

**THE ELECTORAL SUCCESS OF THE (NORTHERN)
LEAGUE IN ITALY (2008-2018).
IS THE ECONOMIC DECLINE OR THE IDENTITARIAN
ISSUES THE MAIN REASON FOR IT?***

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Abstract. This article aims to analyze the rise and electoral success of the (Northern) League in Italy, for the period 2008-2018. The purpose of this analysis is to determine whether the economic difficulties encountered by the electorate or other factors, such as political and cultural ones, have influenced the growth and electoral success of the League in Italy. By analyzing both demand and supply-side data, the analysis shows that the League has had better electoral results in the years after the crisis when the economy has been improving than in the years when there has been a major economic shock. Regarding survey data on the supporters of the League, the analysis shows that the economy is among the least influential factors for them to support a right-wing populist party. On the contrary, the analysis shows that the main triggers for radical right populist mobilization have more to do with group values, identity issues, ethnic and cultural affiliation, xenophobic sentiments, skepticism towards foreigners, multiculturalism, and forms of Euroscepticism.

Keywords: populism, the Northern League, economic decline, national identity, Euroscepticism.

Introduction

Studies on the rise of populism can be traced back to the early 1960s and have become increasingly significant after the 1990s. Those initial studies focused mostly on Latin America and the so-called new populism.

* This article is a revised excerpt from the author's master's thesis, "The Influence of Economic Decline in the Rise of Right-Wing Populist Parties in Europe-Two Case Studies," defended at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University (Prague, Czech Republic).

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However, after the financial crisis of 2008, there has been a shift in studies of populism from left-wing to right-wing and from Latin America to Europe. Europe saw a resurgence of populist discourses with new and old populist parties or groups emerging as relevant political actors. Some of those parties even became part of coalition governments. The rise and electoral success of right-wing populist parties have been inquired by many authors, such as Cas Mudde, Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell, Pippa Norris, and Ronald Inglehart, etc., whose studies and conclusions have provided different lenses for explaining the reasons behind the growth of right-wing populism.¹ One of the approaches that analyzed the rise of right-wing populist parties is the so-called *economic crisis* approach. The core idea of this strand of literature is that during an economic crisis, there is a rise in electoral support for right-wing populist parties in line with a diffused search for material and immaterial security among the voters.

Although different other causal factors are mentioned in the existing economic theories, the general idea is that a specific economic situation, *e.g.*, a financial crisis, globalization, or the development of technology, leads to the transformation of the labor market, and generates economic insecurity and consequent social reactions asking for protection. These developments make citizens lose faith in the political system and traditional political parties. Relevant percentages of citizens direct their hopes towards populist parties that present themselves as outsiders, promoters of a change that brings appealing solutions to the voters' economic problems. Those solutions can be protectionism, building a border wall, or, regarding the European Union, forms of Euroscepticism that can even include an exit from the European Union.

The main purpose of this article is to test this *economic crisis* approach. The financial crisis of 2008 offers a solid opportunity to test this approach with regard to the populist increased electoral performance, as it was a

¹ Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell, "Introduction: The Sceptre and the Spectre," in *Twenty First Century Populism*, eds. Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 11; Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, "Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-nots and Cultural Backlash," *American Political Science Association Annual Meeting*, Philadelphia (1-4 September 2016).

financial crisis that hit simultaneously the United States of America and Europe and had substantial social consequences: bankruptcy of many businesses, unemployment, the rise of inequality, as well as a rise of right-wing populist parties in Europe after the crisis, in the general sense. This article can open perspectives for the study of populist parties, and further tests for the link between the increase of their electoral support and economic problems, as well as other non-economic factors that affect their success.

Case Study, Research Question, and Data Presentation

This article aims to analyze the rise and electoral success of the Northern League in Italy for the period 2008-2018. This is because the League was a successful right-wing populist party, with good election results that have brought the party to be a regular presence in the government, initially in a center-right coalition, and more recently in an innovative coalition with the Five Star Movement, the Mario Draghi's Grand Coalition. This case is also a good opportunity for study because Italy has been one of the European countries mostly affected by the financial crisis of 2008-2009. In line with the above, the research question that this article will try to answer is formulated as follows: is there a relation between the economic hardship in the aftermath of the Great Recession and the rise of electoral support of the Northern League in Italy? In this vein, the purpose of this analysis is to determine whether the economic difficulties encountered by the electorate became the main catalyst for the increased electoral performance of the Northern League in the post-2011 period or other factors, such as political and cultural ones, mattered more. In this article, a period of economic hardship is defined regarding a wide range of difficulties caused by the lack of resources to fulfil (basic) economic needs. To measure this, the analysis uses economic data such as: gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, unemployment rate, and the level of general consumption.

However, in line with the literature, this article assumes that it is not possible to explain the performance of the populist galaxy using exclusively economic-focused arguments; in line with the definitional features of

radical right populism, identity issues, group values, anti-immigration stances, and forms of resistance to the diffusion of multiculturalism are equally important. In line with this assumption, the paper focuses first on the relation between the economic crisis and the electoral performance of the League. Then it describes how the main concerns in terms of economic, social, and political aspects impact on the electoral behavior of the League's followers. It is important to see how these aspects are perceived by the Italian voters in general and what the specificities of the League's voters are. This implicit comparison also concerns other aspects such as migration, refugee crisis, multiculturalism, and liberal values.

In the attempt to provide an answer to these inquiries, the article looks first at the main consequences of the financial crisis and then at the electoral results with the aim to assess if there is a form a synchronization between the Great Recession and the increased electoral appeal. In the second part, data on the profile of the Leagues' supporters will be provided to examine the reasons why they mobilize in favor of the party, as well as what their stances on some of the main social and political issues are. This section will also provide data on the general characteristics of these supporters on issues such as the economy, immigration, foreign policy, national identity, culture, and the arrival of immigrants. These data will be provided firstly to clarify the social, economic, and cultural profile of the supporters of these parties, as well as the reasons for their mobilization.

