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The contrasting geographies of 'Padania': the case of the Lega Nord in Northern Italy

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The Lega Nord (Northern League) regionalist party, which has risen to prominence in Italy in recent years, has a specific geographical focus to its political project. This is premised essentially upon the protection of Northern Italian economic (and cultural) interests, however, this geographical focus has been modified during the Lega Nord's relatively short political history. This paper explores the reasons why there have been various shifts in geographical emphasis in the party's political rhetoric as well as the ways in which support for the Lega Nord has changed (or not) as a result of these changes. Interestingly, the latest shift in the Lega Nord's rhetoric has seen the party attempting to construct (and invent) a geography and an ethnicity for a place it calls 'Padania' (which roughly corresponds to North and Central Italy) that has never existed administratively or historically. However, as the paper argues, the Lega Nord's attempts to create a 'Padanian' political identity, have not been matched by any significant changes in its electoral geography.

Key words: Northern Italy; Lega Nord; 'Padania'; electoral geography

Introduction

The Lega Nord (Northern League), which Agnew and Brusa (1999, 117) see as 'one of the most seemingly peculiar yet intriguing political phenomena in contemporary Europe' has been one of the key political actors to emerge in Italian politics during the 1990s (Giordano 1998; Gundle and Parker 1996, 1; Ginsborg 1996). After the initial electoral successes of the various 'regional Leagues' in Northern Italy in the late 1980s, it was assumed that the Lega Nord would eventually dissipate like so many other earlier regionalist political outbursts in Italy (Pileri *et al.* 1993). Yet, the Lega Nord has not simply disappeared or been integrated by other political forces, in fact far from it, instead it has managed to become one of the primary forces of change within Italian politics (Biorcio 1999). The reasons for the Lega Nord's evolution are to do with its ability as a 'political actor', to take advantage of the contem-

porary socio-economic, political and societal transformations, which Italy is undergoing and also because of its ability to interpret, modify and present these changes for its own political advantage and benefit (Diamanti 1996c; Giordano 1999).

According to the Lega Nord, it is the North of Italy and its citizens that are penalized by a corrupt, bureaucratic and wasteful central Italian State, which is biased towards the South of Italy and Southern Italians (Giordano 2000). It is the Lega Nord's ability to politically represent (as well as reproduce) this anti-Southern sentiment felt in the North of Italy, which has been the main reason for the growth of the party. Moreover, the crucial strength of the Lega Nord has been its ability to reshape its political line, which has also meant a shift in its geographical focus, while at the same time maintaining its *zoccolo duro* (main core) of supporters and activists (Giordano 1999). It is possible to delineate several distinct periods of growth for the Lega Nord in which its

main political rhetoric has been targetted at specific geographical scales (Agnew 1995; Agnew 1997; Diamanti 1995). Of course, there is considerable overlap between the different periods with certain themes being dominant throughout, however, it is apparent that the shifts in geographical foci have been relatively distinct from one phase to another.

During the 1980s, the separate 'regional Leagues' stressed ethno-regional differences as a way of gaining electoral support, however, this proved to be problematic (Agnew 1995). In 1991, after the formation of the Lega Nord, the party shifted away from an emphasis on ethno-regionalism to endorse its discourse of federalism. This was based on the division of Italy into three macro-regions, the North, Centre and South. The Lega Nord used the territorial reference to the 'North' as an effective way of representing and integrating the problems and protests of the diverse social sectors within the North of Italy (Agnew 1995; Diamanti 1995).

In its most recent phase of development, the party has rejected its federalist rhetoric in favour of the hard-line discourse of secession and independence of 'Padania'¹ from the rest of Italy. The rhetoric of 'Padania' is the most intriguing geographical construction that the Lega Nord has used to try to mobilize support. The Latin term 'Padania' refers to the basin of the River Po in Northern Italy, but the interesting thing is that a place called 'Padania' has never existed administratively or historically. Instead, the Lega Nord has attempted to construct (and invent) a geography and a history in order to justify its territorial and political claims (Diamanti 1996a). With the creation of 'Padania' the Lega Nord aims to create a kind of 'neo-ethnicity' for a 'nation' which is made up of citizens who do not necessarily have a common history, culture or language but an identity derived from similar socio-economic values and attitudes. This is combined with an insufferance against Rome and the central Italian Government, and the constraints that it has allegedly placed upon the economy and society of the North of Italy. The Lega Nord is attempting to become a kind of '*volkspartei*' or 'people's party' and is trying to normalize the discourse of secession as the only solution for the North and Centre of Italy. Indeed, Agnew and Brusa argue that

the Lega Nord maybe the first authentic post-modernist territorial political movement in its self-conscious manipulation of territorial imagery to create a sense of cultural/economic difference *with* an existing state of which it is part. (Agnew and Brusa 1999, 123)



Figure 1 The Lega Nord's geographical representation of the boundaries of 'Padania', taken from the party's 1996 National election campaign

