

“The rise of populism  
in Europe can be  
traced through  
online behaviour...”

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**POPULISM IN EUROPE:  
LEGA NORD**

Jamie Bartlett  
Jonathan Birdwell  
Duncan McDonnell

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This research is based primarily on an online survey of Facebook supporters of the Lega Nord. The results do not, therefore, necessarily reflect the views of the Lega Nord. Demos is an independent think tank committed to undertaking innovative research in areas of public interest. We are non-party political. Our results are set out objectively and accurately without normative judgement.

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All errors and omissions remain our own.

Jamie Bartlett  
Jonathan Birdwell  
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October 2012

## A note on terminology

This paper is the fifth in a series of country briefing papers released in 2012 about the online support of populist political parties and street-based groups in Europe. These papers are based on a dataset of approximately 10,667 Facebook supporters of these ‘nationalist populist’ parties in 11 European countries, which was published in the Demos report *The New Face of Digital Populism*, released in November 2011.<sup>1</sup> Further papers will be released throughout 2012.

Throughout this paper, we refer to two primary datasets by the following terminology:

*Lega Nord*: The primary data source used in this report is a survey of 838 Facebook supporters of the Lega Nord, collected by Demos during July and August 2011. All references to Lega Nord supporters refer to this group unless otherwise stated.

*Populist parties and movements (PPAMs)*: In order to draw comparisons between Lega Nord Facebook supporters and the Facebook supporters of nationalist populist parties elsewhere in Europe, throughout this paper we refer to the data set collected for *The New Face of Digital Populism*. This includes 10,667 Facebook supporters of nationalist populist parties and movements in 11 Western European countries. We refer to these as PPAMs throughout.

We do not claim that the respondents of this survey are representative of either Lega Nord party members or voters. This sample consists of social media supporters of the party. We are interested primarily in who these individuals are, what motivates and concerns them, and how far their political activism encompasses offline and online engagement.

We also draw on European-wide survey data from a Eurobarometer survey and the *European Values Study* to make comparisons where possible. These studies are cited where relevant below.

## Executive summary

The last decade has witnessed a growth in populist parties and movements (PPAMs) across Western Europe. Many of these parties are defined by their opposition to multiculturalism, and concern for protecting national and European culture, particularly from the supposed effects of Muslim immigration. On economic policy, they are often vocal critics of globalisation, which is held to be an elite-driven, anti-democratic project. Similar claims tend to be voiced about the European Union and the integration process. These concerns are expressed via an 'anti-establishment' rhetoric used to appeal to disillusionment with mainstream political parties, the media and government. Populists thus posit themselves as the defenders of a 'good' people against threats from above (economic, political and cultural elites at national, continental and global levels) and below (immigrants and others considered not part of 'the people'). Often termed 'radical right' or 'the new right', these parties in reality do not fit easily into traditional political divides.

The Lega Nord is the oldest party group in the Italian parliament, and has enjoyed considerable political success: the party has been in government three times, including for eight of the last 11 years. It held several key ministries in the coalition government led by Silvio Berlusconi until November 2011. Since then, according to opinion polls, the party has seen a decline in support, partly driven by scandals surrounding the leadership. Long-team leader Umberto Bossi resigned in April 2012, and the party is now led by former Minister of the Interior, Roberto Maroni.

Nonetheless, the Lega Nord is likely to remain a significant force in Italian politics. It is a party with a clear ideology and unique policy offer, backed by a well-structured

and active internal organisation. Over two decades, it has also built up a class of elected representatives at all institutional levels who have gathered a wealth of experience. In January 2012 the party had 374 mayors, 12 provincial presidents and approximately 6,000 elected representatives, if all subnational branches of government are included.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, its new leader Maroni was consistently the most popular minister in the Berlusconi-led government from 2008 to 2011.

The Lega Nord places strong emphasis on introducing federalism and tough limits on immigration. Since its foundation, the party has always pushed for greater northern autonomy. In recent years, Islam has become an increasingly significant theme for the Lega. Muslims and Islam are often characterised by the party as representing a fundamental threat to the values, way of life and cultural integrity of northerners. According to the Lega Nord's narrative, the courts (run by elites) are complicit in undermining the values and traditions of the people, since minority rights are privileged over those of the indigenous majority. Likewise, the party holds that the EU — as an elite-driven organisation promoting globalisation — fails to do enough to prevent the arrival of immigrants and does not defend the common Christian roots of European people.<sup>3</sup>

The party is known for its Euroscepticism, but in reality it has often had an ambiguous relationship with the EU and integration. For example, until the late 1990s, the party was pro-European given the possibilities for greater regional expression offered at the supranational level. Since then, however, it has been characterised by its strong opposition to both the current construction of the EU and the trajectory of European integration.

The financial crisis hit Italy particularly strongly in the summer of 2011 and led to the resignation of the government in November 2011. It was replaced by a non-party technocratic government led by Mario Monti. This provoked a rupture between Berlusconi's party, which has provided reluctant support to the new government, and the Lega, which is Monti's most vociferous opponent in parliament. As a result of

the crisis and the change in government, it is also now extremely doubtful whether the Lega's key policy goal of fiscal federalism will be implemented, despite this having been approved during the party's time in government from 2008 to 2011. On the plus side for the Lega, the crisis may well make the public more open to its Eurosceptic appeals.

This report presents the results of a survey of 838 responses from Facebook fans of the Lega Nord. It includes data on who they are, what they think, and what motivates them to shift from virtual to real-world activism.

In July 2011 we targeted adverts at individuals who were supporters of Lega Nord related groups on Facebook. On clicking the advert, individuals were redirected to a survey, which they were invited to complete. The survey and adverts were presented in Italian, and were then translated back into English for the purposes of this report. The data were then weighted in order to improve the validity and accuracy of any inferences made about the online population. Although online recruitment in social research is widespread, self-select recruitment via social network sites brings novel challenges. Because this is an innovative research method, with both strengths and weaknesses, we have included a methodology section in an annex to this report.

## Results

The Lega Nord's support base cannot be adequately understood through Facebook alone, and many Lega Nord supporters are of course not on Facebook. The findings in this report refer specifically to Lega Nord Facebook supporters — an important, but specific, sub-group of its overall support base. As we set out in the methodology (in the annex), this study is more exploratory than comprehensive, but does shed important and useful light on this group. It is with these caveats that the results are presented:

- *Lega Nord Facebook supporters are predominantly young and male.* Over three-quarters (78 per cent) are male; and 69 per

cent are under the age of 30 (which is far younger than the average age of Italian Facebook users, of whom only 35 per cent are under 25). This is at odds with what is known about traditional Lega Nord voters and party members, who are from a more mixed demographic.

- *Facebook supporters of Lega Nord tend to be employed or students.* Lega Nord Facebook supporters were more likely to be unemployed than the average Italian citizen (14 per cent vs 8.2 per cent nationally at the time the survey was conducted), but given the large number of young people who completed this survey—and the 27.8 per cent rate of unemployment in Italy among those under 25 in July 2011—our respondents are actually more likely to be employed than the average Italian citizen their age. More than half (59 per cent) of supporters under 30 classified themselves as students, which is likely to reflect the long-standing trend of Italians spending significantly longer in university than northern Europeans.
- *Lega Nord Facebook supporters are motivated and active.* Nearly one-third (30 per cent) are formal members of the party, while 43 per cent reported having taken part in a street demonstration or protest in the past six months, a percentage that is considerably higher than the average PPAM supporter (26 per cent).
- *Lega Nord Facebook supporters' top concerns are more varied than other populist parties surveyed for this project.* When asked to rank their top two social and political concerns, Lega Nord Facebook supporters said the economy and immigration. This may reflect both the impact of the crisis in Italy and the relative youth of our respondents. Interestingly, given the party's focus on immigration and the presence of Muslims in Italy, Lega Nord Facebook supporters were less likely than the average PPAM supporter to be concerned about immigration (25 per cent vs 37 per cent) and Islamic extremism (16 per cent vs 24 per cent).

- *Lega Nord Facebook supporters are far less Eurosceptic than those of other populist parties.* When asked what they thought about the EU, 51 per cent of Lega Nord Facebook supporters gave the positive response: 'freedom to work, study and travel'. Trust in the EU, at 43 per cent, was almost 30 points higher than the PPAM average of 14 per cent.
- *Lega Nord Facebook supporters are no more pessimistic than the average Italian voter.* On measures relating to personal optimism about their own lives, and views about the future of Italy, Lega Nord's Facebook supporters had similar scores to the Italian general public. Equally, they score similar results for trust in other people, which is often used as a proxy for social capital.
- *Lega Nord Facebook supporters distrust the media and justice system.* Unlike respondents from other PPAMs in Europe, Lega Nord Facebook supporters do not display particularly low levels of trust towards most political and social institutions compared with their national compatriots. However, it is of note that the justice and legal system and the press were two institutions that scored especially badly among Lega Nord supporters.