Populism and its Main Features

Populism is a word that comes from the Latin word *populus*, which means "the people," in other words a collectivity, one of the most common features of the populist leaders and parties' discourse and their appeal to the community of ordinary people. Note also that populist leaders claim that their legitimacy and power stem from this collectivity, the community of ordinary people. This aspect of populism is somehow similar to the etymological definition of democracy. Democratic systems are founded on the concept of "people," the power of the people. The people are the sovereign source of power and legitimacy. However,

there is a difference between how liberal democracy and populists define the people. For the former, "people" are all (different) citizens of a country, members of a community defined by rights and duties, while for populists, "people" is a narrower concept, the "ordinary people" and, most importantly, a homogenous community in which differences are not perceived. This idea of the people, namely the "ordinary people," is a crucial point for the understanding of populism. Populism not only relies on the "ordinary people" to fight the elite but also tries to justify a form of political change, a revolution of the and for the people.² Furthermore, populist parties view both groups, the people and the elites, as being antithetical to each other: the people are good while the elites are evil, the people are hardworking while the elites are lazy, the people are moral while the elites are immoral. So, populism has a Manichean and moralistic view of the founding dyad *people* versus *elites*; the opposition is not only objectively justified, based on difference in terms of wealth or income, but also a moral one echoing the antagonism between good and evil, between friends and enemies.³ The people, in the attempt to protect this moral supremacy, is supposed to not collaborate with the elite.

Although populism considers the people as a homogeneous group, the bonds that make this group homogeneous vary across time and space. Not surprisingly, for populist leaders, the concept of people is always in the process of making and remaking, it acquires a different shape through time and space. In this process of reconstructing and reshaping, "the people" are always in a remaking process.⁴ The building of this collective identities in populism is sometimes based on a negative identity in the sense that it lays emphasis on what we are not. This reinforces the antagonism of the groups, *us* versus *them*. The antagonism between *the elite* and *the people* becomes the cornerstone of populism. Their relationship is symbiotic in the sense that without the elite, the people would not have reasons to fight.

According to Cas Mudde, populism is not an ideology that intends to transform a society economically and politically. It is a thin-centered

² Margaret Canovan, "Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy," *Political Studies* 47, no. 1 (1999): 2-16.

³ Cas Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist," *Government and Opposition* 39, (2004): 542.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 553.

ideology that sticks to other ideologies according to the needs of the populist leader(s) or the context. In addition, it can be seen as a set of ideas or mentality that try to explain the world, to make sense of it. Populism differs from classic ideologies such as liberalism, socialism, and nationalism, which all have a structural approach toward society and aim to transform it profoundly.⁵ Populists use these ideologies interchangeably, depending on the specific situation to which they react to. Populism is an incomplete ideology that is grafted with other ideologies or even divergent groups of ideas. Unlike full ideologies, populism considers the general principles or ideas as insufficient to solve problems and tries to find “its new path” in each case.⁶

So even though there are many definitions of populism, most scholars agree that populists main definitory feature is the division of society into two antagonistic groups, *the elite* and *the people*. In left-wing forms of populism, the definition of “the people” has a socio-economic basis, echoing the Marxist class. Hence, *the people* is generally depicted as the poor ones, the exploited, the subdued by the group of rapacious “elites.”⁷ In the right-wing forms, the concept of “the people” is often overlapping to that of nation, generally perceived in the ethnic terms. The right-wing populism has a strong exclusionary dimension, in the sense that radical right populists consider people as a community made of “pure” ethnic individuals that needs to fight the out-groups and all other threats coming from “perverting” minorities. When defining “the elite,” populists sometimes speak about the need to fight the political establishment, sometimes the economic elites (particularly true for left-wing populists) but also the media, equally considered as part of the corrupted “evil” ones.⁸ Last but not least, populists also denounce mainstream parties as part of those corrupted elites. Importantly, they do not refuse the logic of political competition, as they are legally registered and, as such, part of the competition and the consequent dynamics in the post-electoral period.

⁵ Ibid., 560.

⁶ Francisco Panizza, *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy* (New York: Verso, 2005), 10.

⁷ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 6.

⁸ Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist,” 545.

The Economic Explanation for the Rise of Right-Wing Populism

A wide literature shed light on the triggers of support for populist movements, leaders and parties. In their famous book, *Trump, Brexit and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash*, Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart show that populist parties were mostly supported by those with lower incomes, lower education levels, and those with long experience of unemployment. This argument supports the claim that economic insecurity fosters populist views among the general population.⁹ In a similar vein, Johannes Lindvall has studied the first elections in twenty countries after two financial crises, the Great Depression of 1929-1933, and the recent Great Recession and has found significant results regarding the economic voting mechanism during both periods. The research shows that there is more substantial support for the right-wing parties in the crisis period, and voters tend to vote mostly for the right in the elections following a crisis. Also, he has shown that voters punish the parties in government, considered to having been incompetent and having failed to respond to the crisis with effective policies.¹⁰ Similarly, Manuel Funke, Moritz Schularik, and Christoph Trebesch tested the interaction between the financial crisis and the electoral success of right-wing populist parties through econometric instruments. In this study, they found out that in the string financial crisis, extreme right parties increased their votes by thirty percent, but this happened only when there was a constant crisis.¹¹ The thirty percent increase corresponds to an approximate five percent-point increase in the total vote share captured by far-right parties, which is consequential. Alan De Bromhead, Barry Eichengreen, and Kevin O'Rourke found that there is a correlation between economic difficulties, the decline of economic growth, the rise of unemployment, the decrease in incomes, and the electoral success of far-right parties.¹² The electoral success of far-right

⁹ Inglehart and Norris, "Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism," 6.

¹⁰ Johannes Lindvall, "The Electoral Consequences of Two Great Crises," *European Journal of Political Research* 53 (2014): 748-749.

¹¹ Manuel Funke, Moritz Schularik and Christoph Trebesch, "Going to Extremes: Politics After Financial Crises, 1870-2014," *European Economic Review* 88 (2016): 237.

