PADANIA OR FEDERALISM? AN ANALYSIS OF ELECTORAL

FACTORS IN THE LEGA NORD’S

SPATIAL DEMANDS

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**Abstract**

This study will analyze the electoral factors affect the oscillation of the spatial demands of ethno-regionalist parties between more moderate and more radical objectives. The study analyzes the relationship between these factors and spatial demands utilizing a case study of the Lega Nord (LN). The specific factors under analysis are past electoral performance and the policy positions of other parties. Ultimately, the study concludes that there is a relation between these factors and the Lega Nord’s spatial demands. The findings confirm that the LN behaves as a vote seeking party, rather than a niche party. The analysis of the policy position of other parties confirms that the LN responds to other parties, but seems to suggest that the type of response varies according to the relationship between the parties. The findings also suggest that the generalized findings of party change may not always apply to the spatial demands of ethno-regionalist parties.

**Introduction**

The resurgence of regionalism in Europe in the late twentieth century shifted the gaze of political science research away from its traditionally state-centric focus to supranational and subnational movements (Fitjar 2010; Johnson and Coleman 2012). Increasingly, more attention has been paid to ethno-regionalist parties as they form across Europe, seeking to alter the balance of power within their respective states. Despite the increased focus on ethno-regionalism in political science research, there are still many gaps in the literature about them, and there is little discussion of the particularities of ethno-regionalist groups in the literature on party change. For example, many factors have been identified that cause changes in party demands, but there is little literature describing what the nature of that change is. Some studies have also shown that the type of party will affect how the party will change as a result of a given stimulus however; ethno-regionalist parties are left out of this discussion. The purpose of this study is to fill these gaps by analyzing the factors that cause the oscillation of the spatial demands of ethno-regionalist parties. This study will also bring into question whether previous research on party change has overgeneralized to the point where it does not apply to ethno-regionalist parties. Specifically it will focus on the following question: What causes ethno-regionalist parties to oscillate between more moderate to more radical spatial demands?

Regionalist parties, by definition, seek to alter their relationship with the state they are subject to (Fitjar 2010; Johnson and Coleman 2012). Therefore, spatial demands, demands seeking to alter the territorial relationship between a region with the state, are the central axis of regionalist parties. To answer the question of why ethno-regionalist parties oscillate between more moderate and more radical spatial demands this study will conduct a case study of the *Lega Nord* (Northern League, LN), a party based in northern Italy. Since its inception the Lega has oscillated between what Régis Dandoy describes as a federalist party (moderate) and an independentist party (secessionist) (2010). In periods when the LN has operated with federalist demands, they attempted to secure more autonomy for the regions of the North by campaigning for devolution of the centralized powers of the national government to the regions. In periods when they have operated as a secessionist party they have campaigned for the secession of several northern regions into a single entity known as Padania (Coleman 1996, Richardson and Colombo 2013). Little research has been done to examine the factors of why ethno-regionalist parties have changed their demands, and the LN has recently reverted to demanding secession of the northern regions of Italy under the new leadership of Matteo Salvini, making this case study an interesting contribution.

**Literature Review**

Angelo Panebianco (1988) asserted that parties do not change their policies arbitrarily. They need some sort of stimulus to motivate change. Change can come at a high cost of human and material resources; therefore, it is reasonable to assume that parties will resist change, and change will only be made under pressure created by some sort of stimulus (Harmel and Janda 1994; Harmel, Heo, Tan, and Janda 1995). Though many theories have been posited in the literature concerning changes in party demands and goals, there seems to be a general consensus on two broad categories of variables. Changes in demands and goals occur as a result of external stimuli, and the internal structure of the party (Harmel and Janda 1994; Schumacher, de Vries, and Vis 2013).

External variables are factors outside of party control that the party must adapt to. These can include changes to the party system and electoral results (Harmel and Janda 1994). The literature has found that political parties will respond to external stimuli, and in some cases these stimuli are powerful enough to force a party to reevaluate its goals (Harmel and Janda 1994; Schumacher, de Vries, and Vis 2013).