## Implications

Our task in this report is to illuminate the phenomenon of online supporters of the Lega Nord and present the results objectively. We do not offer lengthy recommendations because formulating a response is a task for Italian citizens and politicians. This is perhaps a more difficult task given the fluid and dynamic way many people now express their political preferences online, and the way social media allow for groups and individuals to network and mobilise faster than ever. We hope this research can inform that task.

# 1 Background

## The Lega Nord

The Lega Nord (Northern League) was formally created in 1991 by the union of six regionalist 'leagues' which had emerged in the mid-1980s across the north of Italy. From the beginning, the party was led by Umberto Bossi — founder of the most electorally successful of these leagues, the Lega Lombarda (Lombard League). While many believed that the Lega Nord was a protest party which would not last, over 20 years later it is now the oldest group in the Italian parliament. Having contributed to the demise of the First Republic party system by its criticisms of the traditional parties (and taking support from them), the Lega became a member of the first Second Republic government, led by Silvio Berlusconi, in 1994. The party went on to serve in coalition governments (again led by Berlusconi) for eight of the ten years between 2001 and 2011. In its electoral results and government positions held, the Lega has thus been one of Europe's most successful regionalist parties. Moreover, unlike other populist parties such as the Pim Fortuyn List in the Netherlands or the Freedom Party in Austria, the Lega Nord has proved able in the last decade to serve in government without losing votes, suffering internal splits or having to tone down its rhetoric.<sup>4</sup>

The Lega Nord entered government for the first time in 1994, with just over 8 per cent of the vote, alongside prime minister Berlusconi's party Forza Italia and the post-Fascist Alleanza Nazionale, led by Gianfranco Fini. However, there were evident tensions from the beginning, particularly on policy between Forza Italia and the Lega Nord — with both parties also strongly in competition for votes in the North — and on a personal level between the two leaders Bossi and Berlusconi. As the Lega Nord became increasingly

estranged from its coalition partners, it was no surprise when the party brought down the government in December 1994. The next six years were ones of isolation for the Lega Nord, because of its refusal of alliances and its move from a northern regionalist position to one of advocating independence for Padania (a macro-region, comprising most of northern Italy). During this period, the party ran alone nationally and locally, rejecting all other parties as being part of the same corrupt elites. While this strategy seemed to pay off at the 1996 general election, when it received 10.1 per cent of the vote, ultimately the Lega Nord was penalised by the bipolar logic of Italy's electoral systems. In other words, as long as the party remained outside a coalition, it was destined also to remain outside power, whether nationally or regionally. However, that same logic (of creating two very broad coalitions) also meant that — even though its vote was declining rapidly in the late 1990s — the Lega continued to be a potentially decisive ally. In 2000, this resulted in a rapprochement between Bossi and Berlusconi in time for the 2001 general election.<sup>5</sup>

Although that election was the Lega Nord's worst to date in vote share (3.9 per cent), the centre-right coalition of which it was now again part easily won. While numerically — in votes received and MPs elected — the Lega was in a far weaker position than it had been in 1994, this time Bossi clearly enjoyed an excellent relationship with Berlusconi. The Lega Nord emphasised its loyalty to the prime minister, receiving in return his support for the Lega Nord's key policy efforts on federalism and immigration. The party also, however, seemed proud to be in near-constant conflict with its fellow junior coalition partners of the Alleanza Nazionale and the former Christian Democrats of the Unione dei Democratici Cristiani e di Centro. This division of 'friends' and 'enemies' allowed the Lega Nord to paint a picture to its members and supporters of government participation providing influence on policy, but without the party having sold out.

Following the coalition's narrow defeat in the 2006 general election — but with the Lega Nord increasing its share

to 4.6 per cent — the Lega Nord remained Forza Italia's most faithful ally for the next two years in opposition. After the fall of Romano Prodi's centre-left government, the 2008 general election would prove to be extremely successful for the Lega Nord, with the party receiving 8.3 per cent of the vote. This result not only almost doubled its 2006 performance, but was the harbinger of a new period of success at the ballot box for the party.

After its first year back in a coalition government consisting now of just itself and Berlusconi's new party — the Popolo della Libertà (People of Freedom), created by Forza Italia's merger with Alleanza Nazionale — the Lega achieved its highest ever share of the national vote, 10.2 per cent, in the 2009 European Parliament elections. The regional elections the following year were ever better for the party, with the Lega Nord gaining 26.2 per cent in Lombardy and 35.2 per cent (plus the regional presidency) in the Veneto. In many of the most productive areas of the country the Lega was now the top party. It also was making significant advances on its two key goals of federal reform (directed by the party leader Bossi in his position as Minister for Reform) and immigration (with the Lega Nord's Roberto Maroni as Minister of the Interior leading the way on new restrictive measures).

The Lega Nord's fortunes changed in 2011, however. First it had poor results in the local elections and then the Berlusconi government fell in November, under the pressure of the financial crisis and the Popolo della Libertà's dwindling numbers in parliament. The subsequent decision by Berlusconi to support the government led by Mario Monti also provoked the end of the Lega–Popolo della Libertà alliance, and the Lega Nord became the main parliamentary opposition to the new technocratic administration. Worse was to come for the Lega in 2012 with the revelation of party misuse of public funds, in particular by figures close to Umberto Bossi (including two of his sons). This led to calls for the leader to step down and opened tensions between those supporting Bossi and those favouring the other leading figure in the party, Maroni. Eventually, Bossi resigned in

April 2012 (becoming ‘Life President’ of the Lega) and Maroni was elected as new Federal Secretary at the party congress in July 2012.

These difficulties have been reflected in poor opinion poll results during 2012, in which the Lega Nord slipped back to its 2006 level of around 5 per cent. Nonetheless, it seems likely that the Lega Nord will remain a force in Italian politics and will survive the passage of leadership from Bossi to Maroni. It is clearly no longer in danger of being a ‘flash-in-the-pan’ protest movement, nor—like Berlusconi’s parties—is it one whose lifespan depends on its founder. As outlined below, it is a party with a clear ideology and unique policy offer, backed by a well-structured and active internal organisation. Over two decades, it has also built up a class of elected representatives at all institutional levels who have gathered a wealth of experience. Currently, the Lega Nord has 172 elected representatives spread out between European, national and regional levels. Of these, 80 are MPs, 83 are regional councillors and nine are MEPs. The party also had, as of January 2012, 374 mayors, 12 provincial presidents and approximately 6000 elected representatives, if all subnational branches of government are included.<sup>6</sup>

### **Is the Lega Nord a populist party?**

There is broad agreement among Italian and international academic scholars of populism that the Lega Nord is a clear case of a populist party.<sup>7</sup> Where disputes tend to occur in the classification of the Lega Nord is on the issue of whether it should also be defined as ‘radical right’. For example, the Dutch scholar Cas Mudde notes that while ‘populism has always been a core feature of the Lega Nord’, the party’s qualification as ‘radical right’ is more complicated.<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting that—unlike clear cases of radical right parties such as the Austrian Freedom Party, the Norwegian Progress Party or the Swiss People’s Party—the Lega Nord itself has always rejected the ‘right-wing’ label. In surveys, its supporters have also displayed attitudes—such as less aversion to communism

than those of other right-wing and even centrist parties in Italy—which are not consistent with radical right voters.<sup>9</sup> For our purposes in this report, therefore, we believe it is more useful to treat the party as a clear-cut case of what the academics Roberto Biorcio and Duncan McDonnell have termed ‘regionalist populism’.<sup>10</sup>

It is impossible to understand the party without emphasising the party’s regionalist character. Since its foundation, and its roots in the leagues of the 1980s, the key issue for the Lega Nord has always been that of procuring greater autonomy for the north of Italy. While the degree of autonomy demanded may have oscillated over time, from federalism to independence to devolution and, in recent years, to fiscal federalism, this central tenet of the party’s ideology has never been displaced. As one of the party’s earliest chroniclers, Ilvo Diamanti, wrote: Bossi ‘redefined the concept of territory’ in the late 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>11</sup> The Lega Nord reshaped the economic, political, historical and cultural reference points of the North into a community of ‘interests’ and ‘values’ and set them against those of the Italian state and southern Italy. Typical of populist discourse, it constructed a framework of interpretation in which a virtuous and homogeneous ‘us’—honest, hard-working and simple-living northern Italians attached to their local traditions—was cast as under siege from above by the financial, political and cultural elites and, from below, by a series of others, in particular southerners and immigrants. In this sense, the Lega Nord provided what the UK analyst Damian Tambini terms ‘a new source of self-respect’ for northerners.<sup>12</sup> The party told northerners that they were not to blame for the problems of Italy, but instead were in fact the principal victims of the Italian state, whose corruption and waste northerners were being forced to pay for. The solution to this injustice, the party has always said, is to introduce measures by which northerners will gain greater control over how their localities are run and their money spent. Hence, as far as possible, the Lega Nord says that taxes from northern regions should remain in the North, rather than being

dissipated in the centre and South by inefficient government agencies and corrupt politicians.

