

**One Foot in One Foot Out<sup>1</sup>: can radical right populist parties govern?**

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Since the 1990s there has been a sudden and dramatic increase in the number of populist parties in Western, Central, and Eastern Europe. Cas Mudde has even referred to a populist *Zeitgeist*.<sup>2</sup> Although populist movements range from radical right, to center-right, to left populism, radical right populist parties have proven to be the most successful. Radical right populist parties are now well established in the party systems of Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Italy, Norway, and Switzerland. Moreover, they have held power at the national, regional, and the municipal level. The most notable cases are the inclusion of the Austrian Freedom Party in the center-right coalition in 2000, and then again between 2003 and 2006 (although in a much diminished capacity), the Lega Nord in the 2001-2006 Italian government, the List Pim Fortuyn (LPF) in the 2002 Dutch government, the Danish People's Party's support of the minority government since 2001, and the transformation of the Swiss People's Party (SVP) into a radical right populist party while a member of the Swiss Federal Council in the 1990s.

The casual observer might conclude that radical right populist parties have successfully transformed themselves from anti-establishment and radical parties into legitimate parties of government, in other words they have become *Salonfähig*. However, a closer analysis demonstrates that this has not been a smooth or trouble free transition. Several parties have failed in this endeavor; for example, support for the List Pim Fortuyn and the Austrian Freedom Party diminished and the parties fragmented after holding office. Even the successful cases such as the Danish People's Party, Lega Nord, and the Swiss People's Party have found the transition from an anti-establishment party to a party of government rather difficult.

This paper examines why radical right parties such as the Danish People's Party, the Lega Nord, and the Swiss People's Party succeeded where the List Pim Fortuyn and the Austrian Freedom Party failed. This research problem is pertinent on two accounts. First, now that it appears that radical right parties have become stable fixtures in European party systems, it is reasonable to assume that their eventual survival will depend upon their ability to hold political power. Second, the relation between radical right populism and governance addresses the contradictory relationship that radical right populist parties have with liberal democracy. In this paper, I argue that radical right parties are situated between an anti-system party and a conventional political party. If radical right parties were simply anti-system, anti-democratic, and extremist (i.e. anti-constitutional), the question of governance would be less relevant. It could be assumed that their intentions, and their identity, are based upon remaining a political movement that has no intention of holding political power. Or, if radical right parties were no different than mainstream political parties, there would be no reason to question whether their inclusion into a governing coalition posed a threat to either liberal democracy, or to the identity of the party. However, since radical right populist parties are situated between anti-system parties and parties of government, the question of their relation to liberal democracy becomes particularly relevant.

The paper begins by explaining what is meant by a radical right populist party. I addresses the ambiguous relation that radical right populist parties have with liberal democracies. The paper then assesses the success and the failure of radical right parties to convert themselves into parties of government. I focus on five case studies, two

failures— the List Pim Fortuyn and the Austrian Freedom Party— and three successes the Danish People’s Party, the Lega Nord, and the Swiss People’s Party.

### **What are radical right populist parties?**

Radical right populist parties are both populist and radical right parties. Both of these elements are vital for understanding their identity, their relation with liberal democracy, and their unique position between an anti-system party and a political party that has the ability to participate in government.

Populist parties argue that they emanate from the people. The people are viewed as a non-plural, virtuous, and homogenous group that is part of the “everyday” and the “normal” core of the nation, or the region in question. The idea that there is a homogenous people is juxtaposed with political and economic elites. These elites are portrayed as corrupt. They are blamed for usurping power from the people, and for contravening the foundation of democracy, the idea that the people remain sovereign.<sup>3</sup> However, the elites are not the only threat posed to the people. Populists also point to “dangerous others” such as large economic corporations, financial interests, immigrants, the unemployed, environmentalists, and feminists.<sup>45</sup>

In addition to the populist discourse, populist parties combine centralized organizational structures with populist leadership. Centralized leadership dovetails with demands for an unmediated link between the leader and the people.<sup>6</sup> Populist leaders portray themselves as representatives of the common everyday person.

Populist parties create a triangulation. They present themselves as the true representatives of the people vis-à-vis the political elite and the dangerous others. In the

process, political forces, on the left and right, are presented as one and the same.

Although, and this is very important for our argument, populists “present themselves as the only real opposition to the ‘political class,’ they must not contravene “democracy per se.” This is crucial since “an overwhelming majority of Western European voters are in favor of democracy and view anti-democratic parties and movements as illegitimate.”<sup>7</sup>

Populist parties must walk the thin line between an anti-establishment party and a viable and legitimate political party that is considered *Salonfähig*.