Election results have been identified as a powerful motivating factor for change in party positions, as the goal of most parties is to maximize their share of the electorate (Harmel and Janda 1994; Somer-Topcu 2009; Ezrow and Hellwig 2012; Schumacher, de Vries, and Vis 2013). Harmel and Janda’s theory of party change (1994) proposed electoral failure increases the likelihood of the party change for vote seeking parties. This proposition was later empirically tested utilizing data from the first postwar election to 1998 of the 23 OECD countries. According to this study, conducted by Zeynep Somer-Topcu, parties must balance the potential electoral gain with the potential risk associated with party change. Parties will use election results as a source of information on public opinion, and are more prone to switching their positions as a result of electoral losses than electoral gains. This effect diminishes as time passes from the election (2009). Larger electoral losses will cause those with control over party policy to be more open to taking the risk associated with a change in policy (2009). Electoral support is key to a party’s survival and one of the most extensively studied external variables in relation to changing party policy.

Another external variable that has been identified by the literature is the political positions of other parties. It is possible that a party may change its goals to better fit in with the norms of the system, possibly resulting in greater acceptance for the party or even increasing their coalition potential (Harmel and Janda 1994). Political parties can influence the policy agendas of other parties, even while in opposition to the governing coalition, through their blackmail potential. Blackmail potential is a concept theorized by Giovanni Sartori (1976), stating that parties could still remain relevant while in the opposition to the governing coalition, so long as they can direct the tactics and policy agenda of the other political parties. One method parties can use to alter other the policy positions of other parties is to coerce them through electoral losses (Evans 2002; Massetti, and Toubeau 2013). For example, the Green Party exercised its blackmail potential in the United States in the 2000 presidential election when it attracted voters from the Democratic Party’s base, causing future Democratic candidates to take environmental issues more seriously. Frequently, this tactic is utilized by anti-system parties (Sartori 1976).

The effect of the positions of rival parties on party change was empirically tested in a study conducted by James Adams and Zeynep Sommer-Topcu (2009). Using data from the Comparative Manifesto Project they found that political parties were indeed responsive to policy shifts of rival parties. Their “Party Dynamics Hypothesis” found that parties tend to move their policies in the same direction as their rival parties. Their “Ideological Families Hypothesis” found that parties were more sensitive to shifts in parties that are ideologically similar to them (Adams and Somer-Topcu 2009). This variable is an example of how the party system itself can have an effect on whether a party will or will not change its demands.

Although several studies have shown the aforementioned variables to have significant impacts on the shift in party goals, this does not necessarily mean that all political parties behave the same. Each political party is unique, and some may have different responses to the same stimuli. Certain stimuli may be considered a political shock for one party, while only a minor adjustment for another (Harmel and Janda 1994). Some studies have shown that certain categories of parties will react differently to the same stimulus. For example, a study by Lawrence Ezrow and his colleagues suggests that certain types of parties will be more responsive to different parts of the electorate. Mainstream parties seem to be responsive to changes in the mean voter, but less responsive to changes in their mean supporters. However, niche parties seem to respond to changes in their mean supporters, but less responsive to changes in the mean voter (Ezrow, De Vries, Steenbergen, and Edwards 2011). Another study showed that niche parties infrequently responded to the changes of the general electorate because they had little incentive to do so, as they were frequently punished at the polls when moderating their position (Adams, Clark, Ezrow, and Glasgow 2006). Several generalized theories have been made about change in party policy, but as these studies have shown there are many nuances that have yet to be explored related to the characteristics of the parties themselves.

