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## Owner parties and party institutionalisation in Italy: is the Northern League exceptional?

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Studies on party institutionalisation commonly argue that parties with personalist leadership and weak organisation are unlikely to remain in power beyond leadership succession. In other words, these parties will rarely attain their own institutionalisation. From this perspective, the recent Italian political reality represents a conundrum. Three parties of this type – Northern League; Forza Italia; Italy of Values – confronted significant resignation issues concerning their leaders, but only the League, contrary to the theory, made a decisive step toward institutionalisation by removing its founding father and remaining an actor with national blackmail potential. This article addresses this challenge and provides a solution to this conundrum. In particular, the article demonstrates that an approach that considers both party factors and critical events is necessary to account fully for the variance of outcomes and, more generally, for party change.

**Keywords:** party institutionalisation; personalist leadership; Italian party system; events; Forza Italia; Lega Nord

What factors account for different outcomes in the processes of party institutionalisation? The Italian political system provides rich opportunities to address this question. Over the last 20 years this system has been characterised by a fragmented and unstable party system (Ieraci 2014) comprising multiple parties that are frequently structured around powerful and personalist/personalised leaderships (Bordignon 2014).

According to the literature, a functioning democracy requires a party system with at least minimal institutionalisation (e.g. Mainwaring and Scully 1995; Kuenzi and Lambright 2001; Stockton 2001). In turn, the institutionalisation of the party system depends on the institutionalisation of single parties (Casal Bértoa 2012). The question of party institutionalisation is therefore a very important topic beyond itself; focusing on that is an appropriate way of evaluating the stability of party systems from a narrow perspective in view of broader systemic analyses.

This article aims to both contribute to the literature on political parties and institutionalisation and enrich the debate on Italian party politics and its development by addressing a theoretical conundrum that recently came to light concerning three Italian parties: the Northern League, *Forza Italia*-People of Freedom, and Italy of Values. The article is structured as follows: in the second and third sections of the paper, I discuss the conundrum and clarify the underlying research question and hypotheses. The fourth section of the paper examines the theoretical and conceptual bases of the investigation,

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and the subsequent section reports the empirical analysis. The sixth provides an interpretation of the findings and suggestions for further research.

### The puzzle of party institutionalisation in Italy

Berlusconi's parties *Forza Italia* (FI, Go Italy!) and *Popolo della libertà* (PdL, People of Freedom), in addition to *Lega Nord* (LN, Northern League) and *Italia dei Valori* (IdV, Italy of Values), have been key players in Italian politics over the last 20 years. These parties differ greatly in many respects but share some common traits. All of them have had personalist leaderships and internal organisations clearly developed to sustain and preserve, rather than counterbalance, the leadership of their founders (Pasquino 2014a). These parties can be grouped under the label of 'owner parties', as defined in the fourth section.

The theoretical literature on political parties and party institutionalisation generally argues that this type of relationship between chief and organisation ensures that a party does not outlive a change in its leader or, at least, seriously undermines the party's chances of avoiding a possibly substantial loss of importance following the leader's succession (cf. Panebianco 1988; Harmel and Svåsand 1993; Randall and Svåsand 2002; Chiapponi 2010). In other words, the party faces comparatively more obstacles along the path to institutionalisation, and, generally speaking, any weakening of the leader results in an equal weakening of the party.

Between 2012 and 2013, the leaders of the three parties – Silvio Berlusconi from FI-PdL, Umberto Bossi from LN, and Antonio Di Pietro from IdV – faced crucial 'resignation issues' (Berlinski, Dewan, and Dowding 2012) that were extensively covered in the media. In April 2012, a financial scandal regarding embezzled party funds reached Bossi and some of his relatives and closest party collaborators. Six months later (28 October 2012), Di Pietro was the subject of an investigative report by a well-known TV broadcast suggesting the personal use of party funds. Eventually, on 1 August 2013, Berlusconi received a final conviction for tax fraud. Drawing on the most recent literature on the topic, I define a resignation issue as any event that produces a situation in which a politician has, all else being equal, 'good reasons' to resign following media or other pressure 'as a result of scandal or specific political or personal errors' (Berlinski, Dewan, and Dowding 2012, 38), although the eventual outcome may not be resignation. With regard to this paper's argument, a resignation issue matters if it (negatively) affects the figure of the leader *within* his or her own party; all three scandals that I consider fall under this definition.

In theory, two outcomes are possible: the party seeks to dump the 'embarrassing' leader but declines in power because it cannot survive without him or her or, alternatively, is unable to detach itself from its leader and declines together with him or her. However, the Italian reality has proved more complex and has exhibited an intriguing variation.