### **Populism and the Radical Right**

Radical right populist parties merge populism with a radical right ideology. The radical right constitutes a specific party family;<sup>8</sup> it has a political ideology and specific organizational structures. Ideologically, the radical right champions a politics of exclusion, objecting to immigration and multiculturalism. It posits an organic and traditional civil society, based loosely upon Christian principles. It opposes globalization. This was not always the case; early on the radical right supported a neo-liberal political economy. However, in its current form, it champions tax reductions and less state interference, while it opposes globalization and it supports a welfare state that protects its citizens.

The radical right identity is pertinent to the discussion concerning governance. The literature employs the term “extreme” for political parties that oppose the constitutional order. These parties engage in political activity within civil society without the intention of gaining political power, or even necessarily gaining seats in parliament. In contrast to extreme movements, radical right parties participate in elections and they

attempt to “win representation within democratic political institutions.”<sup>9</sup> As Rydgren points out: “the new radical right does not usually oppose democracy per se (as an idea), although they typically are hostile to representative democracy and the way existing democratic institutions actually work. In fact, these parties argue that they represent true democracy (in contrast to the sham democracy characterizing contemporary Western Europe).”<sup>10</sup>

Since radical right populist parties are radical and not extreme, they situate themselves at the boundaries, but within the legal limits, of liberal democracies. The remainder of the paper examines why some radical right parties more successfully negotiate the tensions emanating from their populist and radical identity with political power.

### **Radical Right Populism and Power: the failed case of Pim Fortuyn**

Dutch politics has experienced a series of dramatic transformations since the early 1990s. The 1994 elections represented the end of Christian democratic hegemony, marking the erosion of the pillar system.<sup>11</sup> Polling data from the 1990s demonstrates that Dutch dissatisfaction and party de-alignment and re-alignment created opportunity structures for populist movements.<sup>12</sup> Dutch voters exhibited higher levels of frustration with politics as usual and they demonstrated higher levels of fear regarding issues such as crime, insecurity, and immigration.<sup>13</sup>

Pim Fortuyn was the first national politician to exploit these new opportunity structures. Fortuyn became an outspoken public figure on the radio, television and in the print media, challenging the political class and the governing consensus. On February 14,

2002 he created his own political party, the List Pim Fortuyn.<sup>14</sup> The newly created party experienced immediate and dramatic success. However, his populist and his confrontational style also brought controversy. In the weeks leading up to the 2002 elections, there were reports that threats had been made on his life.<sup>15</sup> Days before the elections Pim Fortuyn was murdered. Despite the murder, the elections on May 15<sup>th</sup> 2002 proved to be the most volatile elections in Dutch history. The List Pim Fortuyn won 26 seats with 17 percent of the vote and it formed a government with the Christian Democratic Appeal and the Liberal Party.<sup>16</sup>

From the outset the coalition government was in difficulty given that the LPF had lost its charismatic and populist leader. After Fortuyn was murdered, internal struggles ensued over party leadership. No single individual was able to achieve complete control of the party.<sup>17</sup> It could be argued that this was a moot point since none of the so-called successors possessed the charisma, or the populist anti-establishment personality that had been so important in the formation of this highly personalized and populist party.

The lack of internal party organization and the low level of party institutionalization plagued the LPF. Fortuyn had created the party in a matter of months; it was formed in February and it joined parliament in May 2002. The internal organization of the party was very limited, financial resources were scarce, and there were very few candidates to fill government posts. For example, the party had trouble finding qualified individuals to even serve as junior ministers.<sup>18</sup> These internal struggles undermined the public support for the party as it became apparent that the LPF was incompetent. The other parties within the coalition, sensing the weakness of the party, dissolved the government and new elections took place in January 2003.<sup>19</sup>

The case of Pim Fortuyn highlights the difficulty that populist parties encounter in forming government. Populist parties are often created by a single, charismatic leader and they possess light organizational structures and thus find it difficult to transform themselves from opposition parties to parties of government. The party fared extremely poorly in the ensuing elections. In January 2003 it lost 18 out of its 26 seats. In opposition the party continued to decline and fragment. By the November 2006 elections it fragmented into three parties; all three of which were not able to win seats.<sup>20</sup>

### **The Failed Case of the Austrian Freedom Party**

The decline of the List Pim Fortuyn was not an overwhelming surprise. The party emerged from nowhere and its success was based upon the personal charisma of Pim Fortuyn. After Fortuyn's murder it was not surprising that the party was not able to survive. Somewhat more surprising, however, was the almost complete self-destruction of the Austrian Freedom Party two years after it formed the government with the People's Party in 2000.