¹² Alan De Bromhead, Barry Eichengreen and Kevin O'Rourke, "Political Extremism in the 1920s and 1930s: Do German Lessons Generalise?," *The Journal of Economic History* 73, no. 2 (2013): 375.

parties was however strongly dependent on other aspects such as internal social problems, the political culture, and the experience with democracy.¹³ Therefore, countries that have had a previous democratic experience cope better with populist challengers in the sense that there is less significant increase in voting preferences for parties challenging the status quo.

Note also that a vast part of the literature focused on more detailed overviews of the by-effects of stressful economic situations. Hilde Coffé, Bruno Heyndels and Jan Vermeir scrutinized aspects such as unemployment rate, income, and the welfare state as individual dimensions of macro-scarcity, as well as interactions between these variables.¹⁴ Unlike GDP per capita, which masks the distribution of income, and inflation, and “underweights the unhappiness caused by jobless,” the unemployment rates provide a more immediate image of the economic costs.¹⁵ Unemployed individuals suffer both income and non-income losses, with the latter outweighing the former by as much as five-time. In direct connection, Daron Acemoglu, David Autor, David Dorn, Gordon H. Hanson, and Brendan Price studied the rise of unemployment in the United States of America. They highlighted that since the 1990s, the traditional economic sectors, especially manufacturing, have been transferred from developed to developing countries where the low wages attracted many companies.¹⁶ This has led to massive job losses in developed countries and has increased dissatisfaction among these social categories. This phenomenon became more evident especially after China’s entrance in the World Trade Organization (2001), when many of these industrial goods produced in the country began to be imported to the US. This situation caused a shock in US industries, which could not compete anymore with Chinese goods. Those industries were bankrupted and caused massive unemployment. A large part of the labor market in the US related to these

¹³ Ibid., 384.

¹⁴ Hilde Coffé, Bruno Heyndels and Jan Vermeir, “Fertile Grounds for Extreme Right-wing Parties: Explaining the Vlaams Blok’s Electoral Success,” *Electoral Studies* 26 (2007): 145.

¹⁵ Rafael Di Tella and Dani Rodrik, “Labor Market Shocks and the Demand for Trade Protection: Evidence from Online Surveys,” *NBER Working Paper* 25705 (2019): 3.

¹⁶ Daron Acemoglu, David Autor, David Dorn, Gordon H. Hanson and Brendan Price, “Import Competition and the Great US Employment Sag of the 2000s,” *Journal of Labor Economics* 34, no. 1 (2016): 168.

industrial sectors and the bankruptcy of these industries brought a great shock to the labor market, a wave of mass unemployment.¹⁷ On this ground, many studies relate the rise of right-wing populism in the US and, overall, in developed countries to the changes in the international arena, and generally to the consequent economic gap between the richest and other social strata, especially the impoverishment of the middle class, blue collars and small medium enterprises. Right-wing populists had been traditionally appealing to the low-skilled, blue-collar workers, who had low wages and were insecure about their jobs. This social group remained among the most vulnerable in turbulent situations. However, in recent times, the rhetoric of right-wing populists has become increasingly appealing to the low middle-class as well, primarily in line with their rhetoric related to economic protectionism, national based-economy, and anti-globalization.

The argument goes further, in that not only does it deal with economic vulnerability going beyond financial difficulties, but it also points to consequences on the human psychology. More concretely, this line of analysis finds out that when people are in insecure economic situations, they experience feelings of fear and anxiety about their economic and social status; people can compensate for these fears by increased participation.¹⁸ Populist parties offer them a sense of security and belonging in times of deep insecurities; moreover, solidarity between group members offers them support for interior peace and perceived security. Participation in these groups also generates forms of inner solidarity, conformity towards the rules of the group, and, in direct connection, total rejection of the outgroup, the alien, the foreigners. In this view, the populist leader is considered an additional guarantee of group cohesion, and consequently, a provider of inner solidarity and security. The leader is a *protector* of the group from the menaces coming from outside.

¹⁷ David Autor, David Dorn and Gordon Hanson, "The China Syndrome: Local Labor Market Effects of Import Competition in the United States," *American Economic Review* 103, no. 6 (2013): 2128.

¹⁸ Ronald Inglehart, "Modernization, Existential Security, and Cultural Change: Reshaping Human Motivations and Society," in Michele J. Gelfand, Chi-yue Chiu, and Ying-yi Hong (eds.), *Handbook of Advances in Culture and Psychology*, Volume 7, *Advances in Culture and Psychology* (New York: Oxford Academic, 2018), 10.1093/oso/9780190879228.003.0001.

Two events have dramatically strengthened this argument: the 2015 refugee wave with migrants originating from conflict zones in the Middle East and Northern Africa, and consecutive terrorist attacks in Western countries. Many of these attacks were carried out by terrorists born and raised in the West, later radicalized. This has led to increased skepticism toward citizens of Muslim descent. On this ground, voters from Western Europe were challenged by two sources of anxiety: one related to the growing economic inequality, the second related to a pervasive sense of physical insecurity. It is exactly on this ground that across Europe and in the United States of America, radical right populist parties and leaders won visibility with an electoral platform voicing the need to provide a sense of belonging and increased economic and physical security. The reader should also consider that what this wide literature shows is that economic difficulties are not the only trigger for an increased populist mobilization. The context, the democratic mechanisms of accountability, the political culture, the legacies of the past or more technical aspects such as the peculiarities of the electoral system are equally important.

The (Northern) League in Italy

A Short History of the Party

Since the 2018 general election, the Northern League has dropped the geographic reference and held the name The League. This came in line with a change in the party leadership and more specifically Matteo Salvini's endeavor to give the party a national character. In the following part of this paper, the analysis refers to the *the League*. Prior to the 2018 elections, the party's name echoed the regional anchorage and defense on the so-called Padia's people; the party name "The Northern League" (*Lega Nord*), however, the name the League (*Lega*) was regularly used in the media.