The Lega Nord's offer to northerners can be summed up in the party's key slogan of making the people once more 'masters in their homes'. This relates to all elements in the Lega Nord's policy platform, but is particularly strongly linked to its two dominant issues of federalism and immigration. The first chapter of the party's 2009 policy document *Proposte e Obiettivi* (Proposals and Objectives) is dedicated to federalism; and the second chapter to immigration and security. All subsequent chapters—whether on Europe, the family, agriculture, the economy or infrastructure—are to greater and lesser extents related back to the need to introduce federalism and combat immigration.<sup>13</sup> Although the party officially says it only opposes *illegal* immigration, it seems apparent that it is not comfortable with the presence of non-Western European outsiders in northern communities. This is particularly so in the case of Muslims, which has become an increasingly significant theme for the party over the past decade. One of the main ways it did this was by presenting itself as the most vociferous and toughest opponent of Islam and those from Muslim-majority countries present in—or intending to come to—Italy. Muslims and Islam are often characterised by the party as representing a fundamental threat to the values, way of life and cultural integrity of northerners. We can see this, for example, in Lega Nord claims that Muslim communities wish to impose changes in schools such as the removal of crucifixes and Christmas cribs, and the banning of pork products in canteens. These are linked to warnings that Quranic laws are supplanting local ones in many countries and that Western (inevitably Christian) identity, traditions and norms are in danger.

According to the Lega Nord's narrative, the courts (run by elites) are complicit in these attacks on the people, where minority rights are privileged over those of the indigenous majority, and the EU fails to do enough to prevent the arrival of immigrants and does not defend the common Christian roots of the people.<sup>14</sup> Although the party has been described as Eurosceptic, it counters by saying that it is not 'against

Europe *per se*', but against the creation of 'a genuine continental super-state in which democracy is, in practice, non-existent'.<sup>15</sup> It is worth noting, however, that until the late 1990s, the Lega was pro-European, given the possibilities for greater regional expression offered by the EU. This was intertwined with the claim by the party that the North was the only 'European' area of the country. The party's position changed radically following Italian acceptance into European Monetary Union in 1998. Had Italy been forced to remain outside, the Lega Nord was ready to make the case that the North (and northern business in particular) was paying too high a price for the deficiencies of the rest of the country and should secede. Performing a U-turn from Europhile to Eurosceptic, the Lega Nord since the end of the 1990s has been the harshest critic among Italian parties of the EU and European integration. That said, despite the rhetoric, it seems that Europe is an issue on which the party is in reality always willing to compromise. For example, under pressure from its allies, the Lega Nord voted in parliament for both the Nice and Lisbon treaties in 2002 and 2008 respectively. It could be argued, therefore, that Europe is an issue which the party is happy to use when the conditions are propitious, and to set to one side when they are not.

### Organisational structure and leadership

Analysts have often pointed to the strongly hierarchical and centralised structure of the Lega Nord as granting the leader 'an exceptional level of internal control'.<sup>16</sup> However, even though the Lega Nord has been dominated by its leader, Bossi's control of the party was not something so much reflected in specific rules, as in practices and communications.<sup>17</sup> For example, despite the party statute stipulating that a federal congress must be held every three years (and the leader re-elected during it), Bossi did not call one for the ten years between 2002 and 2012. Likewise, it seems clear—despite the party's internal federal structure—that the leader retained full control over

candidatures at all levels, with local and regional branches having little real say in the matter.

Although the party lacks internal democracy, in other ways it resembles a traditional mass party far more than its competitors. Unlike mainstream parties in which the difference between supporters and members has been blurred by the introduction of open primaries, online enrolment and the drastic reduction of local branches, in the Lega Nord the situation is very different. The number of party branches has steadily increased, while membership of the Lega Nord is something which must be earned and is prized. Members are divided into two hierarchical categories: the *'soci ordinari-militanti'* ('ordinary members-activists') and *'soci sostenitori'* ('supporting members'). The latter can only progress to the 'ordinary member-activist' level after having proved their activism over a period of at least six months. This entails regular attendance of weekly meetings, participation in staffing information stalls at markets or in piazzas, putting up posters on walls and similar activities. Despite these requirements (or perhaps also because of them, given that they provide members with a sense of mission and genuine involvement), the number of Lega Nord members has increased over the past decade. At least according to figures made available by its central office in Milan, at the end of 2011 the party had 173,044 members. While down on the 2010 total of 182,502 — its highest ever number of members — the 2011 figure represents an almost 40 per cent increase on 2001 when the party had 124,310 members.

### **Lega Nord and voters**

According to the ITANES study of the 2008 general election, the Lega Nord's electorate presented a number of similarities, but also important differences, compared to other PPAMs. For example, unlike most PPAMS — which gain considerably more support from men than women — according to the ITANES election survey, the Lega was voted for by 8.5 per cent of women and 8.2 per cent of men in 2008.<sup>18</sup> By contrast, the European Social Survey showed that more men than women

voted for the PVV in the Netherlands, the Danish People's Party, the Front National in France, and Vlaams Belang in Belgium — usually by at least two percentage points.<sup>19</sup>

There were no major generational imbalances among the party voters according to the ITANES 2008 data. Although 10.8 per cent of 55–64-year-olds voted for the party, 10.5 per cent of those between 35 and 44 did so, as did 8.5 per cent of 18–24-year-olds. As regards education levels, the most likely people to vote for the party were those who left full-time education after receiving their middle-school (9.4 per cent) or high-school (8.9 per cent) diploma. Consistent with the figures for other PPAMs, only 3.6 per cent of university graduates voted for the party. There was a significant preponderance of private-sector workers of various types (from managers to blue-collar) as opposed to those in the public sector. Strikingly, just 1.8 per cent of teachers voted for the Lega Nord in 2008. As was to be expected — given the long-standing strength of the party in provincial areas of the North — 10.8 per cent of citizens in towns with a population of less than 5,000 inhabitants, but only 3.1 per cent of those living in cities with populations exceeding 250,000 voted for the party. Finally, those who are concerned about immigration are twice as likely to vote for the Lega, while citizens worried about crime (often linked to immigration) are circa 1.5 times as likely to vote for the party.

Research shows a strong correspondence between the party's key themes — northern autonomy and the fight against immigration — and reasons cited for backing the party. Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell conducted a survey of over 200 party members and sympathisers at the important annual party rally in Pontida, held on 14 June 2009.<sup>20</sup> When asked for the three main reasons why they supported the party, 73.4 per cent of respondents listed federalism and 71.7 per cent immigration. No other issue came within 40 percentage points of these two. Interestingly, given what we have said above, Europe only accounted for 2.7 per cent.

### **Lega Nord and social media**

Traditionally, Italian parties have made very poor use of internet and social media, and the Lega Nord has been no exception. Party representative Facebook pages and websites often only sprung into life during election campaigns and would then lie dormant. Moreover, the Lega Nord's website itself ([www.leganord.org](http://www.leganord.org)) was for many years difficult to navigate and outdated in design and content. This situation appears to be changing quickly under the new leader, Roberto Maroni, however. Since he took over in July 2012, the party website has been redesigned and improved. Moreover, a large number of Lega Nord representatives and party employees acquired Twitter accounts in a very short space of time during the late summer of 2012. Judging by some of the early comments, many of them were clearly strongly encouraged by the party to do so. Maroni has led the way, being extremely active both on Facebook ([www.facebook.com/maroni.leganord](http://www.facebook.com/maroni.leganord)) and Twitter (@maroni\_leganord). Whether the Lega has learned to use internet and social media better will be tested during the 2013 general election campaign.

## 2 Who are the Lega Nord Facebook supporters?

This chapter presents the socio-economic, age and gender data of Lega Nord Facebook supporters who took part in our survey. Where possible, we present this information in the context of broader Italian society and make comparisons to similar groups in Western Europe, as presented in the Demos report *The New Face of Digital Populism*.<sup>21</sup>

### Demographics and geography

Using Facebook's publicly available advertising tool, it is possible to identify the age and gender of all Italian users of Facebook, as well as the basic demographic information of Facebook members who express a preference for the Lega Nord.

