LINKING MOBILIZATION FRAMES AND POLITICAL OPPORTUNITIES: INSIGHTS FROM REGIONAL POPULISM IN ITALY[*]

Mario Diani

University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, Scotland

Drawing on the case of the Northern League in Italy, I provide a framework for systematically relating insights from two major currents of recent research on collective action: framing processes and political opportunity structures. Cross-classifying two variables—the stability of political alignments and the opportunities for autonomous action within the polity—yields four types of political structures; each is particularly conducive to different "master frames" (antisystem, inclusion, revitalization, and realignment). This approach also improves specification of the role of organizational resources. These resources become substantially more effective if the strategies they are supposed to support are framed in a way consistent with the master frame and the opportunity structure.

The regionalist parties that form the Northern League[1] have played a major role in recent Italian politics. Their impressive electoral growth between 1990 and 1993 has undermined support for traditional parties, including oppositional parties, and has paved the way for the advent of Mr. Berlusconi's party, Forza Italia. In this paper I do not discuss the events that have followed

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[1] The Northern League includes regionalist parties originally formed as independent organizations from Veneto (Liga Veneta), Lombardy (Lega Lombarda), and Piedmont (Piemont Autonomista), plus three newly constituted leagues in Liguria, Emilia-Romagna, and Tuscany. In this paper I occasionally use expressions such as "the League" as synonymous with the "Northern League."

the general election of March 1994. In particular, I ignore both the League's troubled relationship with Forza Italia and Alleanza Nazionale-MSI, which resulted in the collapse of the right-wing government led by Mr. Berlusconi in December 1994, and its recent shift toward explicit secessionist goals, which led to the proclamation of an "Independence Declaration" in September 1995. Instead I focus on the process that in the early 1990s led to the success of a new political organization and placed a whole polity in jeopardy despite powerful opposition from established political actors.

Italian leagues present an interesting case study for students of collective action for several reasons. First, their growth has not been an isolated event. Rather, they have been one of the most successful examples of a broader trend toward the promarket and antipolitical orientations that have challenged social-democratic arrangements in western political systems since the late 1970s. Moreover, although it is debatable whether the leagues should be regarded as right-wing phenomena (Betz 1993; Corbetta 1993; Mannheimer and Sani 1994; Poche 1994), they are certainly distant from the "new social movements" that have inspired most recent theorizing in the field (Dalton and Kuechler 1990; Morris and Mueller 1992). A proper understanding of the leagues requires (and at the same time stimu-

lates) a finer tuning of interpretations and concepts that have been elaborated largely by reference to other empirical objects.[2]

The success of the leagues challenges current theoretical approaches to collective action. The leagues could not rely on large organizational resources, especially in comparison with established political parties. Similarly, most of their activists had no significant political experience. Also, although opinion-makers have often attributed the success of the leagues to their leaders' communication skills, those leaders had no direct control of mass media and hardly any familiarity with advertising technologies. Finally, success came in spite of a political context that, according to current paradigms, could not be viewed as particularly favorable. These inconsistencies prompt analysts to reconsider the relationship between organizational resources, symbolic production, and political opportunities in collective action theory. I integrate these different layers of analysis by addressing the following question: Under which structural (particularly, political) conditions will some mobilizing messages by "challengers" (Tilly 1978) be more effective than others?[3]

First, I propose a typology of opportunity structures based on a reformulation of Sidney Tarrow's (1994) definition. I relate each type to a specific dominant representation of the political environment, which, following Snow and Benford (1988), I call the "master frame." I argue that one can expect mobilization messages to be more or less successful in different political settings, depending on their congruence with the master frames dominant in a given political phase. As an example, I illustrate how the leagues' "regional populism" has managed to represent within a single frame certain processes and

social changes that in principle also could have been represented in other, sometimes very different, ways. Why regional populism has succeeded where other competing frames have failed is explained by the congruence between the leagues' message and the master frame that characterized the political opportunity structure of the early 1990s in Italy. Next, I show how different degrees of consistency between the opportunity structure and actors' frames can render organizational resources more or less valuable and effective, and how in particular this situation created greater opportunities for the leagues than for their competitors. Finally, I provide some examples showing how this framework contributes to the comparison of mobilization dynamics across time.

