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Going, Going,... Not Quite Gone Yet?

‘Bossi’s Lega’ and the Survival of the Mass Party

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Abstract

The scholarly literature has devoted a lot of attention to the declining number of party members in post-industrial societies, arguing that parties now lack the incentives to maintain a large membership. However, some right-wing populist parties have continued to rely on activism by being rooted at the local level and by fostering the creation of closed communities of ideologically committed members. In short, they have adopted an organisational model in many ways reminiscent of the mass party. By focusing on one of these organisations, the Italian Lega Nord (LN – Northern League) under the leadership of Umberto Bossi (1991–2012), and by drawing on individual and group interviews with party members, this article explores the latter’s experiences of activism. It highlights the reasons why activists stayed in the LN and what they gained from doing so, arguing that the fostering of a strong collective identity among people was an important ingredient of the LN’s appeal, and that understanding it can help us achieve a more nuanced conceptualisation of different forms of activism today.

Keywords: Mass parties, political participation, activism, membership incentives, Lega Nord.

Word count: 8429

Introduction

In recent decades, much academic debate has focused on the ‘crisis of democracy’ affecting post-industrial societies – specifically its pillars of parties and popular participation (Crouch 2004; Dalton and Wattenberg 2000; Pharr and Putnam 2000), with particular attention being devoted to the parties’ declining membership (Dalton 2005; Mair 1994; Mair and van Biezen 2001; Scarrow 2000; van Biezen, Mair and Poguntke 2012; Whiteley and Seyd 1998). In their article ‘Going, Going,... Gone?’

The Decline of Party Membership in Contemporary Europe’, Ingrid van Biezen, Peter Mair and Thomas Poguntke argued that party membership data provided evidence of no less than ‘the sheer extent of party transformation in Europe since the 1980s’ (2012: 42). One reason for the drop in the number of party members that has been noted in many countries has been identified in the increasing dominance of ‘the party in public office’ over ‘the party on the ground’ (Katz and Mair 1994). As parties have turned into ‘cartels’ that share out resources provided by the state (Detterbeck 2005; Katz and Mair 1995, 2009), they are thought to lack the incentive to build or maintain a large membership, since they no longer believe they need the financial and organisational support that the latter can provide (Mair 2013; Scarrow 2000; Whiteley 2011). The literature on party organisation has therefore been unanimous in pronouncing the obsolescence of the mass party model, as famously described by Maurice Duverger (1951), pointing to similar political, sociological and technological changes as contributing to its seemingly inevitable downfall (particularly the erosion of traditional social milieux, and the shift from local canvassing to mass media campaigning for the diffusion of political messages) (Katz and Mair 1995, 2009; Kirchheimer 1966; Panebianco 1988). Although recent research has shown that, even during their brief ‘golden age’ – that is, from the post-war period up to the 1960s – mass parties were, in fact, usually not as large, nor as widespread, as had been widely assumed (Scarrow 2015: Chapter 3), the model of the mass party *did* provide ‘an ideal to which many parties aspired’ (Ibid.: 37). If the mass party has now become obsolescent, then obviously this would no longer be the case.

Mass parties are characterised by vertical organisational ties, a clearly defined ideology and reliance on members for funding and success (Panebianco 1988: 264).ⁱ Moreover, they are rooted at the local level. In contrast, cartel parties are characterised by ‘catch-all’ ideologies, rely mainly on the state for funding and tend to be suspicious of activists, i.e. ‘individuals that are not only members, but active participants in a movement’ (Klandermans and Mayer 2006: 3). This is mainly because activists are likely to try to influence party strategy, formulation of policy and candidate selection, thereby restricting their leaders’ freedom for manoeuvre (Mair 1994: 16–17).ⁱⁱ As a consequence, cartel parties do not necessarily wish to maintain a large and rooted organisation on the ground.