The Lega Nord has deliberately given 'Padania' a territorial boundary in order to reify its cultural claims about northern Italian cultural distinctiveness. However, the interesting thing to note is that the territorial boundaries of 'Padania' are vaguely defined, which is part of a conscious strategy of the Lega Nord to keep the party's political opponents off-guard (Agnew and Brusa 1999) (see Figure 1). As Biorcio (1997, 204) argues what seems to matter more to Bossi and the Lega Nord party militants is the fact that 'Padania' represents a common set of cultural values that distinguishes it and its people from the rest of Italy rather than any precise cartographic boundaries. Therefore, as Agnew and Brusa argue

territory matters crucially to the political imaginations of the Lega Nord but from this point of view territory defines a culture associated with a myriad of northern Italian localities rather than a homogeneous 'Padanian' culture defining a 'Padanian' territory. (Agnew and Brusa 1999, 124)

For the Lega Nord, it is the geographical entity of 'Padania' that 'provides the basis for making a set of historical claims rather than a set of historical claims providing the basis for making a geographical claim' (Agnew and Brusa 1999, 123). Undoubtedly, the Lega Nord's discourse of 'Padania' has provided the party, and especially its leader Bossi, with a powerful tool with which to maintain its political distinctiveness. It has ensured that the party has gained renewed media coverage and provoked considerable public controversy across the whole of Italy (and in other countries). However, as the next two sections of this paper discuss, the changing geographical focus of the Lega Nord and its attempts to expand its imagined political community across a place called 'Padania' have not been successful. Instead, the enduring feature of the electoral geography of the party is that it seems unable to spread its political support outside its original political heartlands.

The changing geographical rhetoric of the Lega Nord

The first phase of growth for the Lega Nord stemmed from 1979 to 1989 (Biorcio 1997). It was during this period that the 'regional Leagues' of Northern Italy gained increasing political support and exposure, especially in regions such as Lombardy and Veneto. The various regional Leagues stressed ethno-regional differences (dialect, behaviour, attitudes etc.) in their political rhetoric in order to try to motivate a sense of regional identity (Agnew 1995). In the Veneto region this rhetoric proved successful as the Liga Veneta (Venetian League) made significant electoral advances during the late 1980s and by the 1987 national election the party gained around four per cent of the vote in the provinces of Vicenza, Treviso and Belluno in the Veneto region (see Figure 2). In addition, as Agnew (1995, 166) argues, 'the Lega Lombarda (Lombard League), using phrases such as "region as nation"', was particularly successful in areas such as Varese, Bergamo and Como in Lombardy, where there is a strong history of localism.

The ethno-regional rhetoric proved to be largely unsuccessful because throughout Northern Italy local, as well as national, identifications are much stronger than regional ones such as that of 'Lombard' (Agnew 1995). Thus, between 1989 and 1992, the creation of the Lega Nord, out of the amalgamation of five other 'regional Leagues' from the regions of Veneto, Piemonte, Liguria, Emilia-Romagna and

Toscana (later the Lega Nord expanded into the regions of Friuli-Venezia-Giulia, Trentino Alto-Adige, Valle d'Aosta, Umbria and Marche) ushered in a second shift in the party's rhetoric. This was instigated by Umberto Bossi, the leader of the Lombard League, who became the leader of the Lega Nord. Biorcio (1997, 37) argues that this was the period in which the fundamental components of the party's political identity and project were formulated.

During this second phase, the geographical rhetoric of the Lega Nord switched from the local and regional to the idea to divide Italy into a federal state divided into three macro-regions, the North, Centre and South. 'The Lega Nord's federal project was accompanied by a concise but clear 'Provisional Federal Constitution', which was composed of ten articles. This detailed presidential and confederal arrangements and proposed an 'Italian Union' as a free association of three Republics (North, Centre, South) with the separate joining of the five 'autonomous regions' of Italy (Valle d'Aosta, Trentino Alto-Adige, Friuli-Venezia-Giulia, as part of the North; Sicily and Sardinia as part of the South). The central government was to be composed of a Premier, directly elected by all the citizens of the Union, assisted by a 'Directory' made up of the presidents of the eight constituting units, able to act only by consensus in economic and financial matters' (Poche 1994, 46). Underpinning the Lega Nord's federal project was the assumption that within Italy there were in fact three distinct and separate 'societies', which were largely defined by their socio-economic differences. The Lega Nord used the territorial reference of the 'North' as an effective way of representing and integrating the problems and protests of the diverse social sectors within the North of Italy (Agnew 1995). This allowed the 'North' to be counterposed against 'Rome', the central state, and the traditional parties and also exclude the South from the North of Italy (Poche 1994, 46).