The Austrian Freedom Party was created in 1956. However, in the immediate post war period it was excluded from Austrian politics due to both the close association that a significant number of party members had with the former Nazi regime and due to the hegemony of the socialist and the Christian democratic subcultures. However, in the 1980s transformations to the party system, the welfare state, and civil society created opportunity structures for new political forces to attract non-aligned and frustrated voters.

The Freedom Party, under Haider's leadership after 1986, sought to exploit emerging disenchantment through an anti-establishment and populist discourse. Haider

targeted Austrian consociational democracy and the neo-corporatist welfare state. Ideologically, the party politicized controversial issues such as immigration, opposition to the European Union, while underlining the importance of Austrian national identity. The impact of Haider's leadership, and this emphasis on new and controversial issues was reflected at the polls.<sup>21</sup> In the elections immediately after Haider assumed leadership of the party its support almost doubled from 5.0 percent in 1983 to 9.7 in 1986. Through out the 1990s, support increased from 16.6 percent in 1990 to 26.9 percent in 1999.<sup>22</sup> The inclusion of the Freedom Party in the 2000 government was an important symbolic break with post war party politics. However, the question was: could the Freedom Party become *Salonfähig*, while retaining its newly acquired support?

### **A Divided Leadership**

Haider was not included in the 2000 government since he was reluctant to step down from his position as governor of Carinthia. Due to the international outcry over the inclusion of the Freedom Party in the coalition government, Haider also relinquished leadership of the party. However, excluding Haider from government was highly problematic since the Freedom Party was not just another political party. Haider was almost single handedly responsible for the success of the party in the 1990s. He, therefore, began too actively campaign against the government, fearing that electoral support, especially among the working class, was in decline, and worried that others within the party overshadowed his control of the party. Even though Haider was no longer the official leader of the party, he remained a strong and influential figure behind the scenes.

While in opposition, Haider was in complete control of the party's political platform and the party's message. He appealed directly to the party grassroots and to the voting public. However, once freed from Haider's control, the Finance Minister Karl-Heinz Grasser and the Vice-Chancellor Susanne Riess-Passer challenged Haider's dominance. Policy disagreements, power struggles, and divisions plagued the Freedom Party.<sup>23</sup> This instability and internal conflict led to declining support in municipal and regional elections, eventually undermining the credibility of the party to such a degree that the People's Party dissolved the government and new elections were held in November 2002.

### **Internal Divisions and Party Organization**

Unlike the List Pim Fortuyn, the Danish People's Party, and the Lega Nord, the Freedom Party evolved from a pre-existing political party. This had distinct advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, Haider had a well established party structure to mobilize voters, while, on the other, he inherited past party divisions and internal conflicts.<sup>24</sup> While in opposition, especially during its dramatic growth in the 1990s, Haider controlled internal dissent. Radical changes to how the party was organized meant that Haider, and his immediate supporters, were no longer responsible to the mid level party members and activists, except during the annual party congress.<sup>25</sup>

However, as the party's electoral success increased, and as the membership grew, it became difficult to control internal tensions. This became particularly pronounced when the Freedom Party joined the 2000 government. First, the over extension of resources, especially human resources, meant that it was difficult to find qualified

individuals for cabinet and committee positions. Second, governing drained human resources from the lower echelons of the party. Third, the growing size of the membership and the increasing pressures of government created internal tensions between the more ideologically oriented grassroots members and those who were perceived as “professional” politicians. These tensions were exacerbated by Haider as he lost control of the party.<sup>26</sup>

### **A Party Like Any Other?**

Thus far, my emphasis has been on party organization and internal tensions. However, the actions of the party while in government also hindered the Freedom Party from transforming itself into a successful party of government. Here of particular importance was the inability of the Freedom Party to present itself as a viable alternative to the Social democrats or to the People’s Party.