Ethno-regionalism, recently has come to the forefront of research on regionalism, as more ethno-regionalist parties are having an impact on the national stage, especially in Europe (Strmiska 2002). There is considerable debate on what constitutes an ethno-regionalist party. Some scholars consider all subnational forms of regionalism ethno-regionalist, while others argue that ethnic components are not a necessary component of subnational regionalism, making ethno-regionalism a specific case of subnational regionalism (Dandoy 2010). However, there is a broad agreement among two elements of ethno-regionalism that can be used to construct a definition. Ethno-regionalist movements are subnational, have exclusive group identity, and some sort of territorial claim corresponding to its exclusive identity that it desires to renegotiate with the state (Türsan 1998; Cento Bull and Gilbert 2001; Strmiska2002; Dandoy 2009; Dandoy 2010).

Part of the difficulty in assessing what qualifies as an ethno-regionalist party is the question of what constitutes an ethnicity (Cento Bull and Gilbert 2001).To what extent does the movement need to have a solid exclusive group identity, and does this group identity need to be grounded in reality? Theoretically, not all regionalist movements are ethno-regionalist movements (Strmiska 2002). Several scholars have noted that in certain cases ethno-regionalist movements have manufactured their identity (Cento Bull and Gilbert 2001; Albertazzi 2006; Cento Bull 2009; Woods 2009; Cento Bull 2011; Woods 2011). In these cases the historical narrative presented to justify the movement’s claim to ethnic unity may not be historically accurate or even be logical. If not all regionalist movements are considered ethno-regionalist, are those movements with a “manufactured” ethnic identity to be included?

Even if ethno-regionalism does not include all subnational regional movements there is a wide consensus that ethnicity, even those with long histories, are rooted in imagined communities (Agnew 2002; Fitjar 2010). If ethnic communities are imagined in all cases, then even the movements that have manufactured their ethnic identities, even those which the historical record will not validate should be considered ethno-regionalist as well, so long as they have convinced others around them that they are indeed ethnically unique and have some sort of territorial claim. Ethnicities are as real to the extent that people can be convinced they are real.

Previous attempts to classify ethno-regionalist parties have focused too specifically on the peculiarities of parties; however, Regis Dandoy offers a coherent model of classification, by creating three broad categories based on the severity of the party’s demands (2010). The desire for spatial rearrangement, the rearrangement of the distribution of power with between the state and a specific territorial entity, is characteristic of all regionalist parties (Strmiska2002; Paasi 2009; Fitjar 2010). Rather than creating several subcategories of ethno-regionalist parties based on various peculiarities, Dandoy’s (2010) typology is all encompassing by revolving around the spatial demands, the demands for territorial rearrangement, of ethno-regionalist movements. These demands are characteristic of all ethno-regionalist parties.

The least radical parties in Dandoy’s (2010) typology are the protectionist parties. Protectionists seek official recognition from the state, generally based on cultural or linguistic grounds, and an improvement of their situation (2010). The moderately radical category of ethno-regionalist organizations are decentralist parties. Decentralists make the demands of the protectionist parties, as well as challenge the division of authority between the state and the region, generally through a federalist or autonomist framework (2010). The final, and most radical, category is the secessionist parties. Secessionists demand complete detachment from the state(s) in which they are currently subjected to the authority of. This could theoretically occur in the form of complete detachment from one or many states into an independent state, or reattachment to another state which the ethnic movement has ties to (2010).

**Theoretical Framework**

The first assumption proposed in Harmel and Janda’s (1994) *An Integrated Theory of Party Goals and Party Change* is that “Parties are conservative organizations and resist change”, thus change will only occur given a certain stimulus. The theory also proposes that vote seeking parties are more likely to change based on the magnitude of their electoral failures (1994). Later, large N studies confirmed this proposition using empirical data (Somer-Topcu 2009; Ezrow and Hellwig 2012), and other studies would go on to identify other variables within the electoral system, such as the policy position of rival parties (Adams and Somer-Topcu 2009), to have an impact on party change. This study will examine the impact of electoral performance and the policy positions of other major Italian parties on the Lega Nord’s spatial demands.