Throughout this paper I draw on the substantial secondary evidence that has been gathered to date about the Northern League. This includes survey data about voters (Mannheimer et al. 1991; Corbetta 1993; Cartocci 1994; Mannheimer and Sani 1994), activists (Segatti 1992), or both (Diamanti 1992, 1993); content analyses of political documents (Allievi 1992); electoral posters (Todesco 1992); excerpts from journalistic surveys (Pajetta 1994); and accounts by leaders (Bossi and Vimercati 1992).

ACCOUNTING FOR CHALLENGERS' SUCCESSES: RELATING FRAMES TO POLITICAL OPPORTUNITIES

To date, the determinants of successful collective action have followed two major lines of investigation. One has highlighted, albeit in different ways, the role of challengers in converting grievances and issues into actual mobilization. Resource mobilization theorists (Zald and McCarthy 1987; Gamson 1990) have treated the success of social movement organizations mainly as the product of skillful political entrepreneurs acting on the basis of a rationality paradigm. From the second perspective, advocates of constructionist approaches to collective action have identified the sources of successful mobilization in the actors' capacities to mount "symbolic challenges" to dominant definitions of reality by reshaping available symbols and creating new systems of meaning (Melucci 1989; Eyerman and Jamison 1991;

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[2] This is true in spite of the recent rise of interest in conservative and right-wing politics among students of collective action (Oliver and Furman 1989; Lo 1990; Oberschall 1993, chap. 13).

[3] I refer to challengers, rather than to movements, to emphasize that social movements should not be equated with organizations (Tilly 1978; Diani 1992). In practice, however, most of the theoretical contributions I discuss here have taken social movements, and particularly organizations acting within those movements, as their empirical object.

Johnston 1991; Benford and Hunt 1992). In particular, Snow and associates have pointed out that mobilization attempts are successful if leaders manage to carry on "frame alignment" processes: ". . . the linkage of individual and SMO interpretive orientations, such that some set of individual interests, values, and beliefs and SMO activities, goals, and ideology are congruent and complementary" (Snow et al. 1986:464).

Although several theoretical disagreements separate resource mobilization from constructionist approaches, these approaches share a critique of structural determinism and an emphasis on the challengers' creative role.[4] In contrast, recent structural approaches have explained successful mobilization in the light of processes that are largely beyond actors' direct control. Some observers have pointed out how mobilization is affected by variables such as differential access to status and power, structural changes in the labor force, and urban renewal (Feagin and Capek 1991; Piven and Cloward 1992). Others have related the spread of collective action and protest to the possibilities created by the political system. In this connection, the notion of "political opportunity structure" has gained increasing popularity (Eisinger 1973; Tilly 1978). This notion has been defined in terms of those "dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations for success or failure" (Tarrow 1994:85). According to Tarrow, these dimensions are the stability of political alignments, the formal channels of access to the political system, the availability of allies within the polity, and intra-elite conflict.

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[4] Substantial divergences especially occur between those who view symbols mainly as a "tool" for political action (McCarthy 1987) and those who see struggles over symbolic production as the major conflictual issue in postindustrial society (Melucci 1989; Benford and Hunt 1992). Differences between the two fields are not always so sharp, however. Even leading proponents of the frame approach to collective action tend in their research to conceive of frames largely as symbolic resources to be used along with more material resources as a means of increasing challengers' mobilization capacities (Snow et al. 1986; Gamson 1990, 1992).

Recently, many scholars have related symbolic production to political conditions more explicitly. Snow and Benford (1992) have focused on the link between framing activity and protest cycles, arguing that success will be easier for those movements whose frames are most consistent with the "master frame" that shapes the whole protest cycle. Gamson and Meyer (1996) have shown that the political opportunity structure itself is the outcome of negotiations about meaning between different actors, often within the same movement or even the same movement organization. Taking a different point of departure, Tarrow (1994) explicitly has incorporated the role of symbolic production into his theory of the political opportunity structure. Although the latter, in the last analysis, remains the key explanatory variable in his model, challengers, by careful use of rhetorical devices, may take advantage of changes in the political context to increase their opportunities to act.[5]

These contributions have substantially improved our understanding of mobilization dynamics, but they also have left some questions unresolved. Resource mobilization approaches have been criticized for failing to identify the structural inequalities underlying differential access to mobilization resources (Piven and Cloward 1992); cultural approaches have been faulted for failing to connect systematically symbolic production with political and economic structures (Bartholomew and Mayer 1992). Most important, from my point of view, critics have emphasized the risks of indeterminacy (and, I would add, ad hoc explanations) inherent in these perspectives. Given the multiplicity of mobilization resources and cultural symbols that characterize societies at any one time, it would not be difficult for any successful challenger to identify the specific "discourse" with which its frame is aligned or the specific resource that its leaders have managed to mobilize.