The 1992 national election confirmed the success of the Lega Nord's federal rhetoric when it gained three million votes, which was 8.7 per cent of the national electorate and meant that the party had 81 elected representatives in the Italian Parliament (55 Deputies and 24 Senators). In Lombardy, the party gained over 23 per cent of the vote, (which meant that it was only one per cent behind the Christian Democrat [DC] party) and 18 per cent in Veneto (where other autonomist parties won a further 8%) (Diamanti 1996c). Significantly, the support for the Lega Nord also expanded into other areas of

Northern Italy, most notably in the autonomous regions of Friuli-Venezia-Giulia and Trentino Alto-Adige as well as further south into Emilia-Romagna, especially in the provinces of Piacenza and Parma, which border Lombardy and Veneto. This was very significant because, for the first time, the Lega Nord's concern with a wider geographical focus was actually reflected in a significant expansion of its electoral support in areas where it had previously been weak (Diamanti 1995, 35) (see Table 1).

The third phase of growth for the Lega Nord was between 1993 and 1994. This coincided with the increasing political instability within Italy as a result of the corruption scandals that became known as '*tangentopoli*' ('kick-back city') that involved the majority of the major political parties and in particular the DC party. Agnew (1995, 159) argues that although corruption was not new in Italy, its systematic nature was a surprise to many Italian citizens. Indeed, as the corruption investigations gathered pace, this caused the disintegration of the two main parties of government (the DC and the Italian Communist Party [PCI]). Subsequently, the whole political system was thrown into turmoil. Diamanti (1995, 90) explains that the chief beneficiary of these changes was the Lega Nord, which gained support throughout the North of Italy. Indeed, the administrative elections of June 1993 saw the Lega Nord winning control of some of the most important northern cities, in particular Marco Formentini of the Lega Nord was elected as Mayor of Milan, the capital of the 'productive North' of Italy (Diamanti 1996c, 116).

It was during this third phase that the political rhetoric of the Lega Nord was modified as Bossi aimed to make the Lega Nord a mainstream, national political force, which was able to fill the hiatus left by the decline of the traditional parties. Once again the Lega Nord reconfigured its geographical focus, which meant that the party no longer presented itself as an 'anti-system' party because it was operating in a political and economic environment in which it seemed all parties were in 'opposition' because of the massive changes that were taking place in Italian politics. As Agnew argues, the shift in the Lega Nord's rhetoric to the national scale

shows how even the most determinedly ethnoregionalist movements can get dragged into political argument appropriate to the state as a whole as it tried to expand its support and move from opposition to power (Agnew 1995, 169)

The Lega Nord became part of the centre-right government coalition, which gained a majority in the 1994 national Italian election. This coalition was called Polo per la libertà (or Freedom Pole) and was led by Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia (or 'Go Italy') party as well as the neo-fascist Alleanza Nazionale² party. However, the entry onto the Italian political scene of the Forza Italia party effectively took centre stage away from the Lega Nord. Although the Lega Nord gained 8.4 per cent of the national vote, which was only a decline of 0.3 per cent from 1992, its vote had in fact stagnated or declined in all the regions of Northern Italy (see Table 1). The party lost support in the areas where it had not managed to gain a significant electoral base, most notably in Central Italy; also those areas where it had gained higher levels of support more recently, for example, in the main metropolitan areas of Northern Italy, especially in Milan, but also in Liguria and Trentino. Indeed, the Lega Nord's electoral geography of 1994 was to a large extent a mirror image of its original profile because the constituencies in which support for the Lega Nord exceeded 25.5 per cent of the vote were situated in the provinces of Belluno, Treviso, Vicenza, Verona, Bergamo, Como, Varese, non-metropolitan Milan, and Cuneo. These were precisely the areas in which the Lega Lombarda and the Lega Veneta first gained support (with the only exception of non-metropolitan Milan) (Diamanti 1996c, 125).

The Lega Nord had succeeded in becoming a national political force, which was clearly a success for a relatively small, regionally-based party. On the other hand, it quickly became clear that being part of the ruling coalition would cause the party some problems. The party suffered badly within the governing alliance with Berlusconi because, besides undermining the Lega Nord's support from the inside, his party was able to acquire external support, by appealing to social groups who were hostile to the party, above all in the South (Diamanti 1996c, 123). Moreover, the Lega Nord found itself allied to the neo-fascist Alleanza Nazionale, which favoured a strong central Italian State and no regional autonomy. In effect, the Lega Nord was linked to its most hostile political opponents, which only served further to undermine and compromise the image and identity of the party. The result was that shortly after the March 1994 elections, the support for the Forza Italia, according to its own polls, passed from eight per cent to 30 per cent, while that for the Lega Nord went in the opposite direction from 16 per cent to

eight per cent. It was clear that the Lega Nord's chosen electoral ally in a short space of time ironically became its chief political opponent (Diamanti 1996c, 123).