Across the country as a whole, Italian Facebook users are slightly more likely to be male than female (54 per cent vs 46 per cent, n=20,731,520), but among the Lega Nord's Facebook supporters, 78 per cent are male and 22 per cent are female (n=45,740). This obviously does not reflect the gender profile of the party's voters in 2008, as we discussed in the previous chapter, but it may better represent the gender split among the party's members. For example, much like the profile of our Facebook respondents here, those in Albertazzi and McDonnell's 2009 survey at the annual Pontida rally were divided 71.6 per cent male and just 28.4 per cent female.<sup>22</sup>

Lega Nord supporters were among the youngest of all those party sympathisers surveyed in the Digital Populism project: 69 per cent were under 25, compared with the PPAM average of 51 per cent. They were also far younger than the average Facebook users in Italy, of whom only 35 per cent are under 25. Only 8 per cent of respondents in our survey were over the age of 40.

The age demographic of our sample, therefore, does not accurately represent the typical Lega Nord voter—which is far more varied. This is partly driven by the younger age demographic of Facebook users in Italy, although, as table 1 sets out, this does not account entirely for the difference. The precise reasons for this are not clear. However, like many other European countries, Facebook was initially popular among university students, which might explain some of the difference (although Facebook is now relatively representative of the Italian public, with over 20 million users). Nevertheless, the sample does offer a unique insight into one important sub-group of the party's supporters: young social media users.

Table 1 **Age group of Lega Nord Facebook supporters (n=45,740) (Italy total in brackets) and supporters of Western Europe PPAMs (Europe total in brackets)**

Age group	Lega Nord total (Italy total) (%)	Western Europe PPAMs (Europe total) (%)
16–20	45 (18)	32 (19)
21–25	24 (17)	19 (17)
26–30	10 (14)	12 (14)
31–40	12 (25)	17 (21)
41–50	5 (16)	12 (15)
51+	3 (10)	8 (13)

## Education and employment

The proportion of respondents whose highest education qualification is a high-school diploma (59 per cent) is slightly above the pan-European PPAM figure of 45 per cent. The proportion of respondents who have a 'high-school diploma' falls among older Lega Nord supporters (from 62 per cent among under 30s to 50 per cent among those over 30); therefore the relatively high overall figure may at least in part be due to the youth of Lega Nord respondents (table 2).

Table 2 **Highest educational attainment of Lega Nord Facebook supporters, by gender and whether under or over age 30 (n=838)**

	Male (%)	Female (%)	Under 30 (%)	Over 30 (%)	Total (%)
High-school diploma	58	60	62	50	59
University degree	19	22	19	24	20
Technical qualification	12	9	8	20	11
Did not answer	11	9	11	6	10

Lega Nord Facebook supporters were more likely to be unemployed than the average Italian citizen (14 per cent vs 7.9 per cent nationally at the time the survey was conducted), but about the same as other supporters of PPAMs (14 per cent) (table 3). However, given the large number of young people who completed this survey—and the 27.8 per cent unemployment rate in Italy among those under 25 in July 2011—our respondents are actually more likely to be employed than the average Italian citizen their age. This in turn reflects the fact that our respondents were almost all based in the more prosperous north of Italy. Nearly three in five (59 per cent) of supporters under 30 classified themselves as students. Although this figure seems high at first glance, it is almost certainly due to the established trend of Italians spending significantly longer in university than northern Europeans. Moreover, given the current crisis, it seems probable that many young people are choosing to remain in university.

Table 3 **Employment status of Lega Nord Facebook supporters (n=838), by gender and whether under or over age 30 (national statistics in brackets) 23**

	Male (%)	Female (%)	Under 30 (%)	Over 30 (%)	Total (%)
Employed	40	35	26	78	38 (61.2)
Unemployed	12	17	14	14	14 (7.9)
Student	46	47	59	2	46
Did not answer	2	1	1	6	2

## Membership and involvement

To determine the extent to which Lega Nord Facebook supporters are involved in offline activity, we asked respondents whether they had voted for the Lega Nord at the last general election in 2008 and if they had participated in any demonstrations or street protests in the past six months (table 4).

Of the Facebook supporters we surveyed, only 43 per cent reported having voted for the party at the last election, a significantly lower proportion than the PPAM average of 67 per cent, but this is probably because many were not eligible to vote at the 2008 election. In fact, the proportion of those over 30 who voted for Lega Nord rises to 59 per cent. These figures are similar to those for many of the groups studied as part of this series. For example, of the 48 per cent of respondents who voted for the Danish People's Party in the last general election, 32 per cent were under 30 years of age and 78 per cent of voters were over 30. In Sweden, 57 per cent of under 30s in our sample voted for the Swedish Democrats at the last election, compared with 89 per cent of those over 30 did.<sup>24</sup>

In other respects, the respondents appear highly motivated: 30 per cent are formal members of the party compared with the average of 32 per cent of PPAMs who are formal members of the party or group,<sup>25</sup> while 43 per cent reported having taken part in a street demonstration or protest in the past six months, a considerably higher percentage than the average PPAM supporter (26 per cent).

Table 4 Offline involvement of Lega Nord Facebook supporters (n=838), by gender and whether under or over age 30 (national statistics in brackets)

	Male (%)	Female (%)	Under 30 (%)	Over 30 (%)	Total (%)
Formal members of LN (%)	31	28	29	34	30 (n/a)
Voted for LN in the 2008 gen. election (%)	42	46	39	59	43 (8.30) <sup>26</sup>
Taken part in march or demo in last 6/12 months (%)	42	45	46	33	43 (37.8) <sup>27</sup>

### 3 Social and political concerns

We asked Lega Nord Facebook supporters a number of questions about their social and political views, trust in people and political institutions, and opinions about the future for themselves and their country. Where possible, we compare results to a Eurobarometer survey and the *European Values Study* in order to make many meaningful comparisons with national level data. We also draw comparisons with supporters of other PPAMs throughout.

#### Top two biggest concerns

When asked to rank their top two social and political concerns from a list of 18 current issues, the most common responses from Lega Nord Facebook supporters were the economy and immigration (table 5). In this respect, they do not mirror the top concerns of the supporters of similar parties across Western Europe. Lega Nord supporters were less likely than the average PPAM supporter to be concerned about immigration (25 per cent vs 37 per cent) and Islamic extremism (16 per cent vs 24 per cent); but more likely than the average PPAM supporter to be concerned about the economic situation (25 per cent vs 16 per cent), unemployment (23 per cent vs 13 per cent) and education (15 per cent vs 7 per cent). This level of concern about the economic situation seems likely to be a result of the timing of the survey, which took place in July and August 2011 – in summer 2011 Italy became the focus of the financial crisis. Its borrowing costs began escalating rapidly and fears about the country becoming ‘another Greece’ were high.

Table 5 **Top two biggest concerns of Lega Nord Facebook supporters (n=838), by gender and whether under or over age 30<sup>28</sup> (national figures in brackets)<sup>29</sup>**

	Male (%)	Female (%)	Under 30 (%)	Over 30 (%)	Total (%)
Economic situation	26	24	24	30	25 (61)
Immigration	26	24	26	22	25 (6)
Unemployment	22	24	23	23	23 (47)
Islamic extremism	15	16	17	10	16 (2)
Education	12	19	17	6	15 (2) <sup>30</sup>

### Politics and voting

We also asked Lega Nord Facebook supporters to tell us their views about the effectiveness of democracy in order to gauge the level of disillusionment they felt with mainstream political channels. In general, Facebook supporters of Lega Nord were pessimistic about the effectiveness of politics, although only 9 per cent agreed with the statement ‘it does not matter who you vote for’ (table 6), which compares with a PPAM average of 16 per cent. Thus, Lega Nord Facebook supporters are not too disproportionately bitter and disenchanted to vote compared with similar supporters in other countries. On one level it is to be expected that supporters of political parties agree with voting. However, given these are social media fans, it is worth noting that even those who engage through Facebook (and therefore do not necessarily vote) still retain faith in the power of voting.

Table 6 **Extent to which Lega Nord Facebook supporters agree that it does not matter who you vote for, by gender and whether under or over age 30 (n=838)**

	Male (%)	Female (%)	Under 30 (%)	Over 30 (%)	Total (%)
Agree entirely	5	6	4	7	5
Agree a little	5	2	4	4	4
Indifferent	12	5	10	13	10
Disagree a little	11	18	15	7	13
Disagree entirely	66	68	66	68	67
Did not answer	1	1	1	1	1

Although they appear to believe in the importance of voting, Lega Nord Facebook supporters remain somewhat sceptical about the extent to which politics is an effective means to resolve their problems: only 45 per cent of supporters agreed with the statement ‘politics is an effective way to respond to my concerns’ (table 7). While this is more than the 35 per cent average for the other PPAM supporters whom we surveyed, this result is nonetheless surprising given the electoral performances of the Lega Nord and, in particular, the party’s policy successes on its key issues of federalism and immigration when in government after 2008. There are at least two possible explanations here: first, at the time of this survey (July and August 2011), the Lega Nord–Popolo della Libertà government was in great difficulty, the Lega had suffered its first election setback in many years (at the May 2011 local elections), and it was appearing increasingly likely that the growing crisis would significantly delay the introduction of fiscal federalism or postpone it indefinitely. These considerations are likely to have influenced responses. Second, given that the Lega Nord has often espoused an ‘anti-political’ rhetoric, it is also possible that some respondents negatively associate the term ‘politics’ not with their own party, but with other parties and politicians. In other words, ‘politics’ for some Lega Nord supporters may well stand for the murky world of backroom deals in Rome.

