that followers gather around a charismatic, all-powerful leader. The LN permits different types of party membership by recognizing within its internal statutes also the category of 'party supporter/sympathizer'. This is the case also in several other Italian parties, but in the case of

LN this category represents simply the first step in the complex procedure of becoming a member. Previous literature has shown that the LN is composed of highly polarized factions and this means that the threat of internal conflicts or even splits has led the party elites to be reluctant to enlarge membership boundaries or give members too extensive rights (Biorcio 2017; McDonnell and Vampa, 2016). The stratarchical organizational structures of the LN and its charismatic leaders and personalized internal organization result in an unequal distribution between rights and obligations for grass-roots members: it is quite complex to become a member and once enrolled the instances for having a say within the party are relatively limited. The LN statutes contain detailed rules for identifying the grounds upon which members can be expelled (articles 34–36). In this party, it is not easy to become a member, but it is even more difficult to remain so. Internal loyalty is considered generally as fundamental because members' rights are significantly less extensive than obligations and the internal decision power is tightly held in the hands of party elites (Sandri, Seddone and Bulli 2015).

Concerning members' rights and obligations, the LN membership privileges include, for instance, the right to take part in crucial intra-party activities and internal decision-making such as participating in social events, selecting the party leader and the delegates to the party congress. The party does not provide the possibility for its members to directly participate in the selection of party central executive bodies. The members are not endowed with the right to directly participate in the formulation of the electoral manifesto or other policy positions. However, the members of LN can exercise an indirect influence in this aspect of intra-party decision-making by sending delegates to the congress, which is responsible for adopting the electoral programme. As mentioned above, in the LN, it is generally the party in central office that selects candidates and decides the composition of the lists.

We can thus see from this discussion of the scope of power of the party leader and of the role of the party grassroots that, while members still maintain a crucial function within the party and the LN features a strongly decentralized mass-like mode of political organization, the leader has increasingly concentrated the intra-party power into his hands. Except for the all membership ballots now formally organized to select the leader, which often are merely coronations (McDonnell and Vampa 2016).

## Conclusions

2013 was a dramatic year for the Northern League. In February the party took part in the parliamentary election under the provisional leadership of Roberto Maroni, gaining an appalling 4 percent of the votes and 35 MPs elected in the two houses. In December, as reported above, Matteo Salvini was elected as the new party leader using, for the first time, the OMOV (One Member One Vote) method. Since then, the party experienced a striking organizational change and obtained remarkable results in second- and first-order elections. The 2018 parliamentary election marked a turning point in Italian political history. Then, the League campaigned for the first time throughout the whole national territory, reaching an astonishing 17 per cent of the votes. As no party or coalition was able to obtain a parliamentary majority, the League broke the right-wing coalition to form a government together with the Five Star Movement. This is the first case in Europe of a cabinet utterly supported by populist – although different from several points of view – parties. And in

just a few months the League overcame its governmental partner in the polls, leaping to an unprecedented 37 percent approval rating from the interviewed voters.

Progressing from the Bossi to the Salvini leadership, the transformations undertaken by the League have been impressive. Moreover, these transformations are strongly connected with the image of Salvini as party leader, and they have been built upon a change in the method used to select the party leader.

The adoption of closed primaries in 2013 significantly affected the party's internal practices. In particular, the use of membership ballots to select the leader, which often are merely coronations, have strengthened even further the stratarchical, personal party organizational features of the new Lega and handed over even more powers to the leader. If the organizational settings and the role of the leaders within the Lega's structures have not fundamentally changed from Bossi to Salvini, the new Lega under Salvini's rule and after the 2015 internal regulations change has witnessed a substantial reinforcement of the personalization and power centralization patterns already present in the Lega. This has been brought about mostly by the use of primaries, which have changed the locus of legitimacy of the leader, which now lies in the hand of the members rather than of the middle-level elites and central party bodies.

As our original survey data clearly showed, the NL members' and activists strongly support the use of internal ballots to select the party leader and strongly advocate the use of primaries for selecting candidates to all public offices at all levels. This means that not only is the leader more broadly legitimated when chosen by a full membership vote, but also that he or she could benefit from a party base which is highly mobilisable, supportive, and strongly satisfied with the party's internal functioning. When these views and support from the grassroots are analyzed together with the consequences in the change of rules on the party internal power distribution, it appears evident that the adoption of primaries for selecting the leader since 2013 has significantly broadened the scope of power of the leader and strengthened his/her tight control over the party organizational apparatuses.

Following our preliminary empirical exploration, several questions arise: to what extent have the changes in the leader selection mode contributed in boosting the party fortune? To what extent has the inclusiveness of the closed primaries been a relevant factor for explaining the extraordinary rise of the League? The answers to these questions require further research. However, based on our explorative and descriptive analysis of the changes in the LN leadership, the relevance or organizational setting such as the leader's selection methods must be nuanced. By and large, while the leader's image has been – and continues to be – influential, the role of the leader selection mode seems to be negligible. Interesting insights on the League's actual success could come rather from the adoption of a comparative perspective. Throughout the European democracies, mainstream – and especially left-wing – parties are actually involved in a deep crisis, probably due to a long-term loss of importance of the basic issues endorsed by social-democrats since their inception. This paves the way for the breakthrough of new parties, with the radical right family being, in this moment, the most rampant.

A long-standing stream of research focusing on populist parties focuses on their ability to adapt and endure, especially once they have entered in government. In the Italian case, the simultaneous access to government of two different populist parties makes this point particularly intriguing. It is difficult to anticipate whether they are prone to a rapid failure

after an initial success, or they are here to stay. Whatever happens, the problem of party leadership, and leader selection, will continue to be central.

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