The risk of uncertainty associated with policy change is not one that a party is likely to make devoid of adequate information to assess the potential positive and negative repercussions of that change; gauging the public’s opinion by analyzing electoral results can be a source of such information (Somer-Topcu 2009). This electoral information can be a source of information for parties, but a later study found that party responses to electoral stimuli were dependent on the party’s composition. James Adams and his colleagues found that niche parties tend to respond to changes in the position of their own membership, rather than changes in the median voter as the mainstream parties do (Adams, Clark, Ezrow, and Glasgow 2006).

The Lega Nord is a niche party, as it has never performed at the levels of the mainstream Partito Democratico (Democratic Party, PD) or Forza Italia (Go Italy, FI); nor does it appeal to the general Italian electorate, as it is regionally based. Although the study of Adams, Clark, Ezrow, and Glasgow (2006) found a correlation showing that niche parties tend to be more responsive to voters within their own ranks, it does not necessarily mean that all niche parties are. There is nothing that by definition would prevent a niche party from responding to electoral results like a vote seeking party from Harmel and Janda’s (1994) theory. This raises the questions of whether there are exceptions to Adams, Clark, Ezrow, and Glasgow’s (2006) findings and whether the Lega Nord is one of them.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Giovanni Sartori’s (1976) theory of coalition and blackmail potential argues that political parties are relevant so long as they can influence policy, regardless of if they are in or out of the governing coalition. Coalition potential is the ability of a party to influence policy decisions through its inclusion in the ruling coalition. This influence becomes stronger if the party’s withdrawal would cause the coalition to lose the parliamentary majority. Blackmail is ability to influence the policy agenda of other parties through the threat of electoral losses (Evans 2002; Massetti, and Toubeau 2013). In times when the Lega Nord campaigned for federalism it was attempting to set the policy agenda through coalition potential. In times when the LN campaigned for secessionism it did not believe the statewide parties to be taking federalism seriously enough, and exerted their influence by punishing them through electoral losses.

In Sartori’s *Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis* (1976) he addresses a question that is often taken for granted: what makes a party strong? He posits that many scholars have tried to quantify a specific electoral threshold that would be sufficient to render parties relevant or irrelevant, but according to Sartori “[T]his is no solution at all, for there is no absolute yardstick for assessing the relevance of size…The relevance of a party is a function not only of the relative distribution of power-that is obvious-but also, and especially, of its position of value, that is, of its positioning on the left-right dimension. Thus a party that ranges at the 10 per cent level may well count for less than a party that obtains only a 3 per cent level” (1976). The percentages a party receives can be vital information to assessing the strength of a party, but it is only a single aspect of a party’s power to have a meaningful effect on public policy. Sartori identified two other aspects: Coalition potential and blackmail (1976).

Coalition potential is the bargaining power that a party receives through becoming a feasible member of a governing coalition (1976). This power is based on the size of the need of a coalition to obtain a majority, which is related to a party’s electoral strength, and the feasibility of the coalition, which is unrelated to a party’s electoral strength (1976). For example, it would make sense that parties not included in a coalition that has a sizeable parliamentary majority would have little coalition potential because they have little to offer and would necessitate more compromise within the coalition. It would also make sense that parties of radically different ideologies, such as communists and fascists, would not be likely to join in a coalition together, regardless of the balance of representation in the legislature. Sartori identifies two rules for deciding on a party’s relevance. The first rule is that a party can be considered irrelevant if it cannot be realistically brought into a coalition (1976).

The implications of coalition potential are apparent in the case of the Lega Nord. In the first Berlusconi government the LN was not able to push through its own policy agenda because the coalition comprising the Lega Nord and the Allienza Nazionale was not feasible. The core ideology of LN was regionalist, while the Allienza Nazionale, composed primarily of members from the neo-fascist MSI, favored a strong central state. Despite being at its electoral height in 1996, it became quickly became apparent that the LN had relatively no power during its secessionist phase because of its unwillingness to cooperate to form a government as a result of its ideological distance from the other parties (Cento Bull and Gilbert 2001; Albertazzi and McDonnell 2005; Massetti and Toubeau 2013). Despite the strong electoral performance, the LN was unable to form a feasible coalition, and thus unable to govern. Consistent with Sartori’s theory, even in periods when the LN has had less electoral support, its coalition potential had made it more powerful, especially when its defection from the government would have caused its collapse as in 2008. In the 2000s the LN moderated its demands, promoting devolution over federalism and was also able to find common ground with the Allienza Nazionale on the issue of immigration (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2005), thus paving the way for a feasible, stable coalition.