The Northern League originated from the merger of several regionalist parties and organizations, which operated in northern Italy in the 1980s. The most important of these organizations was *Lega Lombarda* (the Lombard League), whose leader, Umberto Bossi, later

became the leader of the Northern League.¹⁹ Until the election of Salvini in 2013, the crucial elements in the League's discourse were related to the need to promote increased political and economic autonomy in the Northern Italian regions, as part of an imagined community, Padania, culturally and ethnically different from the Southern part of Italy. Since its foundation, the League has been voicing two main concerns. Firstly, there was the need to defend the richness of the industrialized north against the waste and corruption characterizing the underdeveloped south, and the denunciation of bad political economic, social, and cultural management promoted by the government in Rome. On this basis, the League asked for a reduced role of the central government and increased powers to the regional authorities. The second characteristic feature was the populist dimension in the core of an ethno-regionalist party. As mentioned above, an essential element of populism is the division of society into two homogeneous and antagonist groups, "the elites" and "the people."²⁰ In the case of the League Nord, *the elites* were the political and economic elites from Rome, accused of subduing and exploiting the good and hard-working people of the North.²¹ The League referred to the Northern people as an ethnic organic community, with a strong exclusionary message.²² The positive description of the Northern people was put in direct opposition not only with the Rome-based political elites but also with the negative features of the southerners, the Italian from the Southern region accused of laziness and other negative aspects. Considering the immigration flows originated in the post-communist area and the increased number of Eastern European immigrants in the industrialized North, the League progressively added an anti-Eastern European immigrant discourse, which eventually extended to the wider category of immigrants.

In the context of the 2013 primary elections, the rising star Matteo Salvini became the third federal secretary, defeating the founder of the

¹⁹ Pietro Ignazi, *Partiti politici in Italia* [Political parties in Italy] (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2008), 88.

²⁰ Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*, 6.

²¹ Albertazzi and McDonnell, *Populists in Power*, 44.

²² Cass Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, "Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism: Comparing Contemporary Europe and Latin America," *Government and Opposition* 48, no. 2 (2013): 147.

party, Umberto Bossi.²³ Since the beginning of his leadership, Salvini launched a fierce campaign against the European Union, especially against the Euro currency, which he called a “crime against humanity.”²⁴ The new leader increasingly accused the national government (Prime Minister Matteo Renzi) to be a *collaborator* of the EU elites in exploiting the honest Italian people.²⁵ Like other European right-wing populists, the League also has Eurosceptic stances.²⁶ Under his leadership, the League broadened the international collaboration with other radical right-wing populist parties, among which the National Front, led by Marine le Pen, and the Dutch Party for Freedom, led by Geert Wilders. Ahead of the 2014 European Parliamentary elections, they strengthened the cooperation even more with a shared critical assessment of the European Union (EU) and the migration and asylum policy.²⁷ What these parties voiced was a common denunciation of the EU and the European elites as the promoter of a failed strategy to fight the economic crisis and their solidarity with migrants as a threat to the national identity and well-being of native European citizens.

Right after the election of Matteo Salvini as the Federal Secretary, a federal congress of the party was held in July 2014. This congress approved Salvini’s political line. Primarily, there was an essential change in the approach that the League had towards the central and southern regions. The Congress approved the formation of a “sister party” for these regions, *Noi Con Salvini* (We with Salvini). The party’s congress also endorsed Salvini’s liberal economic agenda and what shall become a core element in the successive electoral programs, the flat tax.

²³ Repubblica, “Matteo Salvini è il nuovo segretario della Lega Nord: «No all’Ue, è un gulag»” [Matteo Salvini is the new secretary of the Northern League: “No to the EU, it’s a gulag”], December 7, 2013, accessed November 20, 2022, www.repubblica.it/politica/2013/12/07/news/lega_nord_il_giorno_delle_primarie_salvini_e_bossi_in_corsa_per_la_segreteria.

²⁴ Lettera 43, “Lega Nord, Salvini: «Euro è crimine contro l’umanità»” [The Northern League, Salvini: Euro is a crime against Humanity], December 15, 2013, accessed November 20, 2022, www.lettera43.it/lega-nord-salvini-euro-e-crimine-contro-lumanita.

²⁵ Mateo Salvini, *Secondo Matteo: Follia e Coraggio per Cambiare il Paese* [According to Matthew: Madness and Courage to Change the Country] (Milano: Rizzoli, 2016), 138.

²⁶ Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, 15.

²⁷ Politica Semplice, “Partiti Politici, Lega Nord” [Political Parties, the Northern League], accessed November 20, 2022, particasesemplice.it/partecipazione-politica/partiti-politici/lega-nord.

Note that since Matteo Salvini has been elected Federal Secretary of the League, there has been a significant shift in the discourse and advocating policies of the League. A symbolic act was the change of the party's name, from The Northern League to The League. Shortly after his election as Federal Secretary, Salvini apologized for the tough discourse on the southern Italians, while claiming that Italy could be saved only if treated as a whole, a community, and this was the interest of the Northern part also.²⁸ The formation of a sister party was part of this effort to turn the League into a national party. In the 2018 general elections, this sister party was dissolved, and the League changed its name. As noted by Daniele Albertazzi, this is a peculiar case, since it is quite a rare that a regionalist party goes national.²⁹ Under Salvini's leadership, the informal role of the leader increased. It was visible in the party name also, the League-for Salvini Prime Minister (*Lega per Salvini Premier*).