As Paul Whiteley (2011: 36) has pointed out, however, these developments are not without consequences: ‘If the state capture of political parties promotes wider

anti-party sentiment and serves to weaken party identification in electorates, then the consequences for contemporary democracy will be serious. Such a development is likely to lead to lower turnouts, more support for anti-system parties and problems of governance in general'. Indeed, in recent years, practices of collusion and 'cartelisation', and the growing disengagement of political organisations from people, have been criticised by right-wing populist parties, who claim the latter to be an inevitable, if unwelcome, consequence of the former (Katz 2005: 118).ⁱⁱⁱ Besides being close ideologically, some of these parties also share the mass party model, continue to promote social integration among their members and seek to preserve 'collective identities through ideology' (Panebianco 1988: 268). These are parties such as the Swiss Schweizerische Volkspartei (SVP – Swiss People's Party) (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015: Chapter 4), the Finnish Perussuomalaiset (PS – The Finns Party) (Arter 2013, 2014) and the Italian Lega Nord (LN – The Northern League) (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015: Chapter 3; Passarelli and Tuorto 2012). As Cas Mudde (2007: 264) has said, however, 'Very little empirical information is available on the internal life and structure' of these parties. More specifically, despite the insights offered by a handful of pioneering studies into the lived experiences of right-wing populist parties' activists (notably Klandermans and Mayer 2006; Art 2011), we still know very little about how these organisations function and what their members *think* of their experience of activism, and specifically what this *means* to them, and what they *gain* from volunteering time and resources to a party.

This article aims to contribute to this debate by focusing on the people who have been active within the Italian Lega Nord under the leadership of Umberto Bossi (from now on: 'Bossi's Lega'). Bossi is the LN's founder, led it for over two decades (i.e. between 1991 and 2012), and was a strong believer in the virtues of the membership-based mass party model (Bossi and Vimercati 1992: 41, 73–4; see also Diamanti 1993: 98–9). The study is empirical, based as it is on fieldwork conducted in northern Italy in 2009 and 2010, not long before Bossi was forced to resign, in April 2012, due to a damaging scandal concerning the alleged appropriation of party funds by him, some of his collaborators and members of his family (*La Stampa*, 21 May 2015). It explores what party members thought they were gaining from activism and their reasons for staying in the party.

By focusing on the *lived experiences* of activists, the article aims to contribute to an understanding of organisations that go against the tide of disengagement

characterising their competitors and still invest time and resources in connecting with their supporters, by creating communities and by talking to people about politics. As political parties of both left and right appear finally to be reconsidering the advantages of having a large activist base – see, for instance, the recent, and successful, recruitment drives by the Scottish National Party and the Labour Party in the UK – the relevance of debates on the alleged obsolescence of the mass party model has clearly increased well beyond the confines of the academic community.

The study relies on the analysis of eighteen interviews with LN members from the Veneto and Piedmont regions, who were spoken to individually or in groups between March 2009 and December 2010. Party members were approached through snowballing: after first contact by phone, emails were sent out and snowball chains developed. Interviews lasted about an hour, were open-ended and semi-structured; respondents were diverse in terms of variables such as political background, gender, age and occupation. The questions asked to LN members focused on why they stayed within the party, the frequency and nature of their engagement with it and how they related to party representatives.

As mentioned above, this article focuses on ‘Bossi’s Lega’. Following Bossi’s resignation as leader in 2012 and a brief interim period, the party has been led by Matteo Salvini, who has set a new course for it. Although it is still early days to fully assess how Salvini wishes to shape the LN, it is clear that he has moved it even further to the right in ideological terms, by emphasising EU-related and immigration issues and by not shunning collaboration (and common mobilisations) with extreme right groups. Moreover, having chosen to downplay a theme which had very much defined ‘Bossi’s Lega’, that is the alleged need for northern Italy to gain more autonomy ‘from Rome’ (Cento Bull and Gilbert 2001: 90–93), Salvini is now attempting to turn the LN into a truly national party, able to field candidates across the whole country. It is still unclear at this stage to what extent the new leader may want (or be forced) to change the party organisation, too. Given that public funding for political parties has been considerably reduced in Italy, and will come to an end by 2017, Salvini had to cut party expenditure. At the end of 2014, the LN’s loss-making newspaper, *La Padania*, was closed, while shortly afterwards almost all full-time employees of the party were sacked (Cremonesi, 9 January 2015). Although this suggests that the party has become ‘lighter’, such a sharp reduction in the number of staff employed by the party may well mean that volunteers will become, if anything,

even *more* important from now on. However, it is unclear how many of them the party can mobilise at present (see the next section). Therefore, the LN's *current* organisation appears to be very much in flux.

The analysis will now proceed as follows. The next section, entitled 'Presence at Grassroots Level and Members' Activism', will provide an introduction to the key features of the LN's organisation and discuss how such features were judged by activists during the last years of Bossi's leadership. Following on from this, 'Why Be a Lega Nord Activist?' will explore the reasons why people said they were happy to volunteer their time and resources to the LN under Bossi and what they thought they were *gaining* from participating in the party's activities. In other words, and uniquely, this section will explore the motivations behind people's decision to be active within the LN. Finally, the conclusions will argue that claims about the mass party model having entered a phase of terminal decline have been exaggerated, calling for a more nuanced conceptualisation of the different forms of activism (traditional and not) that we are faced with today.