The second rule of Sartori’s theory is that a party can remain relevant out of government if it has the ability to direct the tactics or direction of political competition (1976). Sartori defines this as blackmail potential, the ability to have relevance in opposition to the governing coalition (1976). Without the second rule parties only have relevance as long as they are governing. However, the second rule outlines scenarios, in which, opposition parties can utilize strategies to alter the course of political behavior. Sartori notes that blackmail potential is mainly exercised by anti-system parties (1976). Scholars have identified different strategies that parties can utilize to exercise their blackmail potential. One of these methods is to punish major parties by winning over portions of their electorate (Massetti and Toubeau 2013).

This can be seen in the case of the Lega Nord through its position on federalism and its relationship with Forza Italia. The Lega Nord was successful in its early years partially because it was the only party to embrace federal reform (Cento Bull and Gilbert 2001; Massetti and Toubeau 2013). However, in the mid-90s several other parties, on both the right and the left, embraced federal reform in order to attract more votes (Cento Bull and Gilbert 2001; Massetti and Toubeau 2013). They were also able to exercise their blackmail potential when they pulled out of the first Berlusconi government and campaigned on secessionism, winning over much of Forza Italia’s Northern electorate in 1996 (Cento Bull and Gilbert 2001; Albertazzi and McDonnell 2005; Massetti and Toubeau 2013).

Both in the cases of parties utilizing their coalition potential and parties utilizing their blackmail potential their power can potentially increase if they can win over a larger portion of the electorate. From a brief overview of the historical record it would seem that the Lega Nord has responded more to external factors in the electoral system than the opinions of their own party. Based on Harmel and Janda’s (1994) theory, this study hypothesizes that ethno-regionalist parties will change their spatial demands based on electoral factors, specifically poor electoral performance and the policy positions of other parties. Specifically the first hypothesis is that the oscillations in spatial demands of the LN will be adjusted in order to maximize votes. The second hypothesis is that the LN will oscillate its spatial demands when other parties begin to adopt similar stances on issues, specifically in regard to federalism. If these hypotheses are substantiated through the data it would suggest that the LN does not behave as a traditional niche party, but as a vote maximizing party.

**Data and Analysis: Electoral Performance**

The first hypothesis will be tested utilizing data from the European Election Database (EED), provided by the Norwegian Social Sciences Data Services. The LN’s share of the vote will be compared with the different phases of its spatial demands. Prior to 1996 the Lega Nord had more moderate spatial demands. From the period of 1996-1999 the LN campaigned for secession of the northern regions. It reverted again to federalism between 1999-2013, and then once again campaigned for secession after the election general election in 2013.

The data in Table 1, taken from the European Election Database, contains every national and European Parliament (EP) election that the Lega Nord has participated in from 1992 onward. The Lega Nord had taken part in the 1987 national election however; at this point they were not a major party. Therefore, it is appropriate to begin the analysis in 1992. The elections are sorted by year and labeled as either national or EP elections. The elections that are in white are in periods where the Lega Nord advocated for federalism or devolution, and the elections in grey are occurred in periods when the Lega campaigned on more radical spatial demands.