In the 2018 general elections, the League ran as part of the center-right coalition composed of The League, We With Salvini, (its counterpart for central and southern Italy), Go Italy (*Forza Italia*), and the recently created Brothers of Italy. This coalition presented a joint list with the Union of the Center (*Unione di Centra*). With a new electoral symbol and a new agenda promoted by Salvini, the party obtained the best electoral result in its history, with more than 17% of the votes both in the Chamber and the Senate, becoming the first party of the center-right coalition. After the elections, none of the main competing coalitions and parties (center-right, center-left, The Five Star Movement) was able to gather a governing majority. The Five Star Movement (*Movimento Cinque Stelle*) started the negotiation process with The League to form a government. After successful negotiations, a coalition government between The League and the Five Star Movement was formed, with Giuseppe Conte as Prime Minister and Matteo Salvini with the double position of vice-prime minister and Minister of Interior.³⁰ The League's

²⁸ Daniele Albertazzi, Arianna Giovannini and Antonella Seddone, "«No Regionalism Please, We Are Leghisti!» The Transformation of the Italian the League Nord under the Leadership of Matteo Salvini," *Regional & Federal Studies* 28, no. 5 (2018): 655-657.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Corriere della Sera, "Governo Conte, la lista di tutti i ministri: Salvini all'Interno e Di Maio al Welfare. Saranno vicepremier" [Conte government, the list of all ministers: Salvini at the Interior and Di Maio at Welfare. They will be deputy prime minister], August 31, 2018, accessed November 21, 2022, roma.corriere.it/notizie/politica/18_maggio_31/governo-conte-moavero-milanesi-estere-savona-affari-europei.

period in government was turbulent and short, marked by many divergences (even public) between the two governing parties. In August 2019, Salvini announced that the League would leave the government and called for new elections.³¹

As was mentioned above, the 2008-2009 financial crisis is a good opportunity to test the relation between the by-effects of the Great Recession and the electoral performance of a radical right populist party. The following section will describe some of the consequences of the financial crisis in Italy, as well as the main indicators of the performance of the Italian economy, GDP, unemployment rate, and general consumption. On this basis, the next part tries to identify a possible synchronization between the post-crisis election results and the effects of the economic crisis. The concluding remarks provide an overview of the League's online supporters with a focus on the reasons why they support the party, as well as their opinions about mainstream political and social issues.

Electoral Results after the Crisis

In the grip of the financial crisis, the Italian government of Romano Prodi lost the Senate vote of confidence in January 2008, and general elections were held on 13-14 April 2008. The winner of the elections was the center-right coalition led by Silvio Berlusconi, who became Prime Minister. One of the members in the center-right coalition was The Northern League, at that time led by Umberto Bossi.³² The third party in the elections, the League increased its votes by 3.7 percent at the Chamber of Deputies and 3.4 percent at the Senate.³³ As a result, the League obtained sixty mandates at the Chamber (out of 630) and twenty-six at the Senate

³¹ The Guardian, "Italy's Matteo Salvini calls for fresh elections as coalition fractures," August 9, 2019, accessed November 21, 2022, www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/09/italys-matteo-salvini-calls-for-fresh-elections-as-coalition-fractures.

³² BBC News, "Italy returns Berlusconi to power," May 15, 2008, accessed November 21, 2022, news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7347618.

³³ Archivio storico delle elezioni, Senato – Area Italia [Historical archive of the elections, Senate – Italy area], April 13, 2008, accessed November 21, 2022, elezionistorico.interno.gov.it.

(out of 315 members). Overall, if compared to the 2006 results, the League had increased the number of its representatives in the Italian Chamber of Deputies by thirty-two members and thirteen members in the Senate. It was the best result that the League had achieved since the general elections of 1996. On this ground, the League continued to be the most important ally of the Berlusconi government, although with limited success regarding the fiscal autonomy of the northern region.

Consider that even before the break of the financial crisis, Italy had problems with massive public debt, low productivity, and unemployment. The campaign of the Berlusconi's coalition was based on the need to guarantee financial stability, and the revival of the Italian economy.³⁴ The collapse of Lehman Brothers in September 2008 showed the seriousness of the crisis and produced the first consequences on the Italian economy. During the first period of the US financial crisis, Italy did not face many by-effects, the Italian financial institution did not own a large number of subprime bonds.³⁵ Subsequently, the financial crisis, however, had a high impact on the Italian economy with a colossal drop in the GDP and the rise of unemployment. The main problem for Italy after the crisis was the reduction of liquidity. However, the support of the Government limited the losses. Nonetheless, due to insecurity, second-level banks reduced lending to a maximum, which made the small companies reduce investments. Also, the consumers began to save and stopped spending. As a result, many industrial sectors had difficulties surviving. They reduced the number of workers and businesses which could not make payments to subcontractors, who went bankrupt. Therefore, the main effects of the financial crisis were on the small enterprises and the working class who lost their jobs.³⁶ The economic recession affected the entire Italian production system, although this manifested differently across economic

³⁴ Roberto Di Quirico, "Italy and Global Economic Crisis," *Bulletin of Italian Politics* 2, no. 2 (2010): 4.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

³⁶ Matteo Bugamelli, Riccardo Cristadoro and Giordano Zevi, *La crisi internazionale e il sistema produttivo italiano: un'analisi su dati a livello di impresa* [The international crisis and the Italian production system: an analysis of firm-level data], Occasional Papers 58 (Rome: Banca d'Italia, 2009), 7.

sectors and geographical areas. Generally, the crisis had influenced large companies, but it had a chain effect on their subcontractors too.

The first elections in which the League took part after the beginning of the crisis were the European Parliamentary Elections, in June 2009. In these elections, the League obtained a positive result, more than double if compared to the 2004 elections (from 5 to 10.2 percent of the votes). The League had a group of nine MEPs to which five MEPs were added if compared to the previous elections. In the 2010 regional elections held in thirteen out of the twenty Italian regions, the League maintained its place as the third party in the country. It won the regional presidency in Piedmont and Veneto and supported The People of Freedom (Silvio Berlusconi's party) in most of the northern regions.³⁷ Under Roberto Maroni's leadership, the League competed in the general elections in February 2013, with a negative performance. Cut by half if compared to the 2008 performance, the League obtained only 4.1 percent of votes at the Chamber (a decrease of forty-two MPs if compared to 2008 elections) and 4.3 percent of the votes at Senate (a decrease of eight MPs).³⁸

The economic performance of Italy in the year before the elections (2012) was poor, the country had an economic recession, the GDP declined by three percent, the unemployment rate increased to 10.4 percent, and consumption declined. All the economic indicators were deteriorating, and there was a difficult financial situation. The economic difficulties and the fact that the League was in opposition for a year and a half did not influence the elections' results positively. The League performed worse than in the previous elections. This implies that the economic difficulties do not necessarily impact positively the votes for radical right populist parties. The electoral loss is, however, contingent on contextual factors, among which we mention the corruption scandal in which the founding leader Umberto Bossi was involved in, as well as the party internal crisis, with the short leadership of the former Minister Roberto Maroni.