Table 7 Extent to which Lega Nord Facebook supporters agree that politics is an effective way to respond to their concerns, by gender and whether under or over age 30 (n=838)

	Male (%)	Female (%)	Under 30 (%)	Over 30 (%)	Total (%)
Agree entirely	17	15	15	21	16
Agree a little	30	26	29	28	29
Indifferent	-	-	-	-	13
Disagree a little	14	15	15	11	14
Disagree entirely	19	28	23	20	22
Did not answer	-	-	-	-	5

Note: An average of 13 per cent of people answered this question as 'indifferent', and around 5 per cent did not answer.

We asked respondents a question designed to test their attitude to violence. It is important to stress that, in the absence of national level data, it is difficult to draw significant conclusions from these results. Moreover, the survey question does not ask about people's personal propensity to violent activity, rather their attitude to violence in general. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that more Lega Nord supporters agreed that violence is acceptable to achieve the right outcome (33 per cent) (table 8) than the average of 26 per cent of PPAM supporters. This may, at least in part, reflect the occasional warnings in the past of the party leader, Umberto Bossi, that if the democratic process could not ensure northern autonomy, other methods might have to be used. Indeed, through its establishment of the 'green shirts' in the late 1990s during its secessionist phase and its more recent use of small vigilante groups in some towns to protect citizens from crime (and immigrants), the Lega has at times had a somewhat ambiguous relationship with the use of force. While this is in no way to say that the party supports violence and these groups were generally more virtual than real, it is important to note that—at least rhetorically—the party has occasionally sent out mixed messages on this subject.

Table 8 Extent to which Lega Nord Facebook supporters agree that violence is acceptable to achieve the right outcome, by gender and whether under or over age 30 (n=838)

	Male (%)	Female (%)	Under 30 (%)	Over 30 (%)	Total (%)
Agree entirely	18	8	15	12	15
Agree a little	17	19	19	12	18
Indifferent	-	-	-	-	5
Disagree a little	12	9	12	7	11
Disagree entirely	41	61	45	58	48

Note: An average of 5 per cent answered they were indifferent, and 3 per cent did not answer.

### Personal and national optimism

Almost certainly reflecting what was happening in Italy when the survey took place, the majority of Lega Nord Facebook supporters were highly pessimistic about their country's future: 81 per cent disagreed either a little or entirely with the statement 'Italy is on the right track' (table 9). The general public in Italy displayed similar levels of optimism and pessimism at the time. The Eurobarometer survey in autumn 2011 asked, 'at the present time, would you say that, in general, things are going in the right direction or in the wrong direction, in Italy?'. Only 8 per cent of the Italian public believed Italy was going in the right direction; over half the respondents (65 per cent) thought Italy was going in the wrong direction; and 21 per cent thought it was headed in neither one direction nor the other.<sup>31</sup>

Table 9 Extent to which Lega Nord Facebook supporters agree that Italy is on the right track, by gender and whether under or over age 30 (n=838)

	Male (%)	Female (%)	Under 30 (%)	Over 30 (%)	Total (%)
Agree entirely	4	2	3	4	3
Agree a little	9	5	7	11	8
Indifferent	–	–	–	–	4
Disagree a little	19	22	21	19	20
Disagree entirely	58	65	63	53	61

Note: An average of 4 per cent answered they were indifferent, and 4 per cent did not answer.

When asked whether they thought their own life would be better or worse in 12 months' time, Lega Nord Facebook supporters were less optimistic (21 per cent) than the PPAM average (27 per cent). Again this appears likely to reflect the conditions in Italy at the time of the survey, and Lega Nord Facebook supporters were not much more pessimistic than the Italian general public: 21 per cent of Lega Nord supporters believed that the situation in Italy would get better, compared with 19 per cent of the Italian public thinking it would (table 10). However, that this may also reflect the different timing of the two surveys: the Eurobarometer survey was conducted later than our questionnaire, by which time the crisis in Italy was at its height and the government was on the point of collapse.

Table 10 Lega Nord Facebook supporters' personal outlook for the next 12 months, by gender and whether under or over age 30 (n=838) (national statistics in brackets)<sup>32</sup>

	Male (%)	Female (%)	Under 30 (%)	Over 30 (%)	Total (%)
Better	22	20	23	15	21 (19)
Worse	31	33	29	41	32 (18)
Same	42	45	44	40	43 (55)
Did not answer	–	–	–	–	4

Note: An average of 4 per cent did not answer.

## Attitudes toward the European Union

Lega Nord Facebook supporters' attitudes to the European Union differ considerably from those of other PPAMs and are particularly interesting given that the Lega has espoused a strongly Eurosceptic rhetoric over the past decade. Unlike supporters of other PPAMs, Lega Nord supporters gave a positive top answer when asked what they thought about the EU: 51 per cent responded 'freedom to work, study and travel'. Beyond that, three of the top five answers were clearly negative (table 11), but respondents were slightly less likely to cite negative answers than supporters of other PPAMs: 33 per cent of Lega Nord supporters mentioned 'not enough control at external borders' (compared with 58 per cent for other PPAMs), while 32 per cent said the EU was a 'waste of money' (59 per cent for other PPAMs). Likewise—and of note if we recall the claims by the Lega that the EU threatens local, cultural and religious identities—only 29 per cent mentioned 'loss of cultural and national identity' (56 per cent for other PPAMs).

A significantly lower percentage of the general public in Italy than Facebook supporters of the Lega Nord thought that the EU meant freedom to work, travel and study anywhere in the EU—only 26 per cent listed this. The Lega Nord and the Italian public had similar views on the Euro, with 39 per cent of Italians listing it—only 2 per cent more than the Lega Nord. Three other options had a much lower response from members of the Italian public than from Lega Nord Facebook supporters. For instance, only 9 per cent of the Italian public cited 'Not enough control at external borders', compared with 33 per cent of the Lega Nord supporters. Generally, the Italian public associated membership of the EU with freedom and the Euro, democracy (21 per cent) and having 'a stronger say in the world' (21 per cent).<sup>33</sup>

Table 11 What Lega Nord Facebook supporters think about the European Union, by gender and whether under or over age 30 (n=838) (national statistics in brackets)<sup>34</sup>

	Male (%)	Female (%)	Under 30 (%)	Over 30 (%)	Total (%)
Freedom to work, study and travel <sup>35</sup>	46	60	54	41	51 (26)
The Euro	36	40	38	36	37 (39)
Not enough control at external borders	33	32	31	38	33 (9)
Waste of money	32	31	30	37	32 (16)
Loss of cultural and national identity <sup>36</sup>	30	28	27	38	29 (12)

### Trust in institutions and people

Trust in other people, as well as political and social institutions, is generally considered to be an important indicator of social capital in democratic societies. Unlike respondents from other PPAMs in Europe, Lega Nord Facebook supporters do not display particularly low levels of trust towards most political and social institutions compared with their national compatriots (table 12). Across the other parties and movements surveyed for this series, supporters of PPAMs typically scored around 20–30 percentage points lower than their compatriots on every measure tested.<sup>37</sup> This may reflect the fact that the Lega has been in government at national and regional levels for many years and so it is likely that a certain degree of trust in institutions has been built up over time. Indeed, from that perspective, since the Lega Nord was in office at the time of the survey, we might have expected the level of trust in government among respondents to be higher than the national average. Finally, it is of note that the justice and legal system and the press were two institutions that scored particularly badly among Lega Nord supporters. This is to be expected given the Lega's criticisms of the judiciary and its long-standing claims that the mainstream media is against it. It is also in line with the Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell's finding that

over 80 per cent of the members they surveyed considered all newspapers to be against the party (except the Lega Nord's own paper, *La Padania*).<sup>38</sup>

Table 12 Extent to which Lega Nord Facebook supporters and the Italian general public trust institutions (n=838)

Institution	Tend to trust		Tend not to trust	
	LN supporters (%)	Italian public (%) <sup>39</sup>	LN supporters (%)	Italian public (%)
Police	63	58	32	34
Army	61	65	33	28
European Union	43	42	52	40
Justice and the legal system	30	42	65	52
Religious institutions	29	48	65	43
Trade unions	28	32	66	56
Government	24	24	70	65
Political parties	23	9	71	84
The press <sup>40</sup>	18	34	75	53

Note: The figures do not always add up to 100 because some people did not complete all the questions.