The European elections of June 1994 confirmed the continued decline in electoral support for the Lega Nord (see Table 1). In less than four months after the national elections, in every region of the North of Italy, the vote for the Lega Nord had dropped to six per cent, while the vote for the Forza Italia had risen to 30 per cent. However, the Lega Nord suffered some of its biggest losses to the Forza Italia, especially in its previously relatively strong heartlands of support in the north of Lombardy and Veneto (Diamanti 1995, 150).

The period from 1995 onwards marked the beginning of the fourth phase for the Lega Nord during which the party abandoned its role in government in order to redefine its role within the general framework of the Italian political system (Biorcio 1997, 37). Bossi and the Lega Nord progressively moved from being an 'antagonistic ally' to an out and out opponent of Forza Italia and Alleanza Nazionale. Indeed, Bossi chose to leave the governing coalition, which caused its collapse and instigated a political crisis in Italy (Diamanti 1996c, 126). However, as Diamanti (1996c, 127) points out, the move by Bossi to leave the coalition, brought to a head, for two reasons, the contradictions inside the Lega Nord, which had been building up for months.

- Firstly, there was a section of Lega Nord parliamentarians who had affiliations to the centre-right and who basically viewed the Lega Nord as the federal wing of the Forza Italia.
- Secondly, this problem was compounded by the electoral pact, which the Lega Nord and the Forza Italia had struck. Even though the Lega Nord only obtained eight per cent of the national vote in the 1994 elections it succeeded in obtaining 180 parliamentary representatives thanks to the electoral pact with Forza Italia. However, the problem for the Lega Nord was that more than half of the Lega Nord's electorate did not correspond to a distinct base of support and the electorate's political affiliations were in fact closer to Forza Italia than to the Lega Nord.

The break with the governing coalition meant the exit of around one-third of all the Lega Nord parliamentarians (more than 50 out of 180). This was

obviously a very difficult period for the Lega Nord, which saw it not only losing a stake in government, but also losing a considerable base of its electoral support.

Another national election was called in April 1996 in an attempt to end the period of political instability, which followed the decline of Berlusconi's coalition government. This election represented a key turning point in the political fortunes of the Lega Nord as the results of the election signalled its re-emergence. At the end of the experience within government, the failure of Bossi to present the Lega Nord as a 'new' political force as well as the party that represented the whole of the North of Italy, resulted in an identity crisis for the party (Diamanti 1996a, 73). In the face of declining electoral support, the political strategy of Bossi was to return to organizing its political project upon the two main themes, which had prefigured its earlier growth and success—a political territorial identity and an 'anti-system' stance and image.

The Lega Nord's solution was the rhetorical creation of a place it called 'Padania', which represents the latest shift in the party's geographical focus and is clearly an attempt to reconfirm its differences from the other political parties. Moreover, Bossi resorted to using even more aggressive and inflammatory language as well as changing the name of the party to *Lega Nord per l'Indipendenza della Padania* (Northern League for the Independence of Padania). In addition, perhaps more importantly for the Lega Nord, the party restored its links between its political organization and territory; this was something that had been very important but had largely been lost with the Lega Nord's stake in government. This re-emphasis on territory is an attempt by the Lega Nord to create what Diamanti (1996a, 81) defines as a 'virtual territory and homeland' for the people of the North of Italy. However, as the next section examines, the Lega Nord's rhetorical return to an emphasis on territory has not been matched by an actual expansion of support across the whole of 'Padania'.

The 1996 national election and the Lega Nord's 'march back to the past'

The national election of April 1996 was the first opportunity that the Lega Nord had to test its newly-formulated rhetoric focusing on the secession of 'Padania'. The party entered the 1996 election on its own without making any electoral pacts and Bossi

Table 1 The electoral results of the Lega Nord in national and European elections in Italy between 1992 and 1996*