³⁷ Archivio storico delle elezioni, Regionali [Historical archive of the elections, Regionals], March 28, 2010, accessed November 21, 2022, elezionistorico.interno.gov.it.

³⁸ Archivio storico delle elezioni, Senato - Area Italia [Historical archive of the elections, Senate - Italy], February 24, 2013, accessed November 21, 2022, elezionistorico.interno.gov.it.

In December 2013, Matteo Salvini became the party leader. As mentioned above, the party changed its discourse and amended the core of its credo, embraced a national approach, and toughened the anti-EU and anti-immigration stances. The next elections in which the League under Salvini was tested were the European Parliament elections held in May 2014, just a few months after Salvini took the leadership. In this election also the electoral results worsened: minus four percent less than in the previous 2009 elections and a loss of four MEPs if compared to 2009.³⁹ Part of the explanation is connected to the exceptional result the Democratic Party obtained in those elections, in direct connection with the honeymoon of the Prime Minister Matteo Renzi. In the next local elections, for the first time, the League marked a successful penetration in the formerly red regions from the Center, like Tuscany, Umbria, and Marche. It makes sense to consider that the poor results in the first round of elections after the election of Salvini (December 2013) are less a reflection of the appeal of the new leadership and more the by-effect of the internal problems that plagued the party at the end of Bossi's Presidency and the short-lived Maroni's.

The years 2012 and 2013 were challenging for the Italian economy; GDP contracted by 2.4 percent and 1.8 percent respectively, and unemployment reached 12.5 percent in 2013, the highest level on record.⁴⁰ Despite a message targeting the bad economic management in Rome and the EU austerity measures, the League had a bad performance. The impact of economic performance on the results of a challenger party like the new League remains limited and most probably internal tensions count more. Although Italy suffered from political instability, economic stagnation, and lack of structural reforms, the upcoming years 2014-2018 saw a moderate improvement in the Italian economy. After negative economic growth for two years, 2014 was the first year with positive economic growth (+0.2 percent) and it continued in a positive trend, having the highest score in 2017 (+1.7 percent) until 2018 when it fell to 0.7 percent. Also, in those years, there was a reduction in the unemployment

³⁹ Archivio storico delle elezioni, Europee – Area Italia + Estero [Historical archive of the European elections – Italy + Abroad area], May 25, 2014, accessed November 21, 2022, elezionistorico.interno.gov.it.

⁴⁰ Focus Economics, "Italy Economic Forecast," May 2, 2023, accessed November 22, 2022, <https://www.focus-economics.com/countries/italy/>.

rate.⁴¹ It is in a relatively optimistic scenario that Italian parliamentary elections were held in March 2018, after the dissolution of parliament in December 2017. In the meantime, Salvini's League had shifted from a regional to a national party. In these elections, the League showed an extraordinary appeal with 17.4 percent of votes at the Chamber (124 deputies) and 17.6 percent of votes at the Senate (fifty-eight senators out of 315, forty more than the previous ones).⁴²

During the years 2014-2017, the Italian economy was improving. There was positive economic growth and a decrease in unemployment. Contrary to the theory, the success of right-wing populist parties was not supported by a bad economic period, the League having achieved its best result ever, although the economy had not been at its worst performance. Meanwhile, in the 2013 elections, when the Italian economy was facing its hardest time, the party did not have a good electoral performance. The transformation of the League, from a regionalist party to a national one, had influenced the 2018 election results. The League did not aim any longer for autonomy or separatism of the Padania region but took a national stance against migrants and the European Union. The "enemies" were not the Central Government and southerner citizens anymore, but Brussels and the migrants. The League achieved its electoral success in a period when it had drastically changed its aims and its discourse. As a regional party, the main objective of the League was achieving fiscal and political autonomy for the Padania region. Rarely, the party also talked about the transformation of the Italian republic into a confederation. During Bossi's leadership, the League aspired to become the first political party in the Northern Regions region, getting a crucial role in deciding who will form the central government. Through this, it could condition the autonomy of Padania.

When the League transformed itself into a national party, it changed its platform, its profile, its intentions, and its discourse. From that moment, the League intended to become the first party in the country, it aimed for

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Archivio storico delle elezioni, Camera – Area Italia [Historical Archive of the Elections, Chamber – Italy], March 4, 2018, accessed November 22, 2022, elezionistorico.interno.gov.it; Archivio storico delle elezioni, Senato – Area Italia [Historical Archive of the Elections, Senate – Italy], April 4, 2018, accessed November 22, 2022, elezionistorico.interno.gov.it.

nationwide successful electoral results, not only in a region. Since its transformation, the League significantly increased its votes and fulfilled its aims to become a nationwide relevant party. From the elections' results, it can be noticed that there was no direct relation between the hardest economic times and the League's electoral success. The reasons can be found in the party's transformation and the change in its aims. By calling to the national Italian identity, the national language, culture and values, Christian identity, anti-migrant, and xenophobic discourse, the League achieved a nationwide mobilization, which was translated into rapid electoral results. Another aspect that needs to be specified is the crisis of the main party from the center right, Forza Italia. The decline of Forza Italia, a decrease in consensus for Berlusconi's party at the national level, left a considerable gap in the right-wing electorate, which was filled by the League.⁴³ Especially in central Italy, a region that had usually been hostile towards the League, but under Salvini's leadership, the party had successful results there too.⁴⁴

Who and Why Supported the League?