Asked whether they are inclined to trust other people in general, 31 per cent of Lega Nord Facebook supporters agreed (table 13). This is around the average figure for PPAM supporters (33 per cent) and for the Italian general public (31 per cent). Moreover, the Italian general public is less likely than Lega Nord Facebook supporters to think that people can be trusted.

Table 13 **Extent to which Lega Nord Facebook supporters agree that people can be trusted, by gender and whether under or over age 30 (n=838) (national statistics in brackets)**<sup>41</sup>

	Male (%)	Female (%)	Over 30 (%)	Under 30 (%)	Total (%)
In general most people can be trusted	28	37	31	31	31 (30.9)
In general most people cannot be trusted	50	49	50	50	50 (69.1)

Note: In the Demos question, 'indifferent' was also an option, which account for around 15 per cent of responses. Around 4 per cent of respondents did not answer this question.

## 4 Why do people support the Lega Nord online?

The preceding chapter offered some indication of why Lega Nord Facebook supporters are drawn to the party, but we also wanted respondents to describe in their own words why they support the Lega Nord. This chapter presents our findings on 387 respondents' answers to an open-response question asking them to explain this.

Table 14 provides a breakdown of the different categories that we used to code and classify the responses (which we placed in multiple categories if deemed relevant). The three most common replies were identified with the party's values and key themes of immigration and northern autonomy. We discuss the most frequently cited categories below, and provide examples of some of the responses Lega Nord Facebook supporters gave.

Table 14 Reasons given by Lega Nord Facebook respondents for supporting the party, by gender and age bracket (n=387)

	Male (%)	Female (%)	16-20 (%)	21-25 (%)	26-30 (%)	31-40 (%)	41-50 (%)	51+ (%)	Total (%)
Group values	35	54	46	48	23	32	43	41	42
Anti-immigration	20	13	19	24	11	16	8	1	18
Northern autonomy	19	12	11	19	25	28	14	23	17
Other	13	14	14	10	19	14	15	11	14
Identity	12	4	9	8	8	8	10	22	9
Economic	4	8	3	9	22	1	2	0	6
Disillusionment	6	1	2	5	4	6	9	8	4
Integrity	3	4	3	3	0	4	6	3	3
Anti-Islam	2	0	1	2	4	1	1	0	1
Anti-EU	1	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0

Overall, Lega Nord supporters were more likely to give some reasons for supporting the party than the average PPAM supporter, for example ‘group values’ (42 per cent vs 39 per cent) and ‘economic’ (6 per cent vs 4 per cent). In the latter case, supporters were overwhelming in the 26–30 age bracket, who are most affected by unemployment and non-permanent employment, or if still students likely to be worried about their future prospects. Compared with other PPAM supporters, Lega Nord supporters were less likely to cite ‘identity’ (9 per cent vs 18 per cent), ‘anti-Islam’ (1 per cent vs 10 per cent), ‘anti-EU’ (0 per cent vs 3 per cent) and ‘integrity’ (3 per cent vs 9 per cent), but as likely to cite ‘immigration’. This is interesting as, unlike the party in its rhetoric, the supporters do not seem to make the same distinction between the greater dangers posed by Muslim immigration than by immigration in general.

### Group values

Responses were classified as ‘group values’ when respondents had cited, in general terms, the values, principles, norms, beliefs, aspirations or ideas of the Lega Nord as reasons for supporting the party. This was the most common reason for joining the party, and 42 per cent of responses fell into this category, a slightly higher proportion than for supporters of other PPAMs (38 per cent). It suggests that people support the party not simply as a ‘protest’ against other mainstream parties, but because they identify with the Lega’s values. This probably reflects the fact that the party has been in existence for over two decades and so is no longer simply a vehicle for protest. Its ideology and key themes are well known and those supporting the party are likely to identify closely with them.

Respondents on this subject supported what the party stands for overall, appreciated its strong links to local communities and admired the leader:

*Because it’s close to my ideas and, most of all, it is the only party which seems to want to improve things in Italy.*<sup>42</sup>

*It is the only party strongly linked to the grassroots and its voters.*<sup>43</sup>

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

*I like Bossi’s charisma and I agree with the party’s ideology.*<sup>44</sup>

*I agree with the ideas of the Lega such as federalism and the fight against illegal immigration!*<sup>45</sup>

### Anti-immigration

Recent studies have shown that concern over immigration is a key predictor for support of PPAMs. Respondents were classified as being in the anti-immigration category when they explicitly professed concern or anger about rising immigration and its effects. Nearly one in five (18 per cent) of Lega Nord Facebook supporters fell into this category—in line with the average across similar parties surveyed.

The Lega Nord Facebook supporters who commented on this subject typically referred to the economic and cultural effects of immigration on Italy, although some also seemed to object to the mere presence of immigrants:

*Because I am tired of seeing my country being destroyed by people that weren’t born here and of seeing those close to me being afraid of those we have welcomed.*<sup>46</sup>

*Because it’s time to liberate Italy from all the immigrants who steal our jobs every single day. And it’s not true that Italians don’t want to do certain jobs anymore. I know many people who would pay to have a job, even collecting horse shit.*<sup>47</sup>

*I do not want immigrants in MY country. There are too many of them.*<sup>48</sup>

*I don’t want any more non-European immigrants who come here and take our jobs!*<sup>49</sup>

### Northern autonomy

As we explained in the first chapter, the Lega Nord is a regionalist populist party, which has constantly campaigned for northern autonomy. Nearly one in five (17 per cent) of respondents had joined the Lega Nord because of its support for northern autonomy (other than those of Vlaams Belang in Belgium, no other PPAM supporters mentioned regional autonomy as a reason for support — unsurprisingly given that most other PPAMs are nationalist rather than regionalist). Answers from these respondents typically referred to the North being held back by an inefficient centralised state, wasteful public bodies and the burden of maintaining the South. Also mentioned was the importance of federalism in protecting the people's identities, traditions and values:

*Because it's a movement aimed at reforming the state and is against centralisation; because it has given political credit to the productive North, because it is against a state that helps the South while robbing the North, and that, unfortunately, continues to do so without being able to resolve the real problems the South is facing. Paradoxically, I believe that the Lega's political agenda is the only one that can liberate the South from its attitude of dependence.<sup>50</sup>*

*Because of my ideals, or rather our ideals, that are: federalism and the suppression of useless public bodies, in order to eliminate the waste of public funds; annihilation, or rather destruction of all Mafia groups that are present in our territory.<sup>51</sup>*

*I think it is right that each people should have control of its own resources and be responsible for running its own region.<sup>52</sup>*

*I support federalism and the defence of our traditions.<sup>53</sup>*

### Identity

The fourth most common reason for joining the Lega Nord was 'identity'. Respondents referred to a love of their country, commitment to preservation of cultural values, or representation of the interests of 'real' countrymen. Typically,

these respondents mentioned how the Lega Nord stood for ordinary people, and the defence of their traditions and values:

*Because, at the moment, it's the only political party that represents the values of ordinary people without denying and rejecting cultural traditions and identities.<sup>54</sup>*

*Because it's a political party that keeps local identities alive. It respects and promotes centuries-old traditions.<sup>55</sup>*

*I want to support a party that acts as a lobby for the North and defends the identity of my people.<sup>56</sup>*

*Because it's a political party that REALLY gives a voice to the ordinary citizen.<sup>57</sup>*

Again, this matches the Lega's claims to be the sole protector of honest, hard-working northern people who strongly identify with their local communities and who are threatened by undemocratic elites.

## Annex: Methodology

The methodology employed for the collection and analysis of this data is set out in detail in *The New Face of Digital Populism*.<sup>58</sup> We therefore limit this section to Lega Nord specific issues.

For *The New Face of Digital Populism* we collected data from Facebook supporters of nationalist populist political parties or street-based movements drawn mainly across Western Europe. We ran a Facebook advert targeted at supporters of all parties and/or party leaders' Facebook pages over the summer of 2011. Each advert invited Facebook supporters of the group in question to click on a link, which redirected them to our online survey.

Our campaign ran over a three-month period, with no single advert being available for more than six weeks. On clicking the advert, participants were redirected to a digital survey page hosted by the website Survey Monkey, which set out the details and purpose of the survey along with an invitation to take part. The size of target population varied from country to country, depending on the size of the Facebook membership of the group in question. Table 15 gives the details of the data collected for the survey on Lega Nord.