Similar remarks apply to analysts of political opportunities. Generally these analysts produce lists of political variables that might be expected to affect protesters' behaviors

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[5] Other recent contributions in the same direction include Zuo and Benford (1994) and Koopmans and Duyvendak (1995).

**Opportunities for Autonomous
Action within the Polity**

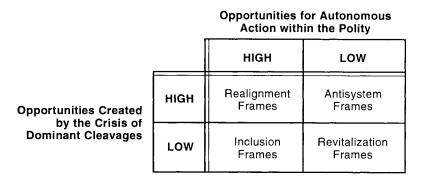|		HIGH	LOW
Opportunities Created by the Crisis of Dominant Cleavages	**HIGH**	Realignment Frames	Antisystem Frames
	LOW	Inclusion Frames	Revitalization Frames

Figure 1. Most Successful Framing Strategies, According to Different Configurations of the Political
       Opportunity Structure

and chances of success. Then they explain specific episodes of mobilization by selecting from that list those dimensions that best fit the case under investigation. They account for challengers' successes by pointing out one or more facilitating conditions; they account for their failures by stressing the absence of opportunities. Usually, however, they omit a systematic analysis of those situations in which some opportunities are clearly available while others are clearly not. This situation is problematic inasmuch as the absence of some opportunities could compensate for the presence of others and could decrease people's "expectation for success" (see, for example, Tarrow 1994:18, 84, 163, 183–84).[6]

The question, then, is how to account systematically for the several potential configurations of the opportunity structure while expanding on current attempts to integrate different theoretical perspectives. I start with a reformulation of the concept of political opportunity structure that draws on two distinct dimensions. One dimension corresponds to Tarrow's "stability of political alignments" and measures the *opportunities created by the crisis of dominant cleavages*. The other dimension is defined as *opportunities for autonomous action within the polity*. By the latter term I mean the political conditions that

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[6] At the same time, however, scholars who take this line are well aware of the problem. Tarrow observes that the dimensions of the opportunity structure "are arrayed differentially in various systems and change over time, often independently of one another, but sometimes in close connection" (1994:89).

foster among challengers the perception that they may engage in independent action within the political system. Opportunities will be greater in this respect, the more conspicuous the presence of one or more of the other dimensions identified by Tarrow (1994:85–9): increasing access, influential allies, divided elites. The combination of these two variables defines four different configurations of opportunity structures (see Figure 1). Each reflects a different perception of the political environment and can be expected to be most conducive to a particular type of framing strategy.

A favorable context for challengers is provided, in principle, by an opportunity structure that combines the perception of ample opportunities for independent action with the decreasing capacity of traditional alignments to support collective identities and to structure political action. Here in particular we find the best conditions for the success of what I would call *realignment frames*. Such conditions emphasize the need to restructure political systems on the basis of new collective identities without a global delegitimation of the established members and procedures of the polity. This environment probably has been the most favorable for the success of the new social movements, at least those (the large majority, I suggest) which have adopted a "democratic populist" perspective (Kitschelt 1993).

In another configuration of the opportunity structure, high opportunities for autonomous action combine with low opportunities created by the stability of political cleavages. In this case we shall expect *inclusion frames* to

be those whose mobilization efforts are most likely to succeed. By this expression I mean rhetorical devices emphasizing new political actors' aspirations to be recognized as legitimate members of a polity, in which definitions of the major actors are not altered. Political innovation following the inclusion of new actors thus affects the composition of the political system rather than its symbolic structure. One should expect greater chances to be offered to challengers who emphasize their continuity with established political actors as much as the differences, rather than to challengers who are willing to introduce new, different cleavages in the polity.

In the most difficult situation for the emergence of new political actors, the capacity of traditional alignments to structure political conflicts is not contested and few chances are available for newcomers to play an autonomous political role. In such a context, *revitalization frames* are likely to be the most successful—or the least unsuccessful. This expression reflects the fact that the most reasonable option open to challengers is that of entering established political organizations in order to redirect their goals and revitalize their structures from within.