Presence at Grassroots Level and Members' Activism

In terms of institutional roles occupied at national and subnational levels, the LN has been one of Europe's most successful right-wing populist parties to date (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2005, 2010). Despite its support being concentrated in the north of Italy, it has served in four national governments (1994, 2001–2005, 2005–2006, 2008–2011), and has recently gained the governorship of the wealthiest regions in the country: Lombardy, Veneto and Piedmont. Up until Bossi's resignation in 2012, the party had also been remarkably successful in its drive to increase its membership. While in 1992, just after its foundation, it had 112,400 members, twenty years later (in 2011) it had 173,044 (source: Federal Organisational Secretariat of the Lega Nord).^{iv} However, the tarnishing of Bossi's reputation had immediate negative repercussions on the party membership, which by the end of 2012 had been reduced to 56,074 (Ibid.). As is well known, the LN's electoral performance in the national election of 2013 was also disappointing, its support dropping to 4.1 per cent of the national vote, from the 8.3 achieved in 2008. Electorally, however, the party appears to be recovering fast under its new leader, Matteo Salvini: in particular, it has performed well in the regional elections held in Emilia-Romagna in November 2014 and in several other regions in May 2015. At present it is not possible to check

whether membership numbers have also started to recover, as the party is no longer willing to release the relevant figures.^v However, when a vote was held to elect the new party leader in December 2013 (which Salvini eventually won against Bossi, who was attempting to stage a ‘come back’), only about 17,000 members were entitled to take part.^{vi} Admittedly, only those who had been *Soci Ordinari-Militanti* (full party members) for at least a year were eligible to vote on this occasion; nonetheless, it is obvious that the negative trend observed in 2012 had yet to be reversed a year later (to say the least).

During its twenty years under Bossi’s leadership, the LN maintained a strong organisational and territorial presence, which allowed it to engage members and the public at large via a variety of activities and events. According to Passarelli and Tuorto (2012: Table 3.14, 168), in 2011 the party had no less than 1,441 branches across northern Italy. In addition to this, it had established a variety of parallel organisations that supported its aims, from youth and women’s organisations, to voluntary associations, not to mention a large number of party media.

As Duncan McDonnell and I have noted, although keen to increase its membership, the LN has always been careful to grant the status of ‘full members’ only to those it sees as deserving of it (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015: 318). Therefore, successive party statutes, including the most recent one approved under Salvini (Lega Nord 2002; 2012; 2014), have reiterated that full membership of the party has to be *earned* via activism, and is not automatically gained via the payment of dues or the passing of time. LN members fall into two hierarchical categories: the *Soci Ordinari-Militanti* (ordinary members-activists, i.e. full members) and the *Soci Sostenitori* (supporting members). The latter can neither elect party representatives nor be elected to party offices themselves. However, they must take part in the LN’s activities if they want to be promoted to the status of full member. Indeed, it is *only* by actively taking part in the life of the movement, as the statute says, that members can gain, and keep, the status of ‘ordinary member-activist’ (Lega Nord 2014: Art. 33). In other words, members know that their duty is to volunteer for their party. As Bossi has explained, asking members to prove themselves was meant to act as a bulwark against the infiltration of the party by its opponents (Bossi and Vimercati 1992: 73–6), but it was also a way to secure valuable organisational support, well beyond pre-election periods. In an age in which the distinction between ‘party members’ and ‘supporters’ has often become fuzzy (Young 2013: 2), with all sorts of

new affiliation options on offer (Scarrow 2014: Chapter 2), the LN has instead maintained a very clear distinction between those who are *in* the party, and can therefore be trusted, and those who are *out* (or only *half-way through the door*, as in the case of the *Soci Sostenitori*).

The members that were interviewed for this article said that they fully supported this policy: they argued that the party needed to be selective as to who should be made a full member, showed pride in having achieved such status themselves (when this was the case), and valued the competitive edge that their duty of activism could provide to their party. A typical example of these views is offered by member 14 from the Veneto region, who was quick to point out the similarities between the Lega and former mass parties of the Left in this respect, such as, for instance, the Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI – Italian Communist Party). As this activist said in his interview:

The PCI, too, exactly, the PCI, too. However, what happened then? It happened that, since the 1980s, this way of doing politics, by selecting and training people, has been abandoned. The Lega has started doing it again. Now, if you want to join the Lega, you have to serve your time, you have to prove yourself.