The Freedom Party unsuccessfully fulfilled its claim to represent a new political force based upon honesty and competence. In the first year of government, the party committed numerous errors.<sup>27</sup> The competence of ministers were questioned due in part to their lack of experience,<sup>28</sup> while other ministers were implicated in illicit activity such as when the Minister of Justice from the Freedom Party, Dieter Böhmdorfer, was criticized for tampering with government investigations into charges laid against “co-partisans.”<sup>29</sup> These failures made it difficult for the Freedom Party to argue that it was different than the Social Democrats or the People’s Party and it was, therefore, not able to present itself as a party of good, clean, and responsible government.

Policy contradictions also plagued the Freedom Party. Policy contradictions are not as apparent while radical right populist parties are in opposition. However, once in power it becomes difficult to reconcile differences between, for example, neo-liberal reforms and tax cuts with demands for more state spending as it pertained, in particular, to family policies. These tensions were particularly pronounced given that the Freedom Party held the Minister of Finance and the Minister for Social Policy.<sup>30</sup> The Finance Minister was especially concerned with balancing the budget. However, too much emphasis on neo-liberal reforms meant insufficient funds were available for an increase in family support and tax cuts. The party was plagued by debates over which route the party should follow; should the focus be on lower middle class voters and fiscal responsibility or should it remain a party of the “popular” classes by emphasizing tax reductions, maternity leave, and child support.<sup>31</sup>

Policy contradictions came to a head when the government was forced to contend with a series of unintended expenditures. In August 2002 there were massive floods in Eastern Austria, requiring government aid. Moreover, the People’s Party purchased a series of the most expensive military jets on the market, the Eurofighter jets.<sup>32</sup> These moves infuriated Haider and caused him to split with the government. In September 2002 a special party congress was held in Knittelfeld where the intern leader Susanna Riess-Passer was deposed.<sup>33</sup> But more importantly the infighting within the party highlighted the Freedom Party’s growing weakness; the People’s Party dissolved the government.<sup>34</sup>

The incompetence of the Freedom Party Ministers and the dramatic policy contradictions were enhanced by the inability of the party to capitalize on flagship issues such as immigration. The Freedom Party sought to politicize immigration throughout the

1990s. Immigration policy did become increasingly regressive while the Freedom Party held political power. Quotas for immigrants were lowered, family re-unification was made more difficult, and cultural integration and language acquisition was emphasized.<sup>35</sup> It could be argued that the Freedom Party was closely linked to these dramatic changes. Yet, ironically these tougher immigration policies were implemented as much on behalf of the People's Party's Interior Minister Ernst Strasser as by the Freedom Party.<sup>36</sup> Thus, the Freedom Party failed to use issues such as immigration to reassure its electorate that its role in government was indispensable.

The Freedom Party did form the government with the People's Party again in 2003, however, in a much diminished capacity. It now only received 10 percent of the vote and in turn it was a minor coalition partner. In 2005, internal division within the party caused Haider to split from the Freedom Party. Haider, subsequently, formed the Alliance for the Future of Austria. Haider's new party remained in coalition with the People's Party until the 2006 elections, when support for the Freedom Party and the newly formed Alliance plummeted. In 2006, the People's Party formed a coalition once again with the Social Democrats, ending the Freedom Parties experience with political power.

### **The Danish People's Party: one foot in and one foot out**

In the case of the LPF and the Austrian Freedom Party, we saw that it was difficult for populists to hold power. Thus, we might conclude that populist parties, especially radical right populist parties, are not able to participate in government. It is too difficult to reconcile their anti-establishment politics and populism with political power.

In order to dispel this belief, we now turn to three cases in which radical right populist parties have managed this transition successfully.

Denmark had one of the earliest anti-establishment parties in Europe. In the 1973 elections the Progress Party won 13 percent of the vote on an anti-tax and neo-liberal political platform. By the 1980s the Progress Party began to include anti-immigration and law and order themes into its political platform.<sup>37</sup> The success of the Progress Party gradually declined due to organizational difficulties. The Party was not able to sustain its success after its leader was jailed for tax evasion. In 1995, Pia Kjøersgaard, who in 1984 had served briefly as the leader of the Progress Party while Gilstrups was in prison, formed a new radical right populist party. She split with the Progress Party when Gilstrups prison term ended. Kjøersgaard disagreed over the direction that the party should take; Gilstrups' faction within the party wanted to return to the more protest and anarchist orientation of the 1970s, while Kjøersgaard envisioned a party more along the lines of other radical right populist parties found in Europe protest.<sup>38</sup>