Yet, another configuration best fits the Italian politics of the 1990s and the emergence of the League. It is characterized both by global crises of traditional alignments and by poor opportunities for autonomous action by challengers. This configuration can be regarded as particularly favorable for what I call *antisystem frames*. The mobilizing messages that fall under this heading challenge both fundamental traits of a political system: its dominant cleavages and identities, and its capacity to accommodate heterogeneous and often conflicting interests and orientations within the political process. Antisystem frames therefore advocate a radical transformation of the polity. One should not associate their dominance with the greatest likelihood of confrontational events, political violence, or even revolutionary outcomes. Whether or not representations emphasizing the need for radical change ultimately result in disruption, revolution, or reform (however deep) depends largely on intervening variables, particularly, the mediating role of political elites (Tarrow 1989a, 1994; Tilly 1993). By antisystem frame I simply mean

here any representation of political reality that defines political actors along lines other than established cleavages and denies legitimacy to the routinized functioning of the political process.[7]

The case of the Northern League provides an empirical illustration of this argument. Before we look at this example in greater detail, however, some qualifications are necessary.

First, the political opportunity structure here depends less on objective facts than on actors' perceptions that chances for successful action are opening up (Gamson and Meyer 1996). Admittedly, the properties of specific events may be expected to affect actors' interpretations of the available opportunities (McAdam 1994). Nevertheless, the easier it is to associate specific events with broader cultural frames, the greater will be the impact of those events.

Second, elites' policy responsiveness is excluded from the determination of the opportunity structure. Potential members of protest groups are always largely unhappy with the performance of political elites. Ultimately, agency always presupposes feelings of injustice (Gamson 1992). Also, full policy responsiveness may be as conducive to demobilization as is fierce repression (Tilly 1978; Rüdig 1990). What matters is whether the behavior of elites creates chances to develop effective collective action, not whether those elites are effective problem solvers.

Third, I posit the existence of a dominant perception of the political context (i.e., a "master frame"), for each political phase. This is not a return to the untenable assumption that each country shares a single political culture. Nor should one forget that controversies about interpretations of the political context arise regularly even among and within movement organizations (Gamson and Meyer 1996). I borrow Snow and Benford's (1992) idea of the "master frame" to stress the importance of representations of reality, which in a given phase are perceived as more compelling and "realistic" than

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[7] Here I come close to Sartori's (1976:132–33, 1982:299–303)definition of antisystem parties as political actors challenging the legitimacy of a given political regime without necessarily aiming at revolutionary outcomes or acting violently.

other, competing representations. Although specific master frames may not be strong enough to attract people socialized in an alternative political tradition, they may weaken those individuals' beliefs, thus reducing their likelihood of mounting effective counter-frames.[8]

Fourth, I view frames here as abstract forms of political rhetoric rather than as belief systems anchored to specific contents. For example, the success of the League's populism is related to its consistency with a broader, strongly critical perception of the political opportunity structure rather than to the peculiar themes and symbols of populism as such.[9]

Fifth, and most important, the notion of frame alignment is redefined here. Usually this notion refers to the connection between movement entrepreneurs' values and goals, on one hand, and their potential constituents' culture, on the other, where culture is understood in the broad sense of the term (Snow et al. 1986; Tarrow 1994:123). Here I interpret frame alignment in a more limited sense—as the integration of mobilizing messages with dominant representations of the political environment.

GRIEVANCES AND FRAMES

The Structural Roots of the Leagues

The new regional leagues were established in Italy in the 1970s and early 1980s. At first their electoral strength was negligible. The strongest of these parties, the Lombard League, and its counterparts in other northern regions, including Piedmont and Veneto,

made their first significant appearance in the national political arena only in 1987. For the Lombard League, this was the first participation in any national election. On that occasion the various leagues ran independently for parliamentary seats and polled overall about 1.5 percent of the national vote. In 1990 the regional parties formed the Northern League under the leadership of the Lombard League.[10] Two years later their support in the new general elections rose to 8.6 percent, an outstanding result if one considers that their constituencies are restricted to the northern areas of the country. The two MPs (members of Parliament) who had been elected in 1987 were joined by 78 new MPs. In the national elections of March 1994 the League registered for the first time a slight reduction in its electoral support, polling 8.4 percent on the national level. However, as a result of the new majoritarian electoral system and their alliance with Forza Italia, the number of its MPs increased to more than 150.[11]