Bossi's decision to build a large organisation rooted at the local level was also one that activists fully agreed with. As member 1 from Piedmont argued, for instance, stressing the qualitative difference between face-to-face interaction and the total reliance on the mass media that he thought characterised the other parties:

We do not just speak to people via the newspapers or the television; people can talk to us face-to-face. I mean: if you come to Turin and need information about what the Lega Nord is doing, you do not have to read the newspapers, you only need to take a stroll, find a local market where you will see our stand [...] and they will be able to tell you everything that is going on. And they will explain it to you in person. [...]. And people appreciate this.

The extent and frequency of their own activism were often and proudly mentioned by respondents in interviews, when talking about both the branch meetings

they attended and their efforts to talk to the public on behalf of the party. In many locations, members said that they attended party meetings about once a week, and volunteered to staff stands in public places, engaging in (not-always-friendly) discussions with passers-by. This claim made by members is corroborated by recent studies that have highlighted the constant engagement between LN activists and members of the public (Passarelli and Tuorto 2012: 176–7) and the willingness of the great majority of LN members to take on additional duties, either within the party itself (e.g. branch secretary) or at various institutional levels (Passarelli and Tuorto 2014: 14).

Members interviewed for this article also stressed how often they were given opportunities to meet up with party representatives at all levels. LN MPs, mayors and regional councillors were said to regularly meet members at party stands and/or attend local party meetings to discuss current issues. This strategy – whereby representatives were asked by the party to engage with the activists and the public at large – was much appreciated and praised by members and described as being unique to their party. As member 18 from Veneto said, comparing the LN to its allies of the Popolo della Libertá (PDL):

They [PDL representatives] come here only when there is an election and then they disappear. On the contrary, when we [LN activists] need something, they [LN representatives] arrive. They come to the *gazebo* [i.e. the party stand], they come to the branch, they'll go anywhere. [...]. We trust our leaders.

Even in very small towns, LN representatives were said to make the effort to be present at meetings with the members whenever possible (see interviews with members 10 and 14 from the Veneto region). Respondents argued that the LN had constantly kept open a line of communication between them and party representatives. As Passarelli and Tuorto have also found, LN activists believed it was easy for them to interact ‘with the other faces of the party (in the public, and, also, in the central office)’ (2014: 14), and saw LN representatives as being responsive to them. This strategy of engagement with members has fulfilled two important functions. Firstly, it has strengthened the members’ trust in party leaders, as demonstrated by the quotation above, thereby putting flesh on the bones of the party’s

repeated claims that it values all members and that it is a ‘community of equals’. Secondly, it has helped the LN to shape members’ interpretations of political developments, including the inevitable setbacks (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2010: 1330–5). In other words, the time invested by party representatives in explaining to members what was happening ‘in Rome’ (or in the relevant regional assembly and/or council) was regarded by the organisation as time well spent. This is another important way in which the Lega resembled the mass parties of old.

Having briefly considered the LN’s organisation and presence at grassroots level and the extent to which these were valued by its activists, the discussion will now shift to the reasons underpinning the members’ willingness to offer considerable amounts of their time (and, sometimes, resources) to the Lega, in an age in which people are generally assumed to be unwilling to get involved with political parties. The next section will address this question by covering different kinds of ‘incentives’ which explain the members’ involvement with the LN, helping us to understand *why* people joined, and then decided to stay in, this party. This is a question that has largely been ignored so far, and yet it is a crucial one if we are to explain various forms of activism and the way they are evolving.

Why Be a Lega Nord Activist?

In their seminal paper on how organisations work, Peter Clark and James Wilson note that: ‘much of the internal and external activity of organisations may be explained by understanding their incentive systems’ (1961: 130). They identify three kinds of incentives: ‘material’, i.e. tangible rewards (in the specific case of political parties, these vary depending on the political culture, the level of party penetration within a country’s economic system, etc.); ‘solidary’, which, they say, ‘derive in the main from the act of associating and include such rewards as socializing, congeniality, the sense of group membership and identification, the status resulting from membership, fun and conviviality, the maintenance of social distinctions, and so on’ (Ibid.: 134–5); and ‘purposive’, which ‘derive in the main from the stated ends of the association rather than from the simple act of associating’ (Ibid.: 135). ‘Purposive’ inducements, they explain, ‘are to be found in the suprapersonal goals of the organisation: the demand for the enactment of certain laws or the adoption of certain practices (which do *not* benefit the members in any direct or tangible way), such as elimination of corruption or inefficiency from public service’ (Ibid.: 135, emphasis in the original