As mentioned above, it is important to consider the demand side of the aspect under scrutiny. This last part focuses on an overview of the profile of the League's supporters, the reasons why they support the party, and their opinions on some major social and political issues. This analysis can allow a more fine-tuned understanding of the relevance of the economic determinants for voting together with other traditional aspects related to identity, group values, and so on. In this way, the reasons why these individuals support the League, as well as their cultural, economic, and social background, will become clearer. A study by Demos has analyzed who has voted for the League, and who the party supporters were in the online milieu.⁴⁵ Based on this survey, among the Facebook supporters of the League, seventy-eight

⁴³ Moreno Mancosu and Riccardo Ladini, *The 'New' League Success in the Red Belt and Its Post-fascist Inheritance: Evidence from 2018 National Elections*, Working paper, (2018): 3, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/u2rq7>.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴⁵ Jamie Bartlett, Jonathan Birdwell, and Duncan McDonnell, *Populism in Europe: Lega Nord*, (London: Demos 2012), 38-49.

percent are male and twenty-two percent female. These percentages show a relevant gender split within the League's followers. The party's supporters were among the youngest if compared to their European counterparts (sixty-nine percent were under twenty-five years of age). However, this does not represent the League's typical voter; there is a bias in the sample of reference, probably due to the young age of Facebook users in Italy. Regarding the level of education, fifty-nine percent have a high school diploma, and twenty percent have a university degree. The League's Facebook supporters are more likely to be unemployed (fourteen percent) than the average unemployment rate in Italy (7.9 percent) at that time. Supporters of the League generally do not believe in politics and are skeptical about the effectiveness of politics. Nevertheless, they do not link *politics* with their party. Politics is considered to be a feature of the underground and corrupted elite in the Rome central government. Asked for the reasons why they support the League, the most important reasons were group values, anti-migration stances, northern autonomy, and identity, while the economy is the less voted - only six percent of respondents.

Respondents who support the League for groups values have said:

"Because it is close to my ideas and, most of all, it is the only party which seems to want to improve things in Italy."

"It is the only party strongly linked to the grassroots and its voters."

"Because of the principles for which the movement was created: protecting our areas, culture, and traditions."⁴⁶

About anti-immigration the League's supporters have claimed:

"Because I am tired of seeing my country being destroyed by people that were not born here and of seeing those close to me being afraid of those we have welcomed."

"I do not want immigrants in MY country. There are too many of them."⁴⁷

About identity:

"Because, at the moment, it is the only political party that represents the values of ordinary people without denying and rejecting cultural traditions and identities."

⁴⁶ Ibid., 51.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 52.

"Because it is a political party that keeps local identities alive. It respects and promotes centuries-old traditions."

"Because it is a political party that REALLY gives a voice to the ordinary citizen."⁴⁸

A survey done by Pew Research Center in October-December 2017 (a few months before the 2018 Italian general elections) shows that only fifteen percent of the League supporters are satisfied with the Italian economy. That is closely to the general Italian public view – only eighteen percent are satisfied with the Italian economy.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, in terms of feelings and ideas about national and cultural identity, there is a considerable difference between League supporters and other Italian citizens. The League's supporters have a sense of superiority of their nation and culture over the others. Forty-eight percent of its supporters strongly agree that "people are not perfect, but their culture is superior to others."⁵⁰ Another factor that has influenced the voters of right-wing populist parties is the sentiment toward Islam. Fifty-four percent of the League supporters, strongly agree with the claim: "Islam is fundamentally incompatible with their culture and values." The superiority of national culture and this sentiment towards Islam is far less prevalent among the rest of the public in the country. This tendency is confirmed and, in a later survey, where sixty-seven percent of the League supporters have a negative opinion of Muslims, while forty-five percent of non-supporters have the same opinion.⁵¹

Nativism is the ideology that best suits right-wing populism. Supporters of these parties have a similar approach. Seventy-six percent of the League's supporters say that "it is important to have been born here to be one of us truly."⁵²

⁴⁸ Ibid., 53.

⁴⁹ Bruce Stokes, "Populist views in Europe: It is not just the economy," Pew Research Center July 19, 2018, accessed November 22, 2022, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/07/19/populist-views-in-europe-its-not-just-the-economy/.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Kat Devlin and Mara Mordecai, "Supporters of European populist parties stand out on key issues, from EU to Putin," Pew Research Center, November 18, 2019, accessed November 22, 2022, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/11/18/supporters-of-european-populist-parties-stand-out-on-key-issues-from-eu-to-putin.

⁵² Kyle Taylor, "Many Italians are deeply pessimistic ahead of general election," Pew Research Center, March 2, 2018, accessed November 22, 2022, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/03/02/many-italians-are-deeply-pessimistic-ahead-of-general-election.

Supporters of right-wing populist parties consider more important familiar heritage than other citizens. Eighty-six percent of the League supporters agree with the claim, "it is important to have our country's family background to be one of us truly."⁵³ Reactions against immigrants by League supporters also have an economic factor, as seventy-three percent of the League's supporters consider migrants "a burden on the Italian economy."⁵⁴ In comparison, forty percent of Italians think the same. However, the main concerns about immigrants have to do with multiculturalism, and they say: "having an increasing number of people of different racial, ethnic, and national backgrounds made their country a worse place to live."⁵⁵ Likewise, sixty-nine percent of the party's supporters consider that migrants "increase the risk of terrorist attacks in the country," while forty-seven percent of other Italians have the same opinion. Eighty percent of the League's supporters think that it "is necessary for the migrants to adopt Italian customs and traditions."⁵⁶

Since Salvini was elected the League's Federal Secretary, the anti-EU discourse has been toughened. Sixty-three percent of its supporters do not have a "favorable opinion" of the European Union. Seventy-seven of the League supporters think that "some EU powers should be returned to the national governments," while fifty-five percent of other Italians share this opinion. Also, sixty-eight percent of the League's supporters consider that "EU membership has been bad for the Italian economy," while only forty-two percent of the Italians have the same idea.⁵⁷ About foreign policy, forty-nine percent of the League supporters have a positive view of Putin, while thirty percent of other Italians share the same opinion.⁵⁸

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Laura Silver, Courtney Johnson, and Kyle Taylor, "The Populist Parties that Shook Up Italy's Election," Pew Research Center, May 30, 2019, accessed November 22, 2022, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/05/30/views-of-italian-populist-party-supporters.