| Region | Province | 1992 National | 1994 National | 1994 European | 1996 National |
|-----------------------|--------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| Val D'Aosta | Aosta | 0.5 | 0.5 | 2.5 | 7.5 |
| Piedmont | Torino | 13.7 | 11.9 | 9 | 9.8 |
| | Cuneo | 20.3 | 25.3 | 17.3 | 29.9 |
| | Novara | 18.1 | 17.2 | 13.2 | 13.5 |
| | Vercelli | 20.5 | 18.8 | 12.8 | 17 |
| | Asti | 18.2 | 19.9 | 15 | 20.2 |
| Liguria | Alessandria | 17.1 | 17.2 | 12 | 16.4 |
| | Genova | 14.3 | 11.4 | 8.1 | 9.8 |
| | Savona | 17.2 | 13 | 9.5 | 10.6 |
| | Imperia | 16.6 | 15.6 | 10 | 16.9 |
| Lombardy | La Spezia | 8.2 | 5.8 | 4.2 | 5.1 |
| | Sondrio | 25.9 | 32.1 | 24 | 38.8 |
| | Brescia | 24.8 | 25.7 | 21.7 | 26.7 |
| | Como | 28.1 | 27.6 | 21.3 | 24.9 |
| | Bergamo | 25.6 | 28.7 | 24.4 | 25.8 |
| | Milano | 19.7 | 17.4 | 13.7 | 16.8 |
| | Mantova | 22.1 | 18.1 | 14.2 | 19.8 |
| | Varese | 29.5 | 30.8 | 26.1 | 31.6 |
| | Pavia | 22 | 19.8 | 15 | 19.7 |
| | Cremona | 21.3 | 18.3 | 13.9 | 18.4 |
| Veneto | Belluno | 27.9 | 32.4 | 20.6 | 37.6 |
| | Treviso | 21.5 | 28.6 | 20.8 | 26.8 |
| | Vicenza | 19.6 | 28.1 | 20.8 | 25.6 |
| | Venezia | 13.4 | 15.4 | 9.8 | 15.4 |
| | Verona | 20.6 | 20.8 | 17.1 | 21.6 |
| | Padova | 14.8 | 17.2 | 12.4 | 17.2 |
| | Rovigo | 8.5 | 10.4 | 6.9 | 13.5 |
| Trentino Alto-Adige | Bolzano | 3.6 | 2.4 | 1.3 | 4.5 |
| | Trento | 13.9 | 12.5 | 7.9 | 14.5 |
| Friuli Venezia Giulia | Udine | 17.9 | 20.6 | 13.5 | 19.3 |
| | Pordenone | 18.8 | 21.7 | 14.3 | 28.6 |
| | Gorizia | 12.4 | 10.9 | 7.5 | 14.5 |
| Emilia-Romagna | Trieste | 8 | 7.6 | 4.9 | 11.7 |
| | Piacenza | 17.5 | 15.2 | 10.4 | 15.7 |
| | Parma | 17.4 | 12.7 | 9 | 12.2 |
| | Ferrara | 7.7 | 4.7 | 3 | 6.4 |
| | Reggio Nell-Emilia | 10 | 6.3 | 4.3 | 6.2 |
| | Modena | 10.8 | 6.5 | 4.5 | 6.1 |
| | Bologna | 7.7 | 4.3 | 2.8 | 3.6 |
| Ravenna | 6 | 4.3 | 2.9 | 4.3 | |
| Tuscany | Forli | 5.8 | 3.9 | 2.7 | 3.9 |
| | Massa | 4.7 | 3.9 | 2.6 | 2.8 |
| | Lucca | 4.1 | 3.8 | 2.5 | 3.2 |
| | Firenze | 2.8 | 1.9 | 1.4 | 2.5 |
| | Pistoia | 4 | 2.8 | 2.3 | 2.5 |
| | Arezzo | 2.3 | 1.4 | 1.1 | 1.5 |
| | Pisa | 3.6 | 2.1 | 1.5 | 1.4 |
| | Siena | 2.2 | 1.3 | 1.1 | 1.3 |
| | Grosseto | 2.5 | 1.3 | 1 | 1.2 |
| | Livorno | 2.5 | 1.5 | 1.2 | 1.2 |

contd

Table 1 (Continued)

| Region | Province | 1992 National | 1994 National | 1994 European | 1996 National |
|--------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| Marche | Pesaro | ** | ** | ** | 1.8 |
| | Ancona | ** | ** | ** | 1.3 |
| | Macerata | ** | ** | ** | 1.4 |
| | Ascoli Piceno | ** | ** | ** | 0.8 |
| Umbria | Perugia | ** | ** | ** | 1.2 |
| | Terni | ** | ** | ** | 0.7 |

Key *see Figure 2 for map of Northern Italian provinces using 1996 data

**indicates no result for the Lega Nord

Source: Ufficio Analisi Statistiche Lega Nord 1995, Ministry of the Interior 1996

presented the vote for the Lega Nord as a hypothetical referendum in which the people of the North were voting for 'independence', whilst also voting against the Left and Right coalitions in Italian politics (Bobbio 1996). The main line of Bossi's argument was that the two main coalitions were basically the same because they simply wanted to maintain traditional socio-economic and political structures within Italy (Diamanti 1996a, 82).

Before the election it was predicted that the vote for the Lega Nord would be lower than the 1994 level. In the weeks preceding the election the Lega Nord's vote was estimated generously at 20 Deputies and less than ten Senators (Scaramozzino 1996). The outcome of the election was a somewhat surprising result for the Lega Nord because the party actually realized the highest percentage vote in its history. The result was greater than any pre-election estimates and guaranteed the Lega Nord a strong presence in the Italian Parliament, with over 90 parliamentarians and about four million votes, which was 10.1 per cent of the electorate.

This election marked the electoral high point in the short but intense political history of the Lega Nord, which actually re-launched the party and meant that it regained its position as one of the most important forces within Italian politics. However, the 1996 result was also a problematic one for the Lega Nord mainly because it was not able to expand its electoral support throughout the whole of 'Padania'. Moreover, the result reinforced the fact that support for the party is limited to certain well-defined geographical areas within the North of Italy, which has become even more segmented politically than it was in 1994 (Diamanti 1996a, 81–5).