text). These categories have subsequently been adopted by Kenneth Janda (1980: 126–32) in his *Political Parties – A Cross-National Survey*, in which he sees material and purposive incentives as being especially relevant to the explanation of why activists remain in a party, and by Susan Scarrow’s (2015) most recent study of party members (see, in particular, Table 7.1, 157). The following analysis also draws on Clark and Wilson’s categorisation, albeit with some further specification. Material incentives will not feature in my discussion because LN respondents categorically deny these play any part whatsoever in making them ‘stay’: therefore there is nothing to say about them here.^{vii} On the contrary, as we will see below, membership of the Lega is alleged to come at great personal cost. Furthermore, within Clark and Wilson’s category of ‘solidary’ incentives, I further distinguish between ‘personal’ and ‘communitarian’ ones. This is because the category of ‘solidary’ incentives as defined by these authors is so general that it lacks explanatory power.

The categories adopted in this article are thus defined as follows:

- (a) *Purposive incentives*. Under this heading, I will discuss what many respondents have said about the importance of party ideology to them and the role this has played in their lives (‘ideology’ being a term LN activists use widely, and which carries no negative connotation for them). Activists sought explanations from the party concerning how and why their communities were changing, and argued that the LN was uniquely able to provide them, as well as defending what they saw as the ‘right’ values.
- (b) *Personal incentives*. These were crucial to many respondents, who talked about their lives and sense of identity being shaped by activism, and about political participation providing ‘fulfilment’, ‘satisfaction’, if not even ‘a reason to live’ for them. This is conceived as a subcategory of ‘solidary’ incentives, insofar as personal incentives have to do with ‘the status resulting from membership’ and ‘the maintenance of social distinction’ (Clark and Wilson 1961: 134–5); however, they should be distinguished from the next subcategory, i.e. the ‘communitarian’ ones, as these specifically address people’s need to ‘belong’. Therefore, with the term
- (c) *Communitarian incentives*, I refer to the party’s ability to create and foster communities of like-minded individuals – thus providing a new ‘family’ to activists, something many respondents clearly appeared to value.

Therefore, communitarian incentives concern finding a ‘home’ for a person’s identity and helping to ‘locate’ that identity within a wider community, which supposedly shares the individual’s values and beliefs.

These categories and subcategories will be deployed as analytical tools in the discussion below, allowing us to better understand what attracted activists to the LN, and how important activism had become in their lives. However, it would be wrong to think of them as being clearly differentiated in people’s minds, or to try to establish a hierarchy between them. On the contrary, here we are dealing with *overlapping* motivations for activism, which tend to support each other and are often mentioned together by the same respondent in the course of the same interview.

Purposive Incentives

Interviews revealed the importance to LN activists of what they saw as a distinctive feature of their party: having a clearly defined and easy-to-grasp ideology.^{viii} This meant essentially two things: firstly, members thought that the Lega was able to provide answers to them, and explain what was going on in the world; and, secondly, they appeared to subscribe to the principles the party upheld, and they valued such principles. While the latter finding may not be surprising given the composition of the sample, the members’ insistence in interviews on how important the clarity and distinctiveness of the LN’s ideas were to them is worth noting in an age in which parties are often accused of being indistinguishable from each other. Member 5 from Piedmont, for instance, saw the LN as being characterised by:

a strong ideology, but not in the negative sense of the term: few ideas, but understandable. In contrast with the PD [i.e. the centre-left Partito Democratico] and the PDL: no clear ideas whatsoever!

Asked to explain why they were active within the LN, member 4 from Piedmont stated that the reason was ‘of an ideological nature’, while member 15 from the Veneto region argued that the Lega put forward ‘the good ideas that are typical of ordinary people’, adding that ‘it is the idea that matters’.

Interestingly, motivations for activism were very rarely mentioned in isolation, so that the importance of ideology and of the party’s ability to create communities (what I have called the *communitarian* incentive, covered more extensively below)

were sometimes referred to as part of the same explanation. This is a typical example of this:

What am I getting from it [i.e. activism]? Um... that I can understand things that are difficult to grasp just from the outside by simply reading the papers, don't you think? [...] And also a feeling of belonging, at the level... we all share some kind of instinctive feeling that we belong somewhere, that something drives us, which is stronger than supporting a football team.