Table 1: LN Electoral Results, National and EP Elections[[2]](#footnote-2)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Election Year** | **Election Type** | **LN % Share of Vote** |
| 1992 | National | 8.65 |
| 1994 | National | 8.36 |
| 1994 | European Parliament | 6.56 |
| 1996 | National | 10.07 |
| 1999 | European Parliament | 4.49 |
| 2001 | National | 3.94 |
| 2004 | European Parliament | 4.96 |
| 2006 | National | 4.58 |
| 2008 | National | 8.07 |
| 2009 | European Parliament | 10.20 |
| 2013 | National | 4.08 |
| 2014 | European Parliament | 6.16 |

Source: European Election Database, Provided by Norwegian Social Science Data Services[[3]](#footnote-3)

When examining the data in Table 1, some general trends can be observed. The first is that the Lega Nord’s share of the vote seems to remain stable or gradually increase, with the exception of certain times when there appear to be electoral “shocks”. I define an electoral shock as a dramatic decrease in a party’s share of the vote in comparison to the last election. With the exception of three electoral shocks, in 1994, 1999, and 2013 there has never been a decrease in the LN’s share of the vote that has been greater than 0.55 percent. The decrease in the share of the vote in 2001 and 2006 is so miniscule that it should be considered to have remained stable. However, in 1994 there is a drop of 1.8 percent in their share of the vote. In 1999 there is a drop of 5.8 percent, and in 2013a drop of 6.12 percent. Admittedly the shock of 1994 is much smaller than the shocks of 1999 and 2013. However, the Lega Nord lost 1.8 percent of the vote in a matter of months in the 1994 EP election, as the EP election occurred in June and the previous general election occurred in March of the same year. Losing 1.8 percent of the vote in three months could be very alarming information for a vote seeking party. Still, the 1994 shock was relatively modest, which may suggest that other factors were involved with this switch in spatial demands.

The second trend that can be observed is that the shocks are typically followed by a sizable electoral gain. This can be seen in the 1996 election when the Lega Nord gained 3.51 percent share of the vote and again in 2012 when the LN gained 2.08 percent of the vote in only a year. However, the same trend does not occur after the electoral shock of 1999. In fact there is actually a modest decrease in the next election of 2001 of 0.55 percent. It takes several years for the LN to regain its electoral support after the shock of 1999. Over the period of 2001 to 2009 the Lega Nord’s share of the vote either remains relatively stable or is increasing. This suggests that adjustments were made to the LN’s platform that made it more appealing to the mass electorate, even if it did not get the immediate electoral boost that occurred after the shocks of 1999 and 2013. Once again, though the evidence supports this trend, other factors are likely to be at work here as well, and they will be examined in subsequent chapters/sections.

The final trend that can be observed is that changes in spatial demands occur following the electoral shocks of 1994, 1999, and 2013. The colors on the chart, white for moderate demands and grey for more radical demands, change with the electoral shocks. There are no exceptions to this trend for the time period being examined. However, there have only been three oscillations of spatial demands over this period of time, one of which occurred recently. It is possible that more radical demands could result in immediate electoral payoffs, while more moderate spatial demands result in gradual electoral payoffs. Still one should not rush to this conclusion, as there has only been one instance in which the LN has switched to more moderate spatial demands. Therefore there is not enough data to come to this conclusion. I do not intend to suggest that this trend is guaranteed to continue, but that for now there isn’t anything to suggest otherwise, and the data seem to support this trend. As more elections occur and data is collected on them future research should continue to look for anomalies in this trend.

The data from the EED seems to support the hypothesis that oscillations in spatial demands will be adjusted in order to maximize votes. It can be observed in Table 1 that spatial demands are changed immediately following large electoral shocks. Table 1 also shows that adjustments in spatial demands also seem to result in an increase in electoral support. This increase could be immediate in the cases of 1996 and 2014, or it could be gradual, as in the case of 2001. From this analysis, the data seems to suggeest that the Lega Nord does indeed behave as what Harmel and Janda (1994) describe as a vote seeking party. It can also be concluded, consistent with Somer-Topcu’s (2009) findings, that the LN has utilized electoral outcomes to inform its decisions regarding party change.

**Data and Analysis: Positions of Other Parties**

The second hypothesis will be tested utilizing data from the Comparative Manifesto Project. This source contains data coded from the electoral manifestos from every general election the Lega Nord has participated in since 1992. The frequency of mentions of federalism will be compared between the LN and its main electoral competitor *Forza Italia* (FI, later becomes the PdL) in the context of the LNs spatial demands.