In analysing the results of the 1996 election for the Lega Nord, Diamanti (1996a, 85) shows that the

areas that made up the zone of relative electoral strength for the Lega Nord in the 1996 election are very similar in socio-economic terms. Indeed, he argues that the North of Italy was in fact divided into five separate electoral zones in the 1996 election, which were relatively internally homogeneous, whilst at the same time very distinct from each other in terms of political orientation and socio-economic profiles.

The zone of relative electoral strength for the Lega Nord corresponds to what Diamanti (1996a, 86) calls the 'profound North' (see Table 2). This zone contained 31 electoral constituencies in which the Lega Nord gained an average vote of 42 per cent in the Majority and 40 per cent in the Proportional part of the election. It is this zone that corresponds to the area in which the Lega Nord has always gained its highest levels of support since its creation. As Table 3 shows, this is one of the most densely industrialized regions in the North of Italy and has a number of small industrial firms and districts, a low level of unemployment and a lower level of urbanization. Also, this was one of the main zones of support for the DC, which got 34 per cent of the vote in the 1992 election (Diamanti 1996a, 88).

It is apparent, therefore, that the Lega Nord's rhetoric about the existence of a specific 'Padanian imagined community' is not reflected in its electoral geography. In fact, rather than being in control of 'Padania', the electoral consensus of the Lega Nord is concentrated in a well-defined, but much smaller area, that Diamanti (1996b, 56) calls '*pedemontania*'³. This area covers part of the north-east of Northern Italy, from Udine and Pordenone to the provinces of Belluno, Vicenza and Treviso to the provinces of Brescia, Bergamo, Sondrio, Como and Varese in Lombardy, and finally to the province of