(member 4, Piedmont)

Given the importance attributed by members to the party's ideology, some interviewees defined the spreading of it as a 'mission' (see interviews with members 7 and 13 from the Veneto region) which required making 'sacrifices'. This is how member 14 from the Veneto region explained this concept in his interview:

As a member of the Lega, you do something because you believe in it. You are ready to pay a price because you believe that it is possible to improve things. As for others [i.e. the members of other parties] all they are interested in is to hang on to whatever degree of power they have accumulated. This is the difference.

When asked to provide examples of such 'sacrifices', activists mentioned the various social, campaigning and proselytising activities the LN engaged in, arguing that these required a considerable degree of commitment on their part. The following quotes provide two paradigmatic examples:

Some may think it is not a big deal, but to stick posters around you need to start at 9pm in the evening and you may have to keep going until 3am in the morning. The following day, you need to get up at 6 or 7am and go to the office, and you have eight hours of work ahead of you. If you have to do this for X amount of hours every week, and you end up sleeping three hours every night, you are not going to enjoy it. You only do it if you believe in the cause. (member 1, Piedmont)^{ix}

when the party's event was on in Turin, I even helped to sweep up leaves and whatnot in the toilets. This is also something I would never have imagined I would end up doing. (member 3, Piedmont)

It was *only* because of the importance of purposive incentives to many respondents that their activism brought satisfaction to them, to the extent that they thought it could even help define who they were. This emerges clearly in the following section.

Personal Incentives

Well, believe me, and I have said this many times, had they offered me a lot of money to distribute party papers in local markets, I wouldn't have done it. So, why do I do it, then? [...] It is an ideal. For me the Lega, this movement, has become as important as an ideal, and it is almost a reason... *one of my reasons for living is this, I mean... I believe in it and I get amazing gratification from it* [my emphasis] [...] When somebody thanks you [i.e. while canvassing], wants to share something with you, stops, encourages you... this gives me enormous gratification, and it is invaluable! [...] The Lega gives me great strength, inspires me to get involved, that's what it is. (member 3, Piedmont)

This quote touches upon many of the themes activists dwelled on in their interviews: the strength of their beliefs, the sacrifices that were said to be necessary to advance the party's cause and the key role that activism was said to play in their lives. This link between the values and ideas that were said to characterise the party and the personal satisfaction accruing to those who chose to defend them was also insisted upon by another member. As he said:

The Lega was not born as a centre of power [...]. It gives me satisfaction... to look for something that is not simply my personal satisfaction... I mean ... *this is satisfaction originating from ... implementing what I believe in* [my emphasis]. [...] there cannot be any identity if there is no clear underlying idea. (member 5, Piedmont)

For member 10 from Veneto ideas were not, in themselves, all that mattered: what was essential was that they needed to be translated into actual achievements.

Trying to change the reality around her gave this member a chance to avoid ending up like her parents, who, she said, were experiencing a sense of failure as they grew older. It was therefore a way to gain pride in one's achievements:

Last year I have become an activist precisely because I wish to do something... I want to get somewhere and change something, improve things [...]. Because if we do not get in while we are young, if we delegate to someone else, we will end up like our parents, who have always been concerned for our well-being, have always worked, have built a house for their children and they find themselves at the age of 60, they should be about to retire, but they can see their retirement fading into the distance. And they find themselves with their spirit broken because they say: 'I made sacrifices all my life and what am I leaving to my children? They cannot find a job, find a place to live, they find it difficult to get married [due to financial difficulties]'; *I do not want to experience the same disappointment when I get older* [my emphasis].

The opportunity to make a difference was often mentioned as a positive feature of activism in these interviews – the quote just cited being typical of such claims. In addition to this, the fact that one could participate in political activities as a member of a closed community of like-minded people who strove to achieve their aims *together* was also cited by many respondents as one of the key benefits of activism. It is to 'communitarian' incentives, therefore, that we now turn.

Communitarian Incentives

One of the ways through which the LN has created communities in northern Italy is by organising annual national gatherings/demonstrations (obvious examples being the ones held annually in the small Lombard town of Pontida and in Venice). Scholars have underlined the importance of these events for the Lega (e.g. Biorcio 1997: 198–201). Indeed, member 1 (from Piedmont) could not have been clearer about the importance of the Pontida gathering to him and his fellow activists:

It is an amazing experience, wonderful. I went there for the first time... *I will never forget my first time* [my emphasis]. [...] you really feel the spirit, the strength that comes from sticking together, the strength of this friendship that

ties you to others, you feel the strength of the people. It is something... I cannot describe it, you need to experience it.