Table 15 Data collected for survey on Lega Nord

	Date of survey	No of specific Facebook interest groups targeted	Size of population targeted	No of unique impressions	Total Facebook link clicks	Total surveys started	Final data set
Lega Nord	Jul-Aug 2011	4	45,740	5,525,754	4,628	1,073	838

The ‘unique impressions’ column lists the number of unique occasions the advert was displayed on the target audience’s Facebook sidebar. The click per impression ratio was just under 0.1 per cent, which is fairly consistent with the ratio for all groups surveyed for this research work. The click to survey completion ratio was around 20. This non-response rate may be the result of some respondents deciding not to take part in the survey on reading the consent form (in which further information was given about Demos and the survey). Our method to correct for non-response rates is discussed in the full methodology given in *The New Face of Digital Populism*. The size of the final data set was lower than the number of surveys completed because we removed incomplete surveys.

### Data analysis and limitations

We decided to use Facebook principally because the site is a popular mode of communication for supporters of many of the groups and parties we surveyed.

In order to increase the validity of our results, we applied a post-stratification weight, using the known demographics of the online population to correct the sample’s balance of gender and age in line with the makeup of the group as a whole. To do this, we gathered background data on the composition of the Lega Nord’s Facebook group membership using Facebook’s advertising tool (which is freely available for any user to access). We gave each participant a weighted value on the basis of the prevalence of their demographic profile (age and gender) in the population at large. Although we achieved demographic representativeness — which can correct for systematic age or gender related bias — it is possible certain attitudinal self-selection biases exist, because this was a self-select survey. It is with this caveat that the results are presented.

While the use of a post-stratification weight is an improvement on the use of unweighted data, it cannot be automatically claimed as a reliable basis for making inferences about the offline group. The use of social network surveys is subject to a well-known technical and

methodological critique focusing on the nature of self-entry interest classification on Facebook, the lack of content reliability on social networking sites, and the lack of internet access and usage in the broader population, all of which are capable of biasing the results of the survey.

Therefore, we take care not to claim at any point in the text that our sample represents or reflects the official views of the group, or indeed of its offline membership.

Throughout the paper, we compare the Lega Nord Facebook survey results to the pan-European study results presented in *The New Face of Digital Populism*.

In the background chapter, we undertook a short literature review of Italian and English language material.

In chapter 2, we collected the gender and age of each of the groups in question directly from the publicly available Facebook group level data using the advertising tool mentioned above. This provides the most accurate results on the Facebook membership for each group. Results related to education, employment and involvement in the group are based on our weighted results.

In chapter 3 we give weighted results and provide comparative data where they are available from the 2008 European Values Study or a Eurobarometer survey. Where the questions are not worded identically, or there were additional answer options, this is expressly identified.

Chapter 4 is based on the analysis of an open text question about why individuals joined the Lega Nord. This open question allowed respondents to answer as they wished. An Italian translator coded the responses. We reviewed the content of the responses and created nine main categories for the responses, with a tenth category ‘other’. Responses could fall into multiple categories.

### Ethical considerations

As this research focused on adolescents over the age of 16, no Criminal Records Bureau check was necessary; consequently, none was sought. Similarly, it was not

necessary for us to obtain informed consent from participant parents or guardians as Social Research Association ethics guidelines suggest such clearance should not be sought and is not required where investigating participants aged over 16. We sought and gained individual informed consent from all participants, who agreed to a consent statement presented at the start of the survey – failure to sign acceptance of this statement prevented them from participating further in the research. Although we targeted the survey only at people aged over 16, a small number of individuals stated they were under 16 when responding to the question about age. We immediately deleted data relating to these people.

We stated on the Facebook advert that we were representing Demos, and were undertaking a survey of Facebook members of the group in question. On clicking the advertisement link, the participant was redirected to the survey landing page. On that page we pointed out that leaders of each group had been informed about the survey. Before running the survey, Demos emailed each of the groups in question to let them know about the survey. On the landing page we also stated that we would be letting the party in question know about the results before they were made public. Before release, we emailed the parties and groups in question with the results where they pertained to their members.

We did not brief participants fully on the study's aims before completing the survey in order to avoid the exhibition of demand characteristics. We provided only a broad overview of the research at the start of the survey, and gave more detailed information on the project's aims only after the last question had been completed. We provided the contact details of the lead researcher to all participants to cover the eventuality that they had questions not covered by the debrief notes, but few participants made use of it.

We told participants that they could withdraw from the research at any time before completion, as part of a preface presented alongside the consent statement. Later we reminded them of this right when they completed the survey via a paragraph in the debrief notes, offering the possibility of

immediate withdrawal via a check box. No participants opted to withdraw in this way.

We observed ethical and legal considerations relevant to the storage and handling of data; all data were kept digitally encoded in an anonymous format, and we did not store any data capable of identifying any participants.

We prepared for the eventuality that the research uncovered information with serious security implications, particularly relating to participant support for violence; we took precautions to absolve the researcher of moral responsibility towards the disclosure of information to agents of the criminal justice system by ensuring that the survey did not ask for precise details of acts of violence or illegal political protest. In order to preserve participant confidentiality (the deliberate exclusion by data capture systems of IP addresses) we removed from the researcher the means to identify and incriminate individual participants.

## Notes

- 1 J Bartlett, J Birdwell and M Littler, *The New Face of Digital Populism*, London: Demos, 2011, [www.demos.co.uk/publications/thenewfaceofdigitalpopulism](http://www.demos.co.uk/publications/thenewfaceofdigitalpopulism) (accessed 16 Feb 2012).
- 2 Lega Nord, *Scuola Quadri Politica*, 2012, [www.padaniaoffice.org/pdf/scuola\\_politica\\_federale/Crema\\_21\\_01\\_2012/VOLUME\\_SCUOLA\\_CREMA.pdf](http://www.padaniaoffice.org/pdf/scuola_politica_federale/Crema_21_01_2012/VOLUME_SCUOLA_CREMA.pdf) (accessed 27 Sep 2012), p 3.
- 3 See Lega Nord, *Proposte e Obiettivi*, 2009, [www.leganordtrentino.org/allegati/200904119080824\\_97proposte%20e%20obiettivi001.pdf](http://www.leganordtrentino.org/allegati/200904119080824_97proposte%20e%20obiettivi001.pdf) (accessed 1 Sep 2012).
- 4 On the Lega's period in government following the 2001 general election, see D Albertazzi and D McDonnell, 'The Lega Nord in the second Berlusconi government: in a league of its own', *West European Politics* 28, no 5, 2005; On the period after the 2008 general election, see D Albertazzi and D McDonnell, 'The Lega Nord back in government', *West European Politics* 33, no 6, 2010.
- 5 For a discussion of the dilemmas facing outsider parties (such as the Lega Nord) regarding whether to join coalitions with other parties, see D McDonnell and J Newell, 'Outsider parties in government in Western Europe', *Party Politics* 17, no 4, 2011.
- 6 Lega Nord, *Scuola Quadri Politica*, p 3.

- 7 See, for example, H-G Betz, *Radical Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe*, New York: St Martin's Press, 1994; R Biorcio, *La Padania Promessa*, Milan: il Saggiatore, 1997; P Taggart, *Populism*, Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000; C Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007; M Tarchi, *L'Italia populista: dal qualunquismo ai girotondi*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 2003.
- 8 Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*.
- 9 See the data on this in I Diamanti and E Lello, 'The Casa delle Libertà: a house of cards', *Modern Italy* 10, no 1, 2005.
- 10 For discussion of the 'regionalist populist' label as applied to the Lega, see R Biorcio, 'La Lega come attore politico: dal federalismo al populismo regionalista' in R Mannheimer (ed), *La Lega Lombarda*, Milan: Feltrinelli, 1991, and D McDonnell, 'A weekend in Padania: regionalist populism and the Lega Nord', *Politics* 26, no 2, 2006.
- 11 O Diamanti, 'Lega Nord: un partito per le periferie', in P Ginsborg (ed), *Stato dell'Italia*, Milan: il Saggiatore, 1994.
- 12 D Tambini, *Nationalism in Italian Politics: The stories of the Northern League, 1980–2000*, London: Routledge, 2001.
- 13 Lega Nord, *Proposte e Obiettivi*.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 N Bolleyer, J van Spanje and A Wilson, 'New parties in government: party organisation and the costs of public office', *West European Politics* 35, no 5, 2012.
- 17 P Ignazi, *Extreme Right Parties in Western Europe*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- 18 ITANES (ed), *Il Ritorno di Berlusconi: Vincitori e vinti nelle elezioni del 2008*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 2008.
- 19 Norwegian Social Science Data Services, *European Social Survey*, Round 5 — 2010, multi-country survey covering over 30 nations, <http://ess.nsd.uib.no/ess/round5/> (accessed 24 Sep 2012).
- 20 Albertazzi and McDonnell, 'The Lega Nord back in government'.
- 21 Bartlett et al, *The New Face of Digital Populism*.
- 22 See D Albertazzi and D McDonnell, *Populists in Power*, London: Routledge, forthcoming.
- 23 Eurostat, 'Harmonised unemployment rate by sex', 2012, Eurostat, <http://tinyurl.com/cb2pqst> (accessed 16 Aug 2012).
- 24 J Bartlett, J Birdwell, M Bani and J Benfield, *Populism in Europe: Denmark*, London: Demos: 2012; J Bartlett, J Birdwell and J Benfield, *Populism in Europe: Sweden*, London: Demos: 2012.
- 25 Bartlett, Birdwell and Littler, *The New Face of Digital Populism*.
- 26 P Corbetta and MS Piretti, *Atlante storico-elettorale d'Italia (1861–2008)*, Bologna: Zanichelli, 2009.