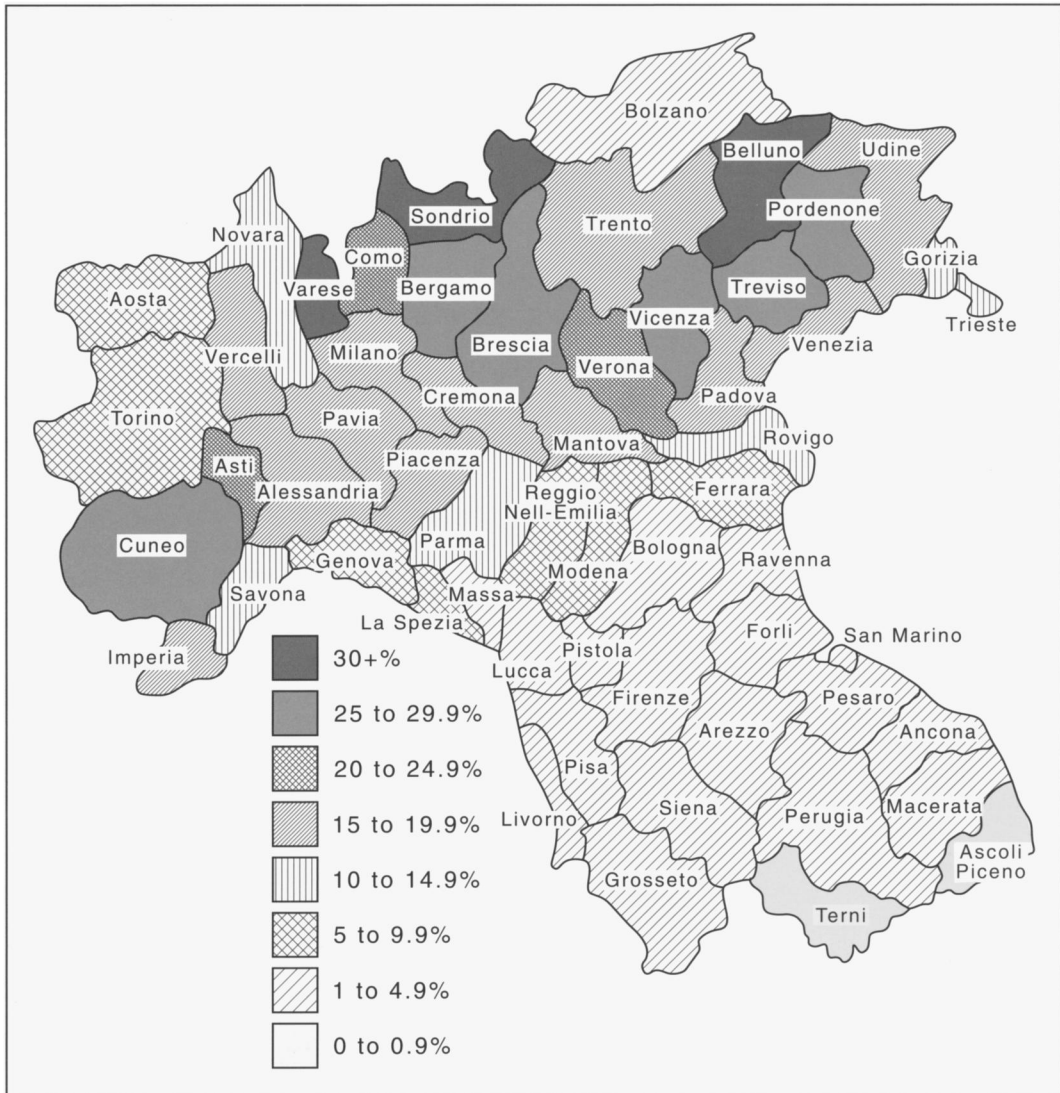


Figure 2 Percentage vote for the Lega Nord, 1996 national election (Ministry of the Interior 1996)

Cuneo in Piedmont. This area is remarkably socio-economically homogeneous, based upon a concentration of small and medium-sized firms, which in the last 20 years has become the so-called industrialized or ‘opulent periphery’ of Northern Italy (Allum and Diamanti 1996, 152) (see Figure 2). It is also the area in which the DC traditionally gained most support, however, the DC has declined which has impacted the previously relatively stable socio-political identity (or ‘white sub-culture’) of such areas. Lastly, it is important to note that, in spite of the Lega Nord’s

shift in geographical focus, its areas of relative electoral strength are still those in which the Lega Veneta and Lega Lombarda gained their first electoral successes in the 1980s and have remained the political heartlands of support for the party ever since.

Conclusions

Undoubtedly, the Lega Nord has undergone a significant rise to political prominence in Italy in recent years. The party has benefitted from (and been

Table 2 Typologies of the electoral constituencies of the North, based on the results of the 21 April 1996: electoral orientations

| | 'Open North' | 'North of the Left' | 'Profound North' | 'North of the Right' | Trentino Alto Adige | Total |
|------------------------------|--------------|---------------------|------------------|----------------------|---------------------|-------|
| <i>Constituencies</i> | | | | | | |
| Absolute values | 97 | 21 | 31 | 22 | 8 | 179 |
| Percentage values | 54.2 | 11.7 | 17.3 | 12.3 | 4.5 | 100 |
| Urban constituencies | 30.9 | 61.9 | 3.2 | 63.6 | 25.0 | 33.5 |
| 1996 election | | | | | | |
| <i>Majority part (%)</i> | | | | | | |
| Ulivo | 37.2 | 51.6 | 28.7 | 38.5 | 27.5 | 37.1 |
| Polo per la libertà | 35.9 | 35.0 | 28.5 | 45.9 | 24.0 | 35.2 |
| Lega Nord | 25.6 | 12.1 | 42.4 | 14.0 | 18.7 | 25.3 |
| Others | 1.3 | 1.3 | 0.4 | 1.7 | 29.9 | 2.3 |
| <i>Proportional part (%)</i> | | | | | | |
| PDS | 15.0 | 25.9 | 8.3 | 17.7 | 8.6 | 15.2 |
| Popolari (DC) | 7.1 | 5.4 | 7.8 | 5.0 | 19.1 | 7.3 |
| Forza Italia | 21.3 | 18.8 | 17.5 | 28.8 | 13.6 | 20.9 |
| Alleanza Nazionale | 11.2 | 12.0 | 7.7 | 13.2 | 11.1 | 11.0 |
| Lega Nord | 23.4 | 10.5 | 40.4 | 12.4 | 12.6 | 23.0 |
| 1992 Election | | | | | | |
| DC | 25.5 | 18.1 | 34.3 | 18.1 | 21.3 | 25.1 |
| PSI (Socialists) | 12.8 | 13.0 | 10.0 | 13.9 | 6.7 | 12.2 |
| PDS | 11.9 | 19.8 | 6.8 | 13.9 | 4.9 | 11.9 |
| Lega Nord | 19.8 | 12.9 | 23.8 | 17.5 | 8.8 | 18.9 |

Source: Diamanti 1996a, 87

Table 3 Typologies of the electoral constituencies of the North, based on the results of the 21 April 1996: socio-economic characteristics

| | 'Open North' | 'North of the Left' | 'Profound North' | 'North of the Right' | Trentino Alto Adige | Total |
|--|--------------|---------------------|------------------|----------------------|---------------------|-------|
| Urban constituencies (%) | 30.9 | 61.9 | 3.2 | 63.6 | 25.0 | 33.5 |
| No. of firms per 1000 inhabitants | 75.4 | 65.2 | 80.7 | 68.9 | 91.5 | 75.0 |
| No. of employees (%) | | | | | | |
| Industry | 44.7 | 36.2 | 55.9 | 30.0 | 32.3 | 43.3 |
| Commerce | 21.8 | 22.6 | 18.6 | 24.8 | 30.3 | 22.1 |
| Services | 33.5 | 41.2 | 25.5 | 45.2 | 37.5 | 34.6 |
| Unemployed (as % of the active population) | 9.9 | 13.3 | 7.5 | 10.1 | 5.5 | 9.7 |

Source: Diamanti 1996a, 88

implicated in) the transformations which have altered the face of Italian politics, economy and society during the last decade or so. Italian citizens were becoming increasingly resentful at emerging econ-

omic and political problems. This was especially the case in the North of the country, where there were widespread fears that the years of 'economic boom' were coming to an end. In the midst of this scenario,

the Lega Nord was successful because it was able to exploit the problems facing the people of the North of Italy as well as interpret and modify their concerns for its own political advancement.