PdL and, later, FI have suffered a significant loss of support, but have not been able to reshape themselves with a new leadership, knowing that without Berlusconi they will likely lose even more. IdV entered a phase of deep crisis, did not attain sufficient votes for parliamentary representation in 2013, and attempted – prompted by Di Pietro himself – to refresh its leadership, but so far it has not recovered. LN is the only party that, despite initial confusion, has changed its leader (twice) and remained a significant party in terms of impact on the party system, halting and averting its electoral decline (see Figure 1).

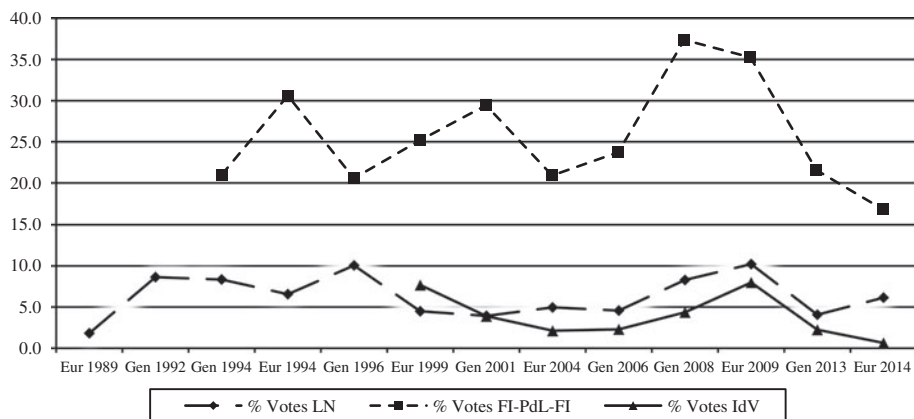


Figure 1. Electoral results of the three parties, general and European elections 1989–2014. Notes: From 2006 onwards, Valle D'Aosta not included as for general elections. In 1999, IdV inside the electoral list *I democratici* (The Democrats); in 2013 as part of the electoral list *Rivoluzione civile* (Civil Revolution). Where absent, the party did not exist. Source: Data of the Ministry for Interior.

### Research question and hypotheses

The question the article seeks to address is ‘Why has the LN overcome a loss of leadership, whereas Berlusconi’s party and IdV have not?’ The answer could provide important theoretical insights on organisational institutionalisation. Some scholars, including Panebianco (1988, 65–67), contend that different party origins can facilitate or restrict the possibility of institutionalisation. However, Panebianco states that the relationship he posits between genetic models and institutionalisation is not valid for charismatic parties or, at least, is not equally straightforward. Bolleyer and Bytzeck (2013) argue that parties created by individual political entrepreneurs with no ties to already organised groups are less likely to be ‘sustainable’. However, the formative approach is not useful for our purposes, because our three case studies have affinities with the type of deviant cases identified by Panebianco or because they do not exhibit significant variance in terms of Bolleyer and Bytzeck’s distinction. Another strand of literature instead grants the major impact to organisational factors (e.g. Mudde 2007). Finally, it has recently been noted that the embeddedness of a new party within the political divide – particularly if it is connected to a long-term policy issue translated into a new ideological division – increases the likelihood of a long-term (significant) presence in the party system (Fink-Hafner and Krašovec 2013).

On these bases, two alternative hypotheses can be formed. The first is that, notwithstanding its own nature and in contrast to the other two parties, the Northern League has been able to separate its fate from its founder owing to some key distinctive organisational arrangements and/or to the strength of its policy identity. Second, if, on the contrary, the Northern League was not more prone to change the leader than FI-PdL and IdV, there may exist a peculiar interplay between internal and rootedness features similar to other parties’ and different exogenous incentives.

Therefore, the following study will be built with a dependent variable, party institutionalisation; two independent variables, party organisation and policy identity; and one intervening variable, events. For the sake of simplicity, behavioural variables will be

fixed, assuming that party elites – e.g. the potential contenders for the leadership – constantly seek, similar to the incumbent leader, the greatest benefit (whatever it may be) from perpetuating the organisation as long as it is convenient for them and rationally pursue that goal.

### Operationalisations

I propose a straightforward operationalisation of the variables ‘policy identity’ and ‘events’. Policy identity is conceived of as the party’s positioning with respect to its core programmatic issue. The meaning of the word ‘event’ as I use it derives from the critical events approach to the study of cabinet durability. In particular, I borrow the conception of critical events from Lupia and Strøm (1995, 651–652, emphasis in the original), who state that:

events ... are not inherently critical. Instead, events *become* critical through their effects on [... intra-party] bargaining. Thus what makes an event critical is the behavioral response it occasions among the bargaining [... party actors]. To put it bluntly, potentially critical events are meaningful only if they affect politicians’ abilities to achieve their ... goals.