⁵⁸ Devlin and Mordecai, "Supporters of European Populist Parties Stand Out on Key Issues, from EU to Putin."

Discussion and Conclusions

The main point of this article is to argue that by comparing election-to-election the results of the League after the financial crisis of 2008, this party had the most satisfactory electoral results in the periods when the Italian economy was improving. By analyzing this case study, it can be concluded that there is no direct relation between times of economic hardship, the latter measured by GDP, the level of unemployment and the level of consumption, and the electoral success of this right-wing populist party. The League has had better electoral results in the years after the crisis when the economy has been improving than in the years when there has been a major economic shock. The demand-side focus confirms this observation: the supporters of this party, instead of economic issues, mostly emphasize group values, cultural and identity issues, skepticism towards multiculturalism, and Eurosceptic tendencies, as reasons for their support of these parties. Even when the supporters of these parties speak out against immigration, more than because of economic terms they are against immigration for cultural and identity reasons. The economic dissatisfaction of the supporters of these parties is not much higher than that of the rest of the population. Also, when asked about the reasons why they support these parties, the economy ranks among the last reasons.

Although the economic problems have been present in the discourse of Matteo Salvini, especially when they are related to other issues such as immigration and refugees, who are presented as “stealers of jobs from Italians,” the research on the League’s supporters shows that the economic aspect is among the least influential factors for them to support the right-wing populist parties.⁵⁹ Their perceptions of the economic situation in Italy are not much different from the rest of the population. On the contrary, the main reasons why these people support right-wing populist parties have more to do with group values, identity issues, ethnic and cultural affiliation, xenophobic sentiments, skepticism towards foreigners, multiculturalism, and growing Euroscepticism. Their opposition to immigration is part of their opposition to a heterogeneous

⁵⁹ Mateo Salvini, *Secondo Matteo: Follia e Coraggio*, 140.

society in ethnic and religious terms, fear of growing terrorism, and loss of national identity. Overall, the main triggers for mobilization are group values, anti-immigration, and identity than about the economy. Meanwhile, when voices are raised related to the need of social security, efficient policies to fight unemployment, and a more solid welfare state, most of the reasons are supported by anti-migration, xenophobic, anti-Muslim stances, *in genera* a highly critical assessment of a society made of multiculturalism, tolerance, and cohabitation of different ethnicities and religions, as well as against European Union, as a representative of transnationalism, globalization, an enemy of national identity; there are less discussions about economic factors.

After the Second World War, mainstream political groups in Western Europe, traditional right and left-wing, talked mostly about economic points such as unemployment, taxation, inflation, trade unions, public services, healthcare, housing, education, and the welfare state. For that reason, usually there was a class-based vote, with workers voting mostly for left-wing parties, while the middle to the upper classes voted for the right-wing parties. Topics related to cultural and national identity, international situations, and membership in international bodies have been left in silence, outside the public sphere. For a long time, the system of political parties in Western Europe was frozen. It was dominated by two mainstream political groups, which were lined up as per the main direction of political cleavage, left and right, which had the economic dimension as the primary variable. As a result of the political changes in the world, the decline and fall of the Soviet Union, and the acceptance of the market economy by the mainstream left parties, the economic dimension became faded in the political discourse, and later on, the system of political parties in Western Europe was dissolved. As there was a consensus on the economic dimension, what distinguished the political parties became the cultural dimension, identifications with specific values, conservative versus progressive.

In a comprehensive study about the causes of the rise of right-wing populists in Europe and the United States of America, Norris and Inglehart demonstrate that the shifts toward post-materialist values starting in the 1950s caused a strong counter-war from the conservative parts of society.⁶⁰ The

⁶⁰ Inglehart and Norris, "Trump, Brexit, and the rise of populism," 27.

change of values from materialist to post-materialist in Western Europe has caused strong counter-reactions from those segments of the society which felt alienated in this new reality. Before this shift, society was much more homogenous in ethnic, religious, and cultural terms. The heterogeneity of the society, multiculturalism, and tolerance towards the *other* has changed the hegemony of the public discourse towards those new values. This caused a *counterattack* from those affected most by this new reality. They felt threatened in their country.

The discourse of right-wing parties about topics such as migration, and national, religious, and cultural identity is an expression of an essential shift in the political struggle between parties, from economic topics to cultural ones. This struggle between political parties is not focused only on migrations and attitudes towards foreigners. It includes other cultural topics, such as gender equality, LGBT+ rights, sexual freedom, the role of the European Union in internal issues, secularism, the decline of traditional values, race, and demography. These topics have become an essential argument in defining identity. The economic question has not disappeared from political discourse; populists present the migrants as an economic threat, under the approach of “foreigners who will come and steal the local citizen’s job.”⁶¹ Nevertheless, the most volatile issues raised by these leaders concern the identity topic.

This perspective can also be seen in the criticism of the EU by the (Northern) League. It continues to present the economic dimension, accusations of the enslavement of *the people* for the economic interests of the elite. Most importantly European Union is described as a representative of globalization, multiculturalism, liberal values, free movement of people, migration, tolerance to foreigners, and ethnic minorities, as well as a loss of national power. For those reasons, the discourse of the League generally goes in two lines: the xenophobic, anti-migrants, anti-Muslim, on one hand, and the anti-EU discourse, loss of national identity, on the other hand. The change of discourse from economic issues to identity issues, and the rise of support for the League in the periods when they speak about threats to national identity show that the most prominent question which disturbs the society is the identity one.

⁶¹ Mateo Salvini, *Secondo Matteo: Follia e Coraggio*, 138.