The newly established People's Party possesses similar characteristics to other radical right populist parties. Its leader employs an anti-establishment populist message, juxtaposing the people with the elites and with "dangerous others" who threaten Danish society. The party opposes multiculturalism; it calls for fewer immigrants, especially asylum seekers, while it favours full integration for new comers. It opposes European integration. And it supports tax cuts and a market economy, while also defending the welfare state, but for Danes.<sup>39</sup> After the 2001 elections the People's Party overtook the Progress Party as Denmark's relevant radical right populist party.<sup>40</sup>

The Danish People's Party possesses similar organizational and ideological structures as other radical right populist parties. However, unlike the List Pim Fortuyn and the Austrian Freedom Party it has survived government. After the 2001 elections the Liberals and the conservatives had enough seats to form a minority government. Although the People's Party received 12.0 percent of the vote, instead of joining the government, it agreed to support the Liberal-Conservative coalition on an issue by issue basis. Initially, it was not clear whether the People's Party could function as a party of government. Previously, much like other radical right populist parties, it was concerned with vote maximization, taking controversial and radical stances on immigration, European integration, and the welfare state.<sup>41</sup>

However, the People's Party managed the transition well, becoming an important ally of the center-right coalition on controversial issues such as immigration reform, municipal restructuring, and foreign policy. The government relied on the People's Party to pass budgets which included tax reductions, while immigration policy became considerably more regressive, and the government sent troops to Iraq largely due to its support.<sup>42</sup>

### **Survival in Power: Why?**

Why was the Danish People's Party able to thrive where other populist parties failed? By situating itself within the government, but at arms length, the party gave the impression that its policies influenced the government, while at the same time it has not

become tainted and compromised by absolute political power. Unlike the Freedom Party which was awarded high profile portfolios in the government, the People's Party has only served on parliamentary committees, and on several occasions receiving committee chairmanships. This strategy has allowed the party to influence government policy, while not diminishing its position on controversial policy issues such as immigration, opposition to the European Union, and national identity.<sup>43</sup> This proved successful, in each of the successive elections the People's Party support has increased.<sup>44</sup>

Pia Kjaersgaard was particularly adept at keeping policy contradictions and internal factions under control. As with other radical right populist parties, the Danish People's Party is highly centralized around its charismatic leader. And unlike other Danish political parties which have experienced declining membership, the People's Party has actively increased its membership. Growing levels of membership have contributed to the ability of the party to mobilize voters. Nevertheless, these members play a passive role, they do not challenge the centralized party structures and centralized decision making. Those who do not tow the party line are asked to leave the party.<sup>45</sup>

Its leader, thus, maintains internal cohesion and order. Kjaersgaard learned from her tenure in the Progress Party that the leader's control of the party, or lack thereof, can contribute to the success and failure of populist parties. For example, in the year preceding the 2001 elections local elected officials and members of parliament objected to Kjaersgaard's complete control over the party; Kjaersgaard acted quickly and forcefully, all dissenting party members were expelled from the party.<sup>46</sup> Even though membership and parliamentary seats increased, the party was not plagued by internal policy debates between different factions.

The Danish People's Party has become one of the most successful radical right populist parties in Europe. Its electoral support has grown incrementally since 1995. Its foray into government has increased its support, while the party has dramatically influenced Danish public policy.

### **Success in Government: the case of the Lega Nord**

The Danish People's Party demonstrates that it is possible for Radical Right Populist parties to govern. However, as noted, the party was not officially a member of the government. We now turn to the Lega Nord which, unlike the Danish People's Party, was an active member of Italy's longest serving government. It was in coalition with Forza Italia, Alleanza Nazionale (AN), and the Union of Christian and Center Democrats (UDC) between 2001 and 2006. Moreover, it held several ministerial positions and it was an important driving force behind controversial legislation, especially as it related to immigration and federalism. This section examines how the Lega Nord was able to maintain its identity as a radical right populist party while a member of the government coalition.

The Lega Nord evolved from the various protest, populist and regional leagues that emerged in Northern and North-Eastern Italy in the 1980s. By the 1980s the Italian post war party system had reached its conclusion. The post war Italian economic miracle ended, the Communist Party was in decline, and Christian Democracy was not sufficiently responsive to demands from civil society. The Lega Nord, and the leagues that preceded it, were a direct response to these emerging opportunity structures as well

as from the extensive corruption charges laid against the political class in the *mani pulite* (clean hands) investigations after 1992.