By contrast, the concepts of party institutionalisation and organisation, as well as the related notion of owner party, deserve greater attention.

### Party institutionalisation

Huntington (1968, 12) states that an institutionalised organisation has three features: recurring behaviours, stability, and value in itself. Hence, ‘institutionalization is the process by which organizations and procedures acquire value and stability’. Consistent with Huntington, Panebianco (1988, 53), studying political parties proper, defines institutionalisation as ‘the process by which an organization incorporates its founders’ values and aims’. What he does not take into sufficient consideration is the role of electoral success as an indicator of *party* institutionalisation, as convincingly argued by Pedahzur and Brichta (2002). According to these authors, acquiring and maintaining votes and placing candidates for public office are core party activities and therefore cannot be discarded from any definition of party institutionalisation. However, to avoid too narrow a definition, the authors make the opposite mistake. They use only continuous participation in elections and electoral and legislative stability as measures of institutionalisation; in doing so, they examine surface stability but overlook the requisite value per se (cf. Arter and Kestilä-Kekkonen 2014, 935).

To a certain extent, Harmel and Svåsand’s (1993, 74–75) definition of party institutionalisation summarises the argument. These authors find that an institutionalised party has routinised behaviour; is perceived by other actors to have ‘staying power’; and has an established record of survival. Regarding the third criterion, mere chronological duration is not a satisfactory indicator (cf. Huntington 1968, 13–14). Indeed, a party can formally last as an organisation but be completely or nearly completely irrelevant to the party system and, hence, ineffective as a party in itself. This is why it seems to be more theoretically viable to operationalise survival in terms of Sartori’s (1976) durable and continuous blackmail potential, which encompasses the second criterion as well. With regard to routinised behaviour, I instead use changes in party leadership as a proxy for *internal* stability and increasing autonomy from the incumbent leader. In

other words, the image of the leader becomes separated from the organisation's, and the organisation, in turn, acquires its own value and autonomous behaviour. I also assume that if the new leader is not a member of the party's first generation, the party will move more substantially towards institutionalisation (Huntington 1968, 14).

### ***Organisation and owner parties***

I have only touched on the issue of defining FI-PdL, LN and IdV as parties of a certain type, that is, 'owner' parties. I use this label not to refer to any type of 'ownership' of the party (that is to personal parties/parties that are the 'property' of a political entrepreneur) but rather to all parties in which the leader behaves in the manner of a *dominus* (an owner) without significant counterweights and he or she benefits from almost entirely undisputed support from followers.

My definition of owner parties follows the conceptualisation of personalist parties of Kostadinova and Levitt (2014).<sup>1</sup> Broadly speaking, an owner party has a personalist leadership *and* a formal organisation that is ineffective on its own, that is, an organisation whose very functioning crucially depends on the leader. These two combined features define owner parties *irrespective of the leader's power foundations* (charismatic, clientelistic, etc.) *and the party structure*. The leader sets the internal structuration, the party's *raison d'être*, and its relationships with society. There is an almost symbiotic relationship between the leader and the party. The leadership is not necessarily free from criticism (at least as long as it is not charismatic), but critics question the leader's choices and behaviours, not the office-holder per se. In addition, when radical criticism occurs, it is likely to produce expulsions decided by the leader. These expulsions can make the party externally weaker, but the crucial point is that, *within it*, the leadership remains very strong, and the organisation continues to depend on it.

The leaders in all three parties have exerted centralised control over the organisation and have been the 'unifying symbol' of the party (Panebianco 1988, 145–146; Pappas 2011, 3). '[T]he party [... has been] the product of a leader rather than he ... the product of a party' (McDonnell 2013, 221–222).

In terms of the formal structure and its sturdiness, the three parties have displayed some variance (see below). However, the vertical use of the leaders' power (together with a populist anti-institutional orientation) has arguably hindered the development of any thick and/or effective organisation (Pasquino 2014a), making the organisational process of the three parties similar. Panebianco (1988, 67, 146) contends that, in charismatic properties, 'the division of labor is constantly redefined at the leader's discretion, career uncertainties are considerable, no accepted procedures exist, and improvisation is the only real organizational "rule" '. This condition tends to reproduce itself because 'the leader ... has no interest in organizational reinforcement which would inevitably set the stage for the party's "emancipation" from his [*sic*] control'. For the purposes of this article, this argument can be extended to all owner parties with no great conceptual impoverishment.