Adams and Somer-Topcu (2009) argued that the position of other political parties is a relevant factor for party change. They go on to suggest that parties are more sensitive to shifts within their own ideological family (e.g. parties on the right are more sensitive to shifts in other parties on the right). Based upon the logic of these findings this study has hypothesized that the Lega Nord will oscillate its spatial demands when other parties begin to adopt similar stances on issues, specifically in regard to federalism. Table 2 compares the Lega Nord to another member of its ideological family and the largest party of the right in Italy, Forza Italia. The LN and FI have traditionally competed for the same segment of the electorate (Cento Bull and Gilbert 2001).

Table 2 presents data for the Lega Nord and the FI/PdL for every general election held in Italy between 1992 and 2013 on the percentage of their electoral manifesto that is dedicated to the issue of federalism. This data was taken from the Comparative Manifesto Project, a data source that codes manifestos to determine the percentage and frequencies of mentions of various issues. The column shaded in grey was the 1996 election, and is shaded because it is the only general election in which the LN campaigned for secessionism (radical demands).

Table 2: Percent of Manifesto dedicated to Federalism in General Elections

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Election Year** | **LN** | **FI/PdL**[[4]](#footnote-4) |
| 1992 | 12.6% | X |
| 1994 | 12.6% | 2.2% |
| 1996 | 13.8% | 3.7% |
| 2001 | 4.8% | 4.3% |
| 2006 | 0.0% | 0.0% |
| 2008 | 31.1% | 2.4% |
| 2013 | 3.3% | 3.3% |

Source: Comparative Manifesto Project

When examining the data in Table 2, it does not seem to support the hypothesis that the Lega Nord’s change in spatial demands would occur with oscillations in FI’s agenda on federalism. However, this is not to say that FI’s stance on federalism had no impact upon the Lega Nord’s spatial demands. Adams and Somer-Topcu’s (2009) study concluded that parties tend to be sensitive to the policy shifts of other parties, and were particularly sensitive to the policy shifts made by parties within their own ideological families. They argued that parties tend to move in the same direction as other parties within their ideological family. The hypothesis of this study, based on the finding that shifts in other political parties are relevant and the idea that parties can exercise power through coalition and blackmail potential, expected to find that in periods when Forza Italia focused more on federalism it would push the Lega Nord to more radical spatial demands, and when FI focused less on federalism the Lega Nord have more moderate spatial demands. Table 2 does not seem to support either trend throughout the entire period of the analysis. This does not mean that the idea that other parties of the same ideological family have had no effect on the LN’s spatial demands should be rejected. When examining the time period before the 2001 election the Lega Nord does in fact have more radical spatial demands as FI enters the political arena and begins to adopt federalism as a larger share of its platform. After 2001, Adams and Somer-Topcu’s argument seems to be correct, as the two parties converge on the issue of federalism (with the exception of the 2008 election which will be explained momentarily).

What could have caused the switch from the LN following a path of divergence with Forza Italia to one of convergence on the issue of federalism? One explanation, which would align well with the data, is that parties will respond differently to the policy shifts of other parties, even those in their own ideological family, depending on whether or not the parties are political allies or foes. Prior to the 1999 EP elections the Lega Nord had been competitive with Forza Italia, and even when the two parties were in a governing coalition together, the relationship was tense and was one of the factors of Berlusconi I’s early demise (Coleman 1996; Koff and Koff 2000; Cento Bull and Gilbert 2001; Richardson and Colombo 2012). The switch from the LN as a competitor with FI to one of its closest allies occurred after the 1999 EP parliamentary election, with the formulation of the CdL (Cento Bull and Gilbert 2001; Albertazzi and McDonnell 2005; Massetti and Toubeau 2013). The change in the relationship between the Lega Nord and Forza Italia lines up perfectly with the change from divergence on spatial demands to convergence.