The League's strongholds in northern Italy display a peculiar socioeconomic profile. Regardless of the individual voters' class and status (Mannheimer et al. 1991), the League developed in social milieus with a strong small-industry, petite bourgeoisie profile (Diamanti 1993:35–40). After growing at extraordinary rates throughout most of the 1980s, these sectors faced the recession of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Fears about the economy were paralleled by the growth of other typical sources of middle-class resentment: public corruption, Third-World immigration, the growth of criminal activities, particularly in southern Italy, and spreading fears such as those related to drug addiction or AIDS.[12] Widespread anger over the misfunctioning and corruption of the state fuelled traditional hostility between

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[8] For example, the emphasis on social welfare shared by major political actors in Italy in the 1970s made it very difficult to disseminate frames emphasizing the need to keep public expenditure under control; such frames immediately would have been labelled "antisolidaristic." In contrast, widespread distrust of public agencies in the early 1990s has rendered it virtually impossible to oppose the privatization of public services without being stigmatized as supporting "inefficient and corrupted bureaucracies."

[9] The distinction between these two notions of "frames" is discussed by Donati (1992). Most analysts of collective action, however, refer to frames in either sense (Snow et al. 1986).

[10] See Diamanti (1993) for a documented reconstruction of the early phases of the leagues, as well as for an introduction to the persistent differences between these parties.

[11] In the new electoral system, three-quarters of the parliamentary seats are assigned on a first-past-the-post basis; the remaining seats are assigned on a proportional basis.

[12] A broad picture of recent changes and problems in Italian society and politics may be found in Ginsborg (1994).

northern and southern Italians.[13] The striking differences in economic and institutional performance between northern and southern Italy (Putnam 1993) also played a role.

The Northern League's Populism

Major sources of grievance in the Italian society of the late 1980s, however, hardly explain why the regionalist leaders managed to mobilize such massive support. Indeed, social problems have long been recognized as the outcome of social construction processes and struggles over meaning (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988; Best 1989). Therefore, far from "creating" the Northern League, changes in Italian society provided new opportunities for political groups willing to assert themselves as "problem owners" (Gusfield 1963) through their peculiar definitions of the issues at stake.

In this conflict over meaning, the League developed its own approach. To link references to as many sources of grievance as possible within a coherent interpretative frame without losing its distinctness from established political actors, the Northern League increasingly adopted what most observers regard as a (regional) populist frame (Biorcio 1991, 1992; Betz 1993; Leonardi and Kowacs 1993; but see Segatti 1992). Providing a precise definition of populism is not simple: Populism is not a coherent and systematic ideology and it can take several forms (Wiles 1969). Still, we can associate it broadly with "those political beliefs that draw their major inspiration and legitimacy from 'the people.' People are seen as an homogeneous social aggregate as well as the only depository of peculiar, positive, and everlasting values" (Incisa 1983:859). Careful analysis of the electoral communications of the Lombard League and later of the Northern League (Todesco 1992) shows that these parties actually adopted most of the 24 distinctive traits of populist discourse identified by Wiles (1969) in his seminal contribution. For simplicity, however, these traits can be grouped under three broad themes.

The first theme focused[14] on the definition of the actor. Northern Italians did not differ from other people on strong cultural or ethnic grounds. The northern Italian identity had no clear, positive defining quality except for the *voglia di lavorare* (commitment to work), which cut across all layers of local society (Confalonieri 1990). Consistently, no class divisions were recognized in northern Italy. Class struggle was rejected in favor of cooperative attitudes between employers and employees, inasmuch as

> . . . all social classes in Lombardy share a quest for freedom, and all wish to liberate themselves from their subordinate position, according to which they are exploited as animals, and treated like a Roman colony. (From *Lombardia Autonomista*, November 1985, as quoted in Allievi 1992:18)

Rather, identity was defined mostly by opposition to those groups and actors who did not belong to the people—that is, whose behavior ran counter to the ordinary person's values and aspirations. This theme was articulated in both an upward and a downward direction. Considerable hostility was expressed toward the political and economic elites. Although in broad terms the League's approach was quite distant from the anticapitalist positions of traditional agrarian populism (Poggio 1994), hostility toward the economic elites often surfaced.