The Lega Nord has evolved through four phases. In the first phase in the 1980s, various protest, populist, and regional leagues were formed in Northern and especially North-Eastern Italy. In the second phase, in the early 1990s Umberto Bossi brought these various leagues under one umbrella when it formed the Lega Nord in 1991. The party became one of the largest political parties in Northern Italy. The Lega was populist, while it emphasized federalism, an anti-Rome, anti-South discourse and neo-liberal, anti-state themes. In the third phase in the mid 1990s, the party returned to its roots, representing the small and the medium sized towns in the foothills in Northern Italy. The party remained populist; it opposed what it perceived as central government domination of the North, while it moved from federalism to succession. It increased its anti-immigrant rhetoric. And it also began to mitigate its outright support for a free market economy.

By the late 1990s, the Lega's electoral success began to wane. It was during this last phase, culminating in the poor showing in the 1999 European elections, that the party replaced separation with devolution and in 2000 it rejoined the center-right coalition.<sup>47</sup> The Lega remained populist and federalist, while its anti-immigrant and its anti-EU message became more pronounced. Its cultural and moral conservatism and its emphasis on law and order also increased. Finally, it continued to emphasize support for tax reductions with opposition to globalization. Much like the other parties examined in this paper, the Lega Nord evolved into a radical right populist party.

### **A Stronger and Leaner Lega**

The Lega reached the pinnacle of its success in the early 1990s, obtaining 17 percent of the vote in the North. By the late 1990s its support had diminished to just below four percent nationally. However, the party remained an important political force in Northern Italy. Silvio Berlusconi, calculating that the Lega could be decisive in winning the 2001 elections, coaxed the party into the center-right coalition. After the center-right coalition won the 2001 elections, the Lega was given two official ministerial posts, the Minister of Justice and Welfare, while Umberto Bossi was appointed the unofficial Minister of devolution, replaced in July 2004 by Roberto Calderoli when he fell ill.

In 1994 an earlier attempt at governing had failed when the Lega withdrew its support for the first Berlusconi government after only eight months, fearing that too close of an association with Forza Italia would cause loyal supporters to abandon the party.<sup>48</sup> However, this second attempt at governing (2001-2006) proved to be more successful. Importantly, the Lega's political identity and its organizational structures had been substantially consolidated. In the 1980s, Umberto Bossi, and his close knit group of political supporters, engaged in grassroots politics to create the Lega Nord ex novo. During the fall of the so-called First Republic in the early 1990s, the party experienced rapid growth, causing numerous factions, internal struggles, and dissenting voices. However, by the late 1990s, the smaller and leaner meant that the Lega was a more united party with a stronger political identity.<sup>49</sup> Umberto Bossi was able to maintain complete control over the party, while those who remained with the party were loyal to their leader. Bossi remained the heart and the sole of the Lega.<sup>50</sup> This was the case even though Bossi

did not participate in politics for almost a year, having suffered a serious illness. Even so, his leadership, unlike Haider's, was never questioned nor challenged.

The party identity was reinforced by its strong presence within civil society. This was accomplished through the creation of cultural, business, and union organizations and through the party newspaper, and its radio and television stations. Moreover, symbolic and cultural identities, such as the annual festival along the Po river were intended as both a nationalist (Padanian) pilgrimage and an annual gathering to reinforce a sense of community and belonging.<sup>51</sup>

### **One Foot in and One Foot Out**

Despite the Lega's strong party identity and its control over internal divisions, joining a governing coalition remained risky. Successes depended in large part upon its ability to exploit the internal tensions within the governing coalition. By doing so the Lega did not renounce its identity as a fighting party; political power did not translate into a softer or a tamer Lega.<sup>52</sup>

The Lega gave the impression that it was an oppositional force, but an oppositional force within the government. The UDC was characterized as the reincarnation of the post war Christian democratic political class. Both the UDC and Alleanza Nazionale were attacked as defenders of the centralized state, and as partial of Southern Italian interests. And the other parties in the coalition were accused for being soft on immigration. The Lega repeatedly treated its coalition partners as if they were opposition parties, claiming that even though its alliance with the government *might* be

distasteful to its supporters, that it was *necessary* to insure that Italy would not be turned over to either Fini's post Fascists or to the ex-Christian Democrats.<sup>53</sup>

The special relationship that the Lega had with Berlusconi permitted the party to comport itself as if it was a party of opposition. Even though the Lega's support declined to just under four percent, it remained an important voice within the coalition. Berlusconi used the Lega to fight his battles with the justice system (Roberto Castelli from the Lega was the Minister of Justice) and to fight his battle to maintain his media empire. In return Bossi was permitted to make provocative statements, either directed at the coalition partners, at other Italian politicians, or at international actors.<sup>54</sup> Berlusconi rarely condemned these comments, and in most cases he minimized them. This worked to Bossi and the Lega's favour, allowing the Lega to retain its populist stance while in power.