### **The road to (missed) institutionalisation: a comparison of the Northern League, Forza Italia, and Italy of Values**

The three cases are compared in light of the inquiry's variables: first, I will examine the origins and evolution as well as the policy identities of the parties; second, the analysis will focus on party structure and the changes that have occurred over the years;

third, attention will be paid to the internal power dynamics at the level of the party in the central office (Katz and Mair 2014), where the decisive barriers to leadership change can be assumed to be found. Attention will also be devoted to identifying the critical junctures<sup>2</sup> that have set the direction of organisational changes and the ways in which the parties have addressed them. Finally, I will provide a brief picture of the three parties' development after the 'resignation issues'.

### *Origins and policy identities*

The League was born in 1989 from the union of a number of regional 'leagues' that had begun to advocate ethno-regionalist issues in northern Italy in the early 1980s. Eventually, the leader of the then *Lega Lombarda* (Lombard League), Umberto Bossi, exploited the internal conflicts of the other leagues and achieved the hegemony of northern 'leaguism' by federating the individual leagues into a single party. During the first congress in February 1991, Bossi was chosen as party secretary (party leader) and retained this position until 2012 (Tarchi 1998; Passarelli and Tuorto 2012).

The party has always focused its political discourse on regionalism and the defence of the economic and cultural interests of northern Italy (McDonnell 2006), although the radical character of its requests has changed over the years from federalism to secession and devolution. These issues have accompanied others, such as limiting immigration and various criticisms of the European Union (Albertazzi, McDonnell, and Newell 2011). However, representation of the North has always been the core policy of the League, and both anti-immigration proposals and Euroscepticism could be viewed as corollaries of the 'battle' to defend the referential community against those actors who threaten it (Huyseune 2010). The party founded its policy identity by politicising a political cleavage (centre–periphery) inherent in Italy's political system that remained latent until new political opportunities and political entrepreneurs awakened it (Di Sotto 2014). Eventually, in 2014, the new leader, Matteo Salvini, decided to exploit widespread dissatisfaction with the Euro to expand the League's electoral constituency even to central-southern Italy. In doing so, he created a second-tier centre–periphery cleavage between national and European interests. Although the primary reference community (the one characterising the party trademark) remains the North, Salvini opened the door to the possible activation of a broader constituency on specific issues, particularly European monetary policy. The expansion strategy was closely accompanied by the creation of a parallel political list – that lacked any graphic references to the classic League – to be presented in the central-southern regions called *Noi con Salvini* (Us with Salvini).

*Forza Italia*,<sup>3</sup> meanwhile, dates from 1993, when the tycoon Berlusconi decided to establish a basis for his first electoral campaign in the upcoming general election in March 1994. Unlike the Northern League, this party is a clear-cut example of a personal party, that is, a party whose 'only rationale is to provide a vehicle for the leader to win an election and exercise power' (Gunther and Diamond 2003, 187, emphasis in the original. See also Ignazi 1996). In this sense, the party was more the party of Berlusconi than the League was the party of Bossi. *Forza Italia* lasted until 2008, when, according to Berlusconi's purposes, People of Freedom was established (at first simply as a federation of parties) by merging with the post-fascist *Alleanza Nazionale* (AN, National Alliance) and other tiny parties (McDonnell 2013, 218). In the summer of 2013, the third drastic change occurred: Berlusconi declared that he wanted to transform PdL into a new version of *Forza Italia* to revitalise the party, and a second version of *Forza Italia* came into being that winter.



Berlusconi's party was founded as a liberal-oriented and firmly anti-establishment party but soon blurred its policy identity into a more populist-plebiscitary party, and its heirs have followed in its steps. The economic cleavage has remained at the centre of the political discourse, but it has been increasingly intertwined with a certain intolerance for the institutional practices of parliamentary systems. Emphasis has been placed on the need for a more direct relationship between leaders and the 'people'. Furthermore, the relevant electorate has comprised not only the business world, firms, freelance professionals, etc. but also other more composite sectors of the population. This composition did not allow the party to build a clear liberal, liberal-conservative or any other well-defined policy profile (Ignazi 2014, 55–63).

Finally, Italy of Values was founded in March 1998 as another personal party, relying on the popularity of its leader, Di Pietro. It is no coincidence that the organisation was first known as *Italia dei Valori-Lista di Pietro* (Italy of Values-Di Pietro List).

In its first years, the party developed as a single-issue party focused on the theme of legality. It established an opposition to Berlusconi and his criticisms of the judiciary (Bordignon 2014, 145) as its main *raison d'être*.