One of the reasons this process of convergence seems to occur in the case of the LN after 2001 is because in many of these elections the Lega Nord and FI run on the same manifesto after the creation of the CdL. There appears to be one anomaly in the data after this point in 2008, when the LN devote 31.1% of their manifesto to federalism, while FI only devotes 2.4% to the issue. Albertazzi and McDonnell (2010) argued that in 2008 part of the reason for the success of the LN was due to its establishment of “issue ownership” over the issues of federalism and security. The Lega Nord became the arm of the CdL that promoted federal and security[[5]](#footnote-5) reform. Though more research will have to be done across many parties to substantiate the claim that the relationship between parties of ideological families can play a role, the analysis of the Lega Nord in relation to FI highlights the oversights of applying generalized models to ethno-regionalist parties and the merits of a thorough case study.

**Conclusions**

The analysis of electoral and manifesto data seem to suggest that factors in the electoral system do have an impact on the oscillation of the LN between more radical and more moderate demands. The spatial demands oscillate after every electoral shock over the period from 1992-2014, suggesting that the Lega Nord does behave as a vote seeking party, and will modify its policy in order to obtain the largest percentage of the vote possible. This would confirm Harmel and Janda’s (1994) theory that vote seeking parties adjust their policy demands in order to gain the largest share of the electorate possible, and Somer-Topcu’s (2009) claim that parties utilize past electoral data as a source of information to navigate the risks of party change. However, this would also suggest that even though the Lega Nord is a niche party, it does not seem to respond to electoral factors as such, as previous studies suggested. The Lega Nord seems to be trying to maximize its voting base rather than please the supporters it already has.

Though this study’s hypothesis that the Lega Nord would become more radical as Forza Italia increasingly addressed federalism was proved to be wrong, however, the data appear to have a sort of pattern that could possibly be grounds for future research. FI did increasingly embrace federalism, and the LN did radicalize their spatial demands, but this process stopped by the 2001 election. After this election a process of convergence between the two parties occurred on the issue of federalism, consistent with trends found by Adams and Somer-Topcu (2009). This might suggest that the relationship between two parties, even of the same ideological family, could have an effect on the way the parties react to each other’s policy shifts. This would be an interesting topic for future, more comprehensive research, but is beyond the scope of this study.

Overall, when examining the factors of electoral performance and the position of other parties, it seems that the Lega Nord follows the generalized trends found by large N case studies only to a certain extent. Upon close examination through a case study, it can be seen that certain niche parties can behave as normal vote seeking parties. The experience of the LN also shows that parties may have different reactions to the policy shifts of other parties based on their relationship with them. This data shows that future research should not hastily assume that generalized research on party change to ethno-regionalist parties, especially when it comes to treating them the same as other niche parties. It also highlights the merits of the case study as a method for a deep contextualized understanding of specific political parties and their relationship with other parties in the political system.

The recent referendum for Scottish independence is a reminder that ethno-regionalism is still a powerful political force in Europe. Recent trends, both at the state and EU level warrant the need for further understanding of how ethno-regionalist parties function. This study has identified factors that relate to the spatial demands of ethno-regionalist parties. There are many studies relating to party demands in general, but few that look at the idiosyncrasies of ethno-regionalist parties. This analysis has shown that the generalized models of party demands do not necessarily fit ethno-regionalist parties in all cases. Smaller scale studies of ethno-regionalism could offer more insight onto how these parties are abnormal in some respects.

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1. This would be an interesting question to pose, as the Lega Nord was not part of Adams, Clark, Ezrow, and Glasgow’s (2006) analysis, though it examined European parties from 1976-1998. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Some of the data applied in the analysis in this publication are based on material from the "European Election Database". The data are collected from original sources, prepared and made available by the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD). NSD are not responsible for the analyses/interpretation of the data presented here. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The datum for 2014 was taken from the European Parliament website. It was missing from the EED. <http://www.results-elections2014.eu/en/country-results-it-2014.html#table02> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Percentages are taken for FI in 1994-2006 and the PdL in 2008 and 2013 after FI merged with the AN to form the PdL. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For the Lega Nord this largely meant immigration. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)