### **The Lega Nord: public policy success?**

The Lega was also particularly adept at choosing policy issues that did not highlight the contradictions inherent in its platform. Much of the Lega's battles were fought at the level of symbolic politics. To be sure, symbolic politics have material consequences, but the success and the failures of these policies are more difficult to measure than fiscal policy and welfare state spending. The Lega focused on immigration, opposition to the European Union, and devolution. There is no question that the Lega also campaigned for lower taxes, social protection for Italian citizens, and pension reform,<sup>55</sup> however, these issues took a back seat to immigration and devolution.

Unlike the Freedom Party, the Lega was quick to take credit for, and even embellish, the success of these policies. For example, largely at the behest of the Lega,

almost immediately upon taking power, the government passed a new immigration law (the Bossi-Fini law). Even though the Bossi-Fini law did not fully comply with the demands of the Lega, the law did increase the perception that there was an inevitable link between immigration and crime: immigration was only possible with a work permit, and family reunification was restricted. However, because of UDC demands (and to a certain extent the Catholic and the business lobby), Italy's largest amnesty accompanied the new immigration law.<sup>56</sup> These dual aspects of the new immigration law provoked a debate about the degree to which immigration policy had in fact become more regressive. For example, Colombo and Sciortino claim that the law's most dramatic impact was symbolic.<sup>57</sup> Despite disagreement over the implications of the Bossi-Fini law, unlike the Freedom Party, the Lega took full responsibility for the law, even embellishing its radical nature.

Joining the center-right coalition was predicated upon the Lega's demand to restructure the state; the heart and soul of the movement since its beginning in the 1980s. Although the center left government passed its own federalist legislation in 2001,<sup>58</sup> the Lega deemed these changes inadequate. Thus, the Lega cajoled its coalition partners into passing legislation to devolve political power. The passing of the devolution legislation in 2005 was celebrated as a long awaited success.<sup>59</sup> On both accounts, i.e. in relation to the immigration law and the federal changes to the state, the Lega proclaimed victory, claiming that its foray into government was a success.

The Lega's success depended upon its ability to keep one foot in and one foot out of the government. While it was in power it did not mitigate its oppositional stance. This was important for retaining support from the party faithful, while it was made possible by

the nature of the coalition. Since the Lega was a minority party, but a minority party with considerable power, it was able to play the role of outsider while remaining a member of the coalition.

Finally, party organization, party identity, and policy choices were crucial. The party remained well organized around Bossi, despite the fact that his ability to lead was severely diminished for almost a year due to his illness. Thus, factions and internal disagreements did not materialize. Policy decisions were also crucial. The Lega emphasized what I have referred to as cultural and symbolic issues. This is important since it could be argued that the Lega demands, in the final analysis, were not fulfilled. The immigration bill was not as affective at controlling immigration as claimed, its anti-EU stance did not dramatically alter the government's relation with Europe, and in June 2006 the devolution legislation was abrogated by a referendum.<sup>60</sup> However, the Lega was able to argue, especially to its supporters, that it did indeed influence policy and when policy was deemed a failure this was due to its coalition partners. In other words, the Lega claimed, had it not been in power, political enemies such as AN and the UDC would have had even more influence over policy decisions.

### **From Establishment to Anti-Establishment Party: the Swiss People's Party**

So far we have examined two radical right populist parties that have not made the transition from a protest, opposition party to a party of government and two parties that have successfully maintained their radical right populist status while also participating in government. In this section, the focus changes; I now examine a political party that transformed itself into a radical right populist party while in government.