### **Formal structures**

From a structural perspective, the Northern League is an intriguing case. Long a charismatic party, it has developed a quite elaborate internal formal organisation. The party in public office has become increasingly significant, and at local level the party has followed the traditional mass bureaucratic party model. However, the most important party level has been the central office. At the apex of the entire organisational pyramid there is the party secretary, who remains in office for at least three years.

*Forza Italia*-People of Freedom-*Forza Italia*'s organisational evolution has been less linear. First, the party was created similar to a pure electoral 'American' party in which the 'firm' was actually part of the organisation (Raniolo 2000, 166). After the fall of the first Berlusconi cabinet in December 1994, FI sought to build a more structured local apparatus; in 1997 a new statute was approved, and the party was reorganised following the model of the old mass Christian Democrat Party (Paolucci 2008). However, in spite of the electoral victory of 2001, in 2003, the new party coordinator, Sandro Bondi, returned to a 'light' party based on elected representatives. After poor electoral performances, Berlusconi gave renewed attention to the local level, but the ground remained quite detached from the centre (Poli 2001; Raniolo 2006; Mariotti 2011). When PdL was established, FI had to blend its party bodies with those of AN, a party with a more traditional top-down organisation (see Ignazi, Bardi, and Massari 2010). From a formal perspective, PdL was even more centralised (Mariotti 2011, 46). At the local level, the party was quite 'intangible', with no provisions regarding membership and no local offices (Ignazi 2012, 62–63). To elect its leadership, PdL followed in the late FI's footsteps and adopted a procedure based on delegates to a party convention, whereas FI's pre-1997 selectorate was an informal party elite (Sandri, Seddone, and Venturino 2013). This had no real impact on Berlusconi's powerful leadership. A deeply vertical organisation characterises the current *Forza Italia* as well. The new party (that is to say, once more, Berlusconi) has decided to return to the party statute approved in 1997 with subsequent changes.<sup>4</sup>

When founded, the Italy of Values party also began giving its leader formal prerogatives concerning party management, and the office was – until the subsequent adoption of the 2004 statute – assigned to Di Pietro until his resignation. The party in



the central office, which was deeply intertwined with the party in public office, was connected to the slight and weak party on the ground through the *trait d'union* at the regional level (Pisicchio 2008). In 2013, the presidency was removed, and the office of national secretary was established in its place and confirmed in 2014. After the introduction of this position, Di Pietro became honorary president. Similar to the early *Forza Italia*, Italy of Values has decreed that the leader should be selected by a party council, that is, by a small selectorate (Sandri, Seddone, and Venturino 2013).

### ***Party dominant coalitions, internal power dynamics, and events***

Overall, the Northern League's formal structure has been the most elaborate. However, that structure was only a façade for a centralised leadership, at least until the removal of Bossi. One way of assessing the extent to which it was only a façade is to follow the suggestion of Ignazi, Bardi, and Massari (2010, 198) and analyse the locus of power within the party in the central office in two dimensions: power to control and power to appoint. From this perspective, the concentration of both types of power was greatest in the hands of Bossi, who changed party policy directions and political strategies whenever he thought it necessary (Biorcio 2010). Furthermore, he led the party in a very informal way; the main career rule among party ranks (and in institutions) was the final approval of the leader. The leader's overwhelming impact on the party structure is attested to by party members' statements, such as, 'There is Bossi and then there are the party members, end of story' (a member of the regional government in Veneto, as quoted in McDonnell 2015, 8). The League has never been a personal party in the same way as Berlusconi's parties or the IdV; nonetheless, as McDonnell (2015, 9) notes, Bossi 'was "the Lega" in the sense that he *incarnated* the movement (with his authority being fully accepted)' (emphasis added).

A narrow party elite that was very close to Bossi emerged. For years, the members of this group were Bossi's early collaborators and party companions. However, on 11 March 2004, Bossi suffered a stroke. Initially, his illness did not seriously damage his charismatic leadership but instead strengthened party unity around its leader (Passarelli and Tuorto 2012, 47–48).

Nonetheless, 2004 was a watershed for the structuration of the party's dominant coalition. Factional divisions began to expand and grow stronger in subsequent years. The main division was between the favourites of Bossi and the followers of Roberto Maroni – a senior minister in all Berlusconi cabinets and Bossi's comrade from the very beginning. In particular, the former faction deferred to the so-called *cerchio magico* (magic circle), a very informal dominant group comprising relatives and party members whose closeness to the leader had increased their decision-making influence as Bossi was strained by his illness. Bossi's second wife, Manuela Marrone, created the circle to stop any attempt to replace her husband as the League's leader and, at the same time, to pave the way for his son Renzo (Lombard regional councillor from 2010 to 2012). However:

[t]he excluding attitude of the magic circle had the unwanted and unforeseen effect of consolidating ... the front of the intermediate party prominents, who found Maroni a plausible successor, respected and beloved by the membership base. But also ... unopposed ... by the Leader, at least manifestly. (Passarelli and Tuorto 2012, 146)

The apex of the conflict occurred in 2011–2012. Maroni had assembled a net of party officials around himself; in other words, he had *organised* an opposition (Passarelli and Tuorto 2012, 133–136).