Umberto Bossi's reappearance in Pontida in 2005, following his partial recovery from a very serious illness that had threatened to end his life, was also described in vivid terms by the same respondent:

When he got on stage and made his first speech there were – and I am not exaggerating here – 100,000 people who were crying! It was a very touching moment... really involving, touching, emotional and deeply felt [...] in that moment *you do not feel that you are part of a political party, but a big family* [my emphasis], which is what the Lega still is today.

Member 1 commented further on the importance that attendance of party events had for him and the opportunities the events provided to build and cement communities. He concluded his explanation by covering the (now familiar) theme of the 'sacrifices' activists needed to make for the benefit of their cause:

To be a *leghista* [i.e. LN member] does not mean sticking a badge on your jacket; it means certain things, such as taking part in the event in Pontida, it means working when there are events to run, it means going to Venice, to the Monviso... certain demonstrations are irreplaceable for us, it is here that you really see the spirit that animates us. It is nice to be a *leghista*, because it is a big family, but you need to make sacrifices.

The feeling of camaraderie that *leghisti* said bound them to each other was mentioned time and again by interviewees as an important 'gain' that flowed from their activism. Asked whether he canvassed and distributed party papers in the streets, for example, one member enthusiastically replied:

Yes, yes. I do it... happily in fact, meaning that, it is not a burden, on the contrary! In truth, we have a good time. There is friendship among us, it is not just a matter of: 'I will see you on Thursday evening and then never again' [laughs]. So, it is different. Maybe yes, it is a community... it is deeply felt, no doubts about it. (member 5, Piedmont)

In reply to the same question, another activist valued the feeling of belonging he believed to be getting from activism, and argued he could trust others within the community the party had become:

It is important to me [to be an activist], because I know that there are like-minded people, who share my ideals, and that love my land as much as I do, and with whom I share many, many things. With whom... I can take my wallet and can give it to Marco, or Giulio [not their real names] or... look [pointing at other people in the room], I have known him for many years, he has worked for me, as for him, I was the witness at his wedding, and he was the witness at mine [...] there is friendship, but there is something more than friendship, since I have many more friends who are not members of this movement, however with them [i.e. the party members mentioned above] I share these things. (member 12, taking part in a group discussion in Veneto)

In his interview, another activist also stressed the similarities between what the party had provided to him and the strong feelings that he felt bound him to his own family, an idea we have already encountered above. As he put it:

I wish my family to have some common interests, that everyone fights together for some common cause, to grow together, don't you think? I have found the same thing in the Lega. In the past I have become a member of clubs, such as bowling and recreation clubs ... where you could find this feeling of belonging to a certain environment. In the Lega I have found the same feeling of belonging, this time to a political organisation, and I like it. (member 6, Piedmont)

Contradicting the stereotypical and one-sided representation of *leghisti* activists that one usually finds in the media (i.e. that of angry people driven only by their opposition to the political class and foreigners), respondents justified their activism in terms of wishing to make a positive contribution, not only to the 'family' that the party had become to them but also to their local community. What is interesting about these claims is not necessarily the rhetoric about helping local people, which is of course the norm among political parties, whatever they actually do on the ground, but

the extent to which activists felt they were being *empowered* by their participation in political activities. In other words, LN members appeared to believe that they could regain control of their lives and change things around them *through* activism. The next two quotes are typical in this respect:

[I am an activist] because of the chance it gives me to express my opinion, to work for... some ideals and to build something. It is also... how can I say this... some kind of social commitment, perhaps... surely to be engaged in politics is a civic commitment. [...] to be part of... to build something.
(member 11, Veneto)

I believe that we can change society for the better. I think that everyone can make a positive contribution. I am convinced that the Lega is the only party that can do something for my land. (member 8, Veneto)

In short, by asking representatives to constantly keep in touch with the grassroots, by organising activities and events targeted at members, and by fostering the creation of closed communities among them, ‘Bossi’s Lega’ was able to secure a strong commitment to the party’s objectives by its activists. In turn, as shown by the interviews analysed above, activists fully subscribed to the ideology and system of values put forward by their party, were happy to rely on the LN for explanations of political and social developments, and enjoyed the feelings of empowerment and sense of belonging activism provided to them. In other words, the adoption of the mass party model by ‘Bossi’s Lega’ appears to have worked, helping the party to effectively shape group identities and create strong emotional bonds with its members.