The main asset of the party has been its ability to change its political rhetoric and hence its geographical focus in order to take advantage of the changing political situation in Italy as well as expand its level of electoral support. The party's initial political rhetoric emphasized the local and regional scale, then it was drawn into the national scale with its federalist stance and most recently it has returned to an emphasis on local territory with the creation of 'Padania'. However, as the electoral performance of the Lega Nord in recent elections clearly shows, this has not been matched by an expansion of support outside its main political heartlands. In fact, the areas of relative electoral strength for the Lega Nord have remained more or less the same since its creation. The only exception to this was when the party endorsed the creation of a federal Italian state, which was accompanied by a short-lived expansion of the party's electoral support in the 1992 national election.

The Lega Nord's result in the 1996 national election clearly confirmed the continued persistence of a specific electoral geography that corresponds more to the *pedemontania* region of Northern Italy. Indeed, there was a deepening of electoral support for the Lega Nord in the areas in which the party gained its original success. The contrast between the geographical claims of the Lega Nord about the extent of its 'imagined political community' and its actual geography of support has been a feature throughout the short, but intense political life of the Lega Nord. Clearly this tension remains marked with the creation of 'Padania'.

Since the 1996 elections the political fortunes of the Lega Nord have subsided somewhat. Firstly, in the local elections of April 1997 the party did badly, with its share of the vote dropping from 40 per cent in 1993 to only 15 per cent in 1997 (*Economist* 1997a). Moreover, the Lega Nord mayor of Milan (Marco Formentini) was defeated and the party also lost the provincial council of Mantua, which is the city of its self-proclaimed parliament. In addition, the Lega Nord only gained one-tenth of the vote in Venice, which is the symbolic capital of 'Padania' (*Economist* 1997b). Moreover, in the 1999 European elections, the Lega Nord continued to lose support; the party's share of the national vote declining from 6 to 4.5 per cent.

Secondly, throughout its history the Lega Nord has been beset by internal conflicts, however, most recently these have become even more prevalent as well as divisive. These internal tensions came to a head at the end of 1998 when a group of party officials from the Liga Veneta, led by Fabrizio Comencini, declared the party independent from the Lega Nord. According to the Lega Nord, the number of dissenters from the party was relatively small but in reality this split was serious and showed that the Lega Nord is still beset by internal divisions (Pajetta 1998). A second and potentially more damaging split occurred in the summer of 1999 when the Lega Nord's head of the region of Piedmont, Domenico Comino, was expelled from the party by Bossi. The reason was that Comino and some of his fellow party representatives in Piedmont wanted to form electoral alliances with Berlusconi's Forza Italia party. According to Bossi, this was a conspiracy that could only contribute to the downfall of the party and so he intervened to expel a number of senior party officials (Colaprico 1999). This led to a period of instability for the Lega Nord, with Bossi in particular gaining a lot of negative media coverage. The implications of this split remain to be seen.

The future of the Lega Nord is far from clear. The endorsement of 'Padania' ensured that the party regained its political identity and it seemed to reverse the political fortunes of the party. However, since the 1996 national election, the Lega Nord has seen its support once again decline, which means that the party does not have a consistent zone of electoral support across 'Padania' to support its political rhetoric. However, the issue of a 'Padanian' imagined political community raises other important questions about the ways in which contemporary political and cultural identities are created. The invention of 'Padania' shows that such identities do not necessarily have to be inherited from primordial roots but can actually be created almost from scratch in contemporary society. Indeed, as Agnew and Brusa point out

what is remarkable in the case of Northern Italy today is that we can see before our eyes the attempted invention of an identity that has had no prior existence. (Agnew and Brusa 1999, 126)

It remains to be seen whether this process will continue even if the Lega Nord cannot manage to gain consistent levels of electoral support across 'Padania'.

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Notes

- 1 According to the LN, the 14 'nations' which constitute 'Padania' are Alto-Adige or Südtirol, Emilia, Friuli, Liguria, Lombardy, Marche, Piedmont, Romagna, Tuscany, Trentino, Trieste, Umbria, Val d'Aosta and Veneto.
- 2 The Alleanza Nazionale is the heir of the fascist party in Italy; its leader is called Gianfranco Fini.
- 3 *Pedemontania* refers to the Alpine foothills zone of the North of Italy.

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