The 2012 scandal exposed the situation and opened the door for change. This event simultaneously affected the leader – who was no longer charismatic (see Chiapponi 2013) – as well as members of the *cerchio magico*. The twofold nature of the scandal was crucial for the leadership succession. Indeed, Maroni, who had set the stage, could seek the office without directly accusing Bossi. He thus argued that Bossi had been a victim of his close entourage, which allowed him to both safeguard the founder-father's image and indicate his inappropriateness as party leader. In April, Bossi was forced to step down, and a triumvirate<sup>5</sup> held the leadership until July, when Maroni – the only candidate for the office – became the new leader. However, Bossi continued to seek to affect party strategies, and Maroni spent the following months strengthening his own position within the party (Cento Bull 2013). Furthermore, the party faced a significant decrease in membership (McDonnell 2015, 12).

Within his party, Berlusconi was no less powerful than Bossi in the League. No formal organisational change affected the original and fundamental principle: the extended dominance of Berlusconi over the party, whatever the structure (Ignazi 2014). At least in the first *Forza Italia*, Silvio Berlusconi founded his powerful leadership on charisma. The leader was a 'monarch' surrounded by trustworthy individuals with important positions in the party machine and in institutions (Poli 2001). When AN joined FI to create PdL, changes occurred. In PdL, Berlusconi remained the dominant leader, but the charismatic foundations of his power were not as strong as they had been in *Forza Italia*. Fini, the former AN's leader and then speaker of the Lower House, began to criticise Berlusconi's behaviour and strategies and to move towards a possible succession to his leadership. The conflict culminated in a public verbal clash during a party executive meeting in April 2010. After that event, Fini left (was isolated from) the party, and a minority of PdL's members followed him. Berlusconi gained even more control over the party without the 'dissidents'; nonetheless, his leadership had been called into question from within for the first time, altering the perception of his image (Mariotti 2011). Notably, the person who opposed Berlusconi was forced to leave the party, as occurred in 2013 in a split led by PdL's political secretary, Alfano, who founded *Nuovo Centro-Destra* (NCD-New Centre-Right).

Similar arguments apply to Di Pietro's leadership. Until his exit (see below), Di Pietro was in fact the party 'dictator' in many respects, including the selection of candidates. Until recently, his leadership had never met serious challenges, except for that from the subsequent mayor of Naples, Luigi De Magistris, in 2010 (see Bordignon 2014, 149). Pasquino (2014a) sums up the situation accurately when he states that:

his dominance of *Italia dei Valori* was never in doubt. *Italia dei Valori* never had much of an organizational presence, just the bare minimum that it needed to field candidates in elections. It was a group of politically ambitious individuals running for and holding office. Di Pietro's plenipotentiaries ran the show.

### ***Institutionalisation at last? After the resignation issues***

The Northern League is the only party of the three case studies that took significant steps towards its own institutionalisation. The 2012 scandal and the subsequent change in leadership introduced a transitional phase that was characterised by a struggle for a

new party identity and by unsatisfactory electoral results; the election of Maroni as president of the Lombardy region in 2013 was the most significant exception. The transitional period ended in December 2013, when the then secretary of the Lombard League, Matteo Salvini – who was close to the new leader – defeated Bossi in the primary elections to succeed Maroni, who had decided to resign after gaining his new institutional office. All party activists could vote for the new federal secretary and Salvini won with 82% of the votes, and his success was later ratified by the party congress. Notably, Salvini, unlike Maroni, is not a founding party cohort member but comes from its second generation. Indeed, he was born in 1973, entered the party in 1990, and became a local councillor in Milan in 1993.