Conclusions

In this article we have considered the organisation of ‘Bossi’s Lega’, what its activists thought of it and what they gained from their activism. Under Bossi, the Lega Nord created a new ‘subculture’ in northern Italy (Diamanti 1993; 1996), usually referred to as *leghismo*, by proposing an allegedly efficient and clean ‘north’ as a new community of interests and values, and by presenting it as very distinct from the rest of the country. *Leghismo* provided ‘a framework of interpretation in which a positively evaluated “us” – honest, hard-working and simple-living northern Italians

attached to their local traditions – was posited as prey to a series of overlapping “them” – southerners, the state, big business and immigrants’ (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2005: 961). LN activists, therefore, had something they could identify *with*, in the shape of a clear ideology that they believed was able to provide explanations of complex processes that were affecting the country, such as globalisation and large-scale immigration.^x Imbued by this new subculture, and organised in a complex network of regional and local branches, party members were happy to help their party via ‘old style’ canvassing, or by volunteering time and resources to it. They were proud to belong to what was still, in many ways, an ‘old style’ mass organisation, to an extent reminiscent of those parties of the left that had also been rooted at the local level in Italy for many decades, such as the Italian Communist and Socialist parties.

Populist identity politics may be particularly suited to incentivising the creation of closed political communities based on post-material, identitarian values, due to populism’s insistence on the homogeneity, unity and common interests of the ‘good’ people vs. the elites (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008). However, this is not to say that only parties sharing a populist ideology can adopt and efficiently deploy the mass party model. As Susan Scarrow has recently reiterated, ‘traditional’ party membership is ‘far from obsolete’ (Scarrow 2015: 216) even today, and there can still be an important role for activism, in all its forms. By exploring why people have joined the LN and decided to stay on, and by showing the ‘intensity of psychological identification with the party and the commitment to [...] participating in party activities’ (Janda 1980: 126) that Bossi’s chosen organisation model was able to secure among activists, this article has taken us into territory that remains, to a large extent, unexplored. More needs to be done to understand the role played by different incentives in fostering participation in political activities, and how these change, according to party, context and political culture. By offering an alternative account of how parties could yet again make membership attractive to prospective supporters, such research would allow us to move away from the present focus on the ‘end’ of the mass party and towards a more nuanced conceptualisation of different forms of activism, which includes newer (e.g. internet based) and more traditional practices, and varying combinations of both.

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ⁱ Following Panebianco (1988), I do not regard internal democracy as a necessary feature of the mass party organisational model.

ⁱⁱ Admittedly, as the distinction between ‘member’ and ‘supporter’ has become more fuzzy in recent years (Young 2013: 2), so has the line between ‘member’ and ‘activist’: there is usually a ‘participation continuum’ (Panebianco 1988: 26) between the two rather than a clear dividing line.

ⁱⁱⁱ In this study, I adopt the definition of right-wing populism that Duncan McDonnell and I put forward in our volume *Populists in Power*: ‘A thin-centred ideology which pits a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous “others” who are together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice’ (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015: 5).

^{iv} Figures quoted in this article refer to the total number of members, whether *Soci Ordinari-Militanti* or *Soci Sostenitori*. On the difference between these two categories, see below.

^v In May 2015, I asked The Federal Organisational Secretariat of the Lega Nord to make their most recent membership data available to me. Unlike on previous occasions, this time it declined to do so.

^{vi} See: <http://www.leganord.org/index.php/notizie/le-news/11608-lega-domani-le-primarie-per-il-rinnovo-segreteria-federale>, cited in McDonnell 2015: 14.

^{vii} That this is unlikely to apply to every single member is not important in the context of the present discussion, since the aim of this article is to focus on how LN’s activists themselves explain and justify their permanence in the party. Although an understanding of the issues just mentioned should not rely exclusively on what activists have to say about their experiences, no attempt to grasp the meaning of activism (whether among populist parties – or indeed any others) can, or should, avoid proper consideration of their testimonies either (Blee 2007).

^{viii} Discussing such ideology is beyond the scope of this article. For a recent analysis, see Albertazzi and McDonnell (2015: 42–8).

^{ix} Wall posters and political graffiti have always played an important role as part of the communicative strategy of this party. Confirming the principle that the medium is the message, their adoption by the LN has helped shape the narrative of an organisation that wishes to be perceived as genuine, close to the people, present on the ground and reliant on ordinary folks.

^x The fact that many people would object to this ideology and find it simplistic, or even

offensive, is irrelevant here.