- 27 Demos survey figure provided is the percentage of respondents who answered ‘yes’ to the question: ‘Have you taken part in a political march, protest, or demonstration in the last six months’. European Social Survey (Round 5) figure provided is the percentage of respondents who answered ‘yes’ to the question: ‘During the last 12 months, have you done any of the following? Have you taken part in a lawful public demonstration?’ The European Value Survey from 2008 states that 37.8 per cent of the Italian public have participated in ‘authorised events’.
- 28 Demos survey respondents were asked ‘Please rank your three biggest concerns in order of importance from the list below’. They were able to provide a maximum of three responses. The Demos survey figure provided is the percentage of survey respondents who ranked the relevant concern as their first or second biggest concern.
- 29 Question A6a1 in the survey by the European Commission, ‘Public opinion in the European Union [November 2011]: table of results’, *Standard Eurobarometer 76*, autumn 2011, [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/eb/eb76/eb76\\_tablesresults\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb76/eb76_tablesresults_en.pdf) (accessed 24 Sep 2012) (*Standard Eurobarometer 76*).
- 30 *Standard Eurobarometer 76*. Islamic Extremism is not listed in the Eurobarometer report—we used terrorism percentages for the national comparison.
- 31 Question 9a.1 from *Standard Eurobarometer 76*.
- 32 Respondents to the Demos survey and *Standard Eurobarometer 76* were asked: ‘Will the next 12 months be better, worse or the same when it comes to your life generally?’
- 33 *Standard Eurobarometer 76*, question 12.
- 34 Respondents to the Demos survey and *Standard Eurobarometer 76* were asked: ‘What does the European Union mean to you personally?’ Respondents were allowed to select multiple options.
- 35 Demos survey figure provided is the percentage of respondents who selected either the option ‘Freedom to travel’ or the option ‘Study and work anywhere in the EU’. The *Standard Eurobarometer 76* figure provided is the percentage of respondents who selected the option ‘Freedom to travel, study and work anywhere in the EU’.
- 36 Demos survey figure provided is the percentage of respondents who selected the option ‘loss of cultural and national identity’. The *Standard Eurobarometer 76* figure provided is the percentage of respondents who selected the option ‘loss of cultural identity’.
- 37 Bartlett et al, *The New Face of Digital Populism*
- 38 See Albertazzi and McDonnell, *Populists in Power*.
- 39 Demos survey respondents were asked: ‘To what extent do you trust the following: [institution]’. Eurobarometer respondents were asked: ‘For each of the following institutions, please tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it. [institution]’. In each case respondents selected either ‘tend to trust’ or ‘tend not to trust’. The percentages cited for ‘Political parties’, and ‘The press’ are derived from *Standard Eurobarometer 76* (November 2011) QA10. The percentages cited for ‘Government’ and ‘European Union’ are taken from *Standard Eurobarometer 75* (May 2011), Spring Wave, QA13.1 and QA13.3. The percentages cited for all other institution are derived from *Standard Eurobarometer 74* (November 2010), QA12ab combined, as they do not appear in the later survey.

- 40 Demos survey respondents were asked whether they trusted ‘The mainstream media’. Eurobarometer respondents were asked whether they trusted ‘The press’.
- 41 Demos survey respondents were asked: ‘To what extent do you agree with the following statement: ‘In general, most people cannot be trusted.’ Respondents were able to select any one of the following options: ‘agree entirely’, ‘agree a little’, disagree entirely’, ‘disagree a little’ or ‘neutral’. The Demos survey figures provided are the percentages of respondents who selected ‘disagree entirely’ or ‘disagree a little’, or selected ‘agree entirely’ or ‘agree a little’. The national statistics provided are drawn from Leibnitz Institute for the Social Sciences, European Values Study, 2008, <http://zocat.gesis.org/webview/index.jsp?object=http://zocat.gesis.org/obj/fCatalog/Catalog5> (accessed 19 Sep 2012). Respondents who took part in the EVS were asked: ‘Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people?’ Respondents were able to select any one of the following options: ‘most people can be trusted’, ‘cannot be too careful’ or ‘don’t know’. The EVS figures provided are the percentages of respondents who selected ‘most people can be trusted’ and ‘cannot be too careful’.
- 42 *‘Perchè si avvicina alle mie idee e soprattutto è l’unico partito che sembra voler agire per migliorare le condizioni del paese.’*
- 43 *‘Unico partito fortemente legato al territorio e ai suoi elettori.’*
- 44 *‘Mi piace il carisma di Bossi e condivido le ideologie.’*
- 45 *‘Perchè condivido le idee per cui si batte la lega quali federalismo e lotta contro gli immigrati senza permesso di soggiorno!’*
- 46 *‘Perchè sono stanco di vedere il mio paese distrutto da chi nn vi è nato, di vedere i miei fratelli impauriti da chi abbiamo accolto.’*
- 47 *‘Perchè è ora che l’Italia sia più libera da tutti gli extracomunitari che ogni giorno ci tolgono lavoro e non è vero che gli italiani non vogliono fare certi lavori perchè conosco tante persone che pagherebbero per lavorare anche a raccogliere il letame.’*
- 48 *‘Non voglio gli immigrati nel MIO paese sono troppi.’*
- 49 *‘Perchè non voglio più che gli extra comunitari ci rubino il lavoro!’*
- 50 *‘Perchè è un movimento riformatore dello Stato, antistatalista, perchè ha dato valenza politica al Nord produttivo, perchè è contro uno stato meridionalista che ha depredato il Nord e che purtroppo continua a farlo senza riuscire a risolvere i problemi del Sud. Paradossalmente credo che la politica della Lega sia l’unica che possa affrancare il Sud dall’assistenzialismo.’*
- 51 *‘I miei ideali, anzi i nostri ideali sono: federalismo e soppressione degli enti locali inutili per eliminare lo spreco di denaro pubblico — annientamento, anzi distruzione di tutte le mafie esistenti sul nostro territorio.’*
- 52 *‘Penso sia giusto che ogni popolo gestisca le proprie risorse e programmi il proprio territorio.’*
- 53 *‘Perchè sono un sostenitore del federalismo e della tutela delle nostre tradizioni.’*
- 54 *‘Attualmente è l’unico partito che rappresenta i valori del popolo senza rinnegare le identità e le tradizioni nazionali.’*
- 55 *‘Perchè è il partito che tiene vive le identità locali rispettando e favorendo tradizioni centenarie che permettono al nostro paese di distinguersi dagli altri per eccellenza.’*
- 56 *‘Perchè voglio supportare un partito che agisce come lobby del nord e difende l’identità della mia gente.’*

- 57 *'Perche' e' un Partito che da' VERAMENTE voce al semplice cittadino.'*
- 58 Bartlett et al, *The New Face of Digital Populism.*

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Nationalist populist parties and movements are growing in support throughout Europe. These groups are known for their opposition to immigration, their ‘anti-establishment’ views and their concern for protecting national culture. Their rise in popularity has gone hand-in-hand with the advent of social media, and they are adept at using new technology to amplify their message, recruit and organise.

Of these groups, Italy’s Lega Nord can perhaps lay claim to the greatest political success. The party has been in government three times, including for eight of the last 11 years holding several key ministries in the coalition government led by Silvio Berlusconi. It is a party with a clear ideology, emphasising tough limits on immigration, greater northern autonomy, and characterising Muslims and Islam as representing a fundamental threat to the values and cultural integrity of northern Italians. Recently the financial crisis has also helped create an even wider audience for the popular new leader, Roberto Maroni’s Eurosceptic appeals.

This report presents the results of a survey of Facebook fans of Lega Nord. It includes data on who they are, what they think, and what motivates them to shift from virtual to real-world activism. It also compares them with other similar parties in Western Europe, shedding light on their growing online support, and the relationship between their online and offline activities. This report is the fifth in a series of country specific briefings about the online support of populist parties in 12 European countries, based on our survey of 13,000 Facebook fans of these groups.

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