Positive electoral performances in both the local and European elections of May 2014 produced a certain degree of stability and endowed the party with renewed bargaining power vis-à-vis the centre-right parties (Passarelli and Tuorto 2014). The Northern League traditionally receives a more or less constant proportion – approximately 4% – of ‘frozen’ ideological votes, and the positive fluctuations above this threshold have depended on various factors, such as the electoral coalition it has been part of, the political scenario at that moment, and the leader’s campaign (Di Sotto 2014, 127). However, the increase in votes in 2014 is even more significant in terms of party resilience against the detrimental effect of the leadership succession. Recent opinion polls appear to confirm the party’s growing electoral trend under Salvini’s leadership. On 18 January 2015, the Italian national newspaper *Corriere della Sera* published results from a survey that was conducted by the well-known IPSOS institute, which revealed that 12.8% of voters were inclined to vote for the League and 14.8% for *Forza Italia*.<sup>6</sup>

The electoral decline of FI and its inability to outlive its leader are consistent with theory. After the resignation issue and the split of the NCD, the constellation of powers within the most recent incarnation of *Forza Italia* appears to show new arrangements compared with the past. In fact, a type of inner circle similar to the ‘magic circle’ of the Northern League has arisen; following the unsatisfactory electoral performance in the 2014 elections, in which FI achieved its poorest showing ever, strong internal criticism of the party management came from outside of that circle.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, we examine Italy of Values. In the aftermath of the 2012 scandal, Di Pietro, with a view to the 2013 general election, forced Italy of Values to join the broader list *Rivoluzione civile*, led by the public prosecutor Antonio Ingroia and comprising a number of left-wing parties. Following a disastrous electoral result, Di Pietro resigned from the party’s presidential office, but the party opted for his line of argument against its dissolution. In June 2013 a congress open to party members elected a new party secretary, Ignazio Messina. However, the poor electoral performances have not ceased but have worsened, and Di Pietro continued to receive media attention and set some party strategies until a short time ago.<sup>8</sup> Eventually, in early October 2014, the party’s national executive and other delegates distanced the remainder of the party from the former leader by voting by 95% to accept Messina’s proposal of a new collaboration with the centre-left wing *Partito Democratico* (PD-Democratic Party) and against Di Pietro’s position in the hope of a political recovery. As a consequence, Di Pietro left the party.

Italy of Values, in particular, reveals how much a consensus based almost entirely on trust in the relationship with a leader is fragile. Such a relationship ‘can dissolve in a time span of a few hours, when the reputational bases of the leader are suddenly damaged: it is what happened to Di Pietro in the 2012 autumn’ (Bordignon 2014, 237).

Table 1 sums up the similarities and differences between the three parties.

Table 1. Similarities and differences between the three parties before and after the resignation issues.

	Before the resignation issues				After the resignation issues			
	Policy identity	Formal organisational structure	Strength of organisational structure	Leader's strength	Leader's control over nominations	Level of internal democracy	Leader	National electoral trend
Northern League	Rooted/clear	Articulate	Low	High	High	Very low	New	Increasing
Forza Italia	Blurred	Thin/articulate	Low	High	Very high	Very low	No change	Decreasing
Italy of Values	Weak	Thin	Very low	High	Very high	Very low	New	Severely declined

Note: The categories and the relevant entries from the third to the sixth are drawn from the table in Pasquino (2014a, 561).

### What do parties need to become institutionalised? The Northern League as an illustrative case

The three analysed cases are similar with regard to the personalist relationship between the party leader and the party organisation. Despite their similarity, they reacted differently to similar environmental events that challenged their leaders.

Our analysis has provided an explanation of the divergence of outcomes. With regard to the change in leadership, the first result is that, overall, the theory is *not* proved wrong, as the evidence appears to indicate. *All* three cases confirm that an owner party can change its leader only with difficulty, particularly if the leader provides no specific incentive. However, we have learned that this statement is true *unless* the party meets critical junctures that modify the relational system of power within it.

As long as the three parties were characterised by a pattern of an ‘overlord’ in the centre and a *cohesive* dominant coalition around him, no real alternatives were formed. What has distinguished the Northern League from the other two parties has been the change in this arrangement in the aftermath of a critical juncture, namely, the illness of the leader. The way in which the leader and some of his closest collaborators responded to this event broke the dominant coalition into an *inner* and an *outer* group, the latter being more *excluded* than in the past in terms of access to the leader for organisational incentives. The persons who were excluded by the inner circle began to call the party management (*not* the leadership *per se*) into question. One of the most prominent party members, Maroni, built his own group of followers both within and outside (among voters) the party to pave the way for the future. It is likely that he was able to do this because he was one of the first members of the League’s party elite and was not co-opted by the ‘boss’, unlike potential competitors in a party such as *Forza Italia*. Maroni has been traditionally viewed as a second leader. It could be argued that the non-cooptation of the possible alternative is a pre-condition for preparing the field for a future struggle; this condition is still lacking in *Forza Italia*.