The Swiss People's Party (SVP) was formed in 1971 when the Farmers, Artisans, and Citizens' Party merged with the Democratic Party. Until the 1980s the SVP was a center-right party with social-liberal policies. Its main base of support came from employers, the diminishing agrarian sector, and the lower middle class.<sup>61</sup> However, beginning in the 1980s its political identity began to gradually change. Much like other radical right populist parties, the SVP adopted a populist rhetoric. This was due to Christoph Blocher, the SVP leader in the Zurich canton. The SVP began to challenge the consociational political culture as the party situated itself as the authentic people's representative vis-à-vis the elites.<sup>62</sup> Ideologically it combined an anti-EU and an anti-immigrant message with demands for a reduction in the scope and the activity of the state.<sup>63</sup> The new populist and radical right identity contributed to the growing electoral fortunes of the party.<sup>64</sup> In 2007, it became the largest Swiss party.<sup>65</sup>

In the 1980s and the early 1990s, the SVP was particularly adept at using a series of referendums and citizen initiatives to challenge governmental policies. It initially targeted international organizations. For example, the SVP opposed Switzerland joining the European Union. The SVP also proposed a series of referendums objecting to Swiss asylum and immigration policy.<sup>66</sup> Naturally, the Swiss consociational system, a system that emphasizes cooperation but at the same time permits considerable internal disagreement, was conducive to the SVP's dual identity as a party inside and yet outside the government. The anti-establishment nature of the party was also permitted by a federal system that allots considerable autonomy to the cantons.<sup>67</sup>

The ideological evolution of the party, coupled with its new found populism, was accompanied by organizational changes. Much like the other parties examined in this

paper, Christoph Blocher proved to be a charismatic leader who was able to take control of the Zurich wing of the party. Blocher centralized the party around his leadership and in the process he rid the party of long time party members in favour of new members who were loyal to his leadership.<sup>68</sup>

Swiss political parties are generally not well organized and membership tends to be low. Thus, Blocher and the SVP succeeded where other Swiss political parties often fail. The SVP was a well organized and ideologically cohesive party with a growing membership. In the 1990s the SVP also created a wide array of independent organizations, associations, and interest groups that permitted the party to disassociate itself from the more “traditional socio-professional interest groups” and their financial and their personal resources.<sup>69</sup> As the party institutionalized its new found identity, it began to increase its autonomy vis-à-vis the more traditional wings of the party and the state.

As the autonomy, organizational capacity, and the ideological identity of the SVP were consolidated, the party challenged the consociational nature of the Swiss party system. This was particularly noticeable after 2003 when the SVP was given an extra seat in the Federal Council. As a member of the Federal Council in 2003, Blocher sought to actively challenge the consensual nature of decision making. He consistently blocked policies, and counter to Swiss consociational politics and to the workings of the Council, he publicly voiced his objections to policy decisions.<sup>70</sup> Consequently, in 2007 Blocher was not reappointed to the Council, despite the fact that the SVP had become the largest Swiss party.<sup>71</sup> Blocher and the Swiss People’s Party have, therefore, moved in the opposite direction from other radical right populist parties. The party was able to

radicalize while in power, demonstrating that populist and radical politics do not preclude political power. But the recent exclusion of the SVP from the Federal Council highlights once again the tension between populism, radical politics and political power.

### **Can Radical Right Populist Parties Govern?**

This paper begun by posing the question: can radical right populist parties govern? The assumption was that radical right populist parties are situated between an anti-system party and a party that proclaims that it can govern. To be sure, as the preceding analysis has demonstrated, becoming *Salonfähig*, while retaining their political identity as an anti-establishment and radical party remains difficult. Success depends on a combination of opportunity structures and party agency. Thus, radical right populist parties such as the Danish People's Party, the Lega Nord, and the Swiss People's Party succeeded since they created strong political identities. In other words, supporters identified with the issues, the party ideology, and the party platform. Moreover, the successful parties are also well organized; they possess extensive cultural and party associations within civil society. However, these organizations remain passive insofar as the parties' charismatic leader directs the party agenda. Success and failure also depended on the ability of the radical right populist parties in question to situate themselves vis-à-vis parliament and the other parties in the coalition. The three successful cases were able to keep one foot in government, while maintaining their anti-establishment and populist identity. The Danish People's Party accomplished this by supporting a minority government, the Lega Nord exploited the heterogeneity of the coalition and its special relationship with Silvio Berlusconi, and the Swiss People's Party used referendums,

plebiscites, and citizen initiatives, along with considerable canton autonomy, to establish its anti-establishment identity while a member of the Federal Council.

<sup>1</sup> The idea for the title for this paper came from Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell's article on the Lega Nord and political power. See Albertazzi D. and McDonnell D. (2005) "The Lega Nord in the second Berlusconi government: in a league of its own," *West European Politics* 28(5), pp. 952-972.

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<sup>17</sup> Lucardie P. (2007), p. 163.

<sup>18</sup> Holsteyn J.M. J. and Irwin A.G. (2003), p. 63.

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