However, the Northern League remained an owner party and, by definition, dependent on its leader. Given the previous conditions, the change occurred because of the resignation issue. In this regard, it is worth underlining that the issue helped Maroni in his race to the leadership because it involved the leader *and* the ‘magic circle’. If it had affected only Bossi, Maroni would not have had the same opportunities to challenge him and prepare his succession. Indeed, Maroni could avoid criticising the main symbol of the party while indirectly attacking him via the circle, and the criticism of the inner circle ultimately was a strategic move to remove Bossi, on whom the party was dependent. Only a specific coincidence of events and opportunities enabled the separation of the party’s destiny from its first leader’s without the party falling with him. In the other two cases, this was not possible because there were no similar preconditions.

Therefore, the first finding is that Northern League departed from the path followed by the other two parties not because of a more pronounced rootedness or any structural complexity (cf. McDonnell 2013). The League changed because of a very specific chain of critical junctures that eventually created a very narrow window of opportunity that was exploited by a strategic actor who had previously prepared himself for this event.

However, the same argument does not apply to the preservation of a substantial role in the political system. In this case, the party structure and the rootedness of the ideological profile in social cleavages appear to be complementary explicative variables.

Since the leadership succession occurred, the party has no longer been an owner party, and the new leaderships have been more ‘rational-legal’. The presence of a quite extensive grass-roots party structure – even at the local level – assisted the incoming leaders by granting them an infrastructure over which they could establish their more institutionalised power. The lesson is that formal party organisation can give the new leader a basis for completing the process and achieving successful leadership change. Parties should prepare beforehand.

Moreover, the analysis has provided further evidence for the thesis that different ideological profiles provide different opportunities for maintaining a substantial electoral record over time. IdV is counterfactual: ‘as Berlusconi’s era seems to enter its conclusive phase, Di Pietro’s model too enters a crisis’ (Bordignon 2014, 150). The Northern League has placed itself along a deep-rooted cleavage (centre–periphery) to which other issues have been connected. This has provided the League with a core of ideologically oriented votes regardless of other factors, such as the nature of its leadership.

The findings provide insights into the possible future of Italian politics. It is worth noting that *Forza Italia* remains an important player in one of the three poles of the party system (cf. Pasquino 2014b). The other two are Matteo Renzi’s personalised Democratic Party on the left and *Movimento5Stelle* (M5S – Five Star Movement), which is also characterised by a tight relationship between the leader and party (Tronconi 2015). A system based on a tri-polar competition in which two key actors such as *Forza Italia* and the Five Star Movement are so strongly dependent on their own leaders for their existence could face more challenges in the process of systemic stabilisation.

More generally, the results encourage reflection and further research into the processes of party institutionalisation. In particular, by seeking to solve a theoretical puzzle, this analysis has demonstrated the need for a dynamic approach that can observe the interactions between party features and critical events. This approach has emphasised the importance of the distinction between a dominant party coalition that excludes and an inclusive dominant coalition as different conditions for party change.

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### Notes

1. I have chosen not to use the term ‘personalist’ for the party as a whole, but only for the leadership (whereas Kostadinova and Levitt talk about dominant leaders), in order to make the terminological distinction with personalistic parties as defined by Gunther and Diamond stronger and avoid any confusion with more general classifications in the literature (see, for example, Pasquino 2014a).

2. I take the liberty of borrowing the phrase ‘critical junctures’ from the historical institutionalist literature (Collier and Collier 1991; see also Acemoglu and Robinson 2012).
3. Formally, the first *Forza Italia*, People of Freedom and the current *Forza Italia* are three different parties. Nonetheless, they are strictly linked to each other and can be treated as three faces of the same Silvio Berlusconi creation. In this analysis, I will therefore treat them as a single party.
4. The statute can be found on <http://forzaitalia.it/speciali/statutoforzaitalia04.pdf>, accessed March 19, 2015.
5. Comprising Maroni himself, the party prominent Roberto Calderoli and the former president of the Venetian League, Manuela Dal Lago.
6. “La Lega a un passo da Forza Italia. E i democratici perdono sei punti.” *Corriere della Sera*, January 18, 2015.
7. See for instance “Il diktat di Fitto a Berlusconi: ‘Basta con le nomine dall’alto’.” *Corriere della Sera*, May 29, 2014; “Elezione presidente della repubblica. Mattarella e la sconfitta che carica Fitto: ‘Il partito va azzerato’.” *Corriere della Sera*, January 30, 2015.
8. See “Italia dei Valori, indietro tutta. Di Pietro: ‘Tornare alle origini’. Il suo nome sparisce dal simbolo.” *La Stampa*, September 14, 2013 and “‘Beni dei mafiosi per finalità sociali’. La riscossa di Antonio Di Pietro.” *La Stampa*, February 5, 2014.

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