> I live nearby a FIAT car dealer. . . . When I pass by I always think the same thing: "You may be big and powerful, but even a little man can sometimes put empires into jeopardy if he is backed by the people." . . . No, life will not be easy for FIAT when the League is in power. (Umberto Bossi, as quoted in Bossi and Vimercati 1992:295; also see Pajetta 1994:59)

The harshest polemics, however, were directed against politicians. They were singled out because of their pervasive control over Italian society, their involvement in corruption, and their waste of the resources origi-

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[13] As a result of clientelistic public employment policies, southern Italians are overrepresented in the rank-and-file positions of the public administration (Woods 1991; Leonardi and Kowacs 1993).

[14] Use of the past tense throughout this section does not imply that this picture of the League's discourse is totally, or even partially, outdated. Rather, I wish to stress that I focus on the period that preceded the League's access to—and later, withdrawal from—government.

nating from people's work. Traditional political elites were described as having lost all touch with ordinary people and were contrasted with the League's leaders, who had proved capable of perceiving and giving voice to their people's beliefs and aspirations (see, for example, Gianfranco Miglio's foreword to Bossi and Vimercati 1992).

Rather than taking an autonomous form, antisouthern sentiments were framed largely within the antipolitician perspective:[15]

> We aim at the transformation of the current, centralized state, that is in the hands of the Southern ethnic majority, whose dominant position is enforced by "Roman" parties. (Lombardia Autonomista, January 1986, as quoted in Allievi 1992:38; see also Leonardi and Kowacs 1993)

Anti-elite sentiments also resulted in the strongest disregard for intellectuals and journalists, usually described as the servants of rulers. Sometimes these sentiments even took the form of overt hostility toward the Catholic hierarchy (Pajetta 1994).

The second basic theme of regional populism consisted of suspicion and hostility toward marginal social groups. One major polemical target was the ethnic underclass from Third-World countries. To be fair, the leagues never adopted a strictly racist approach, nor did their electoral success increase overt acts of intolerance. In a few cases, such as in Varese, some positive steps even were taken to facilitate the integration of non-White immigrants (Pajetta 1994, chap. 3). As a rule, however, the leagues were extremely critical of current immigration policies, which they judged to be too "loose." They viewed immigrants as a problem rather than as an opportunity (in both

cultural and economic terms) for Italian society.[16] Hostility toward immigrants was often paralleled by similar attitudes toward individuals with unconventional lifestyles. This was not restricted to drug addicts or other marginal groups, but also applied to people who violated conventional social norms regarding sexual behavior, "regular" work, or "normal" family life; for example, a member of a local branch of the Northern League in the Northeast was expelled from the party because of his homosexuality.

The third major theme in the League's populism was a generally suspicious attitude toward political activity. It went well beyond the stigmatization of specific politicians' illegal behaviors. Rather, it entailed a wholesale rejection of the mediating role of political parties:

> The League's roots are in the local communities, and in their strong quests for autonomy . . . the League is the most straightforward expression of those claims, and rejects the intermediating role of traditional parties. (Consulta Cattolica-Lega Nord, as quoted in Poggio 1994:151)

In contrast to democratic populism as it was embodied in many contemporary movements (Boyte 1980; Kitschelt 1993), in the League little emphasis was placed on participatory democracy.[17] The function of democracy was reduced largely to the selection, by electoral means, of a new political elite. Being

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[15] This, however, should not lead one to overlook the role of antisouthern attitudes among the League's supporters. For example, according to a survey conducted in late 1992 and early 1993 among 590 residents in Lombardy and Veneto, one in two Northern League supporters stood for limiting in some way the presence of people of southern origin in their regions, versus 26 percent of the total respondents; hostility toward southerners actually was identified as the most influential variable explaining individual support for the Northern League (Diamanti 1993:105; also see Mannheimer and Sani 1994, chap. 4).

[16] One telling example comes from a meeting held in Milan in September 1994, which was called to launch a campaign for stricter immigration policies. It was advertised by posters carrying the headline "Public Order–Third World Immigrants," thus implying a strong connection between the two. Opinion polls confirm the special appeal of the League for those sectors of the northern Italian population which are most sensitive to these issues. Almost three-quarters of League supporters (72 percent) regard Third-World immigrants as causes of social and cultural conflicts, versus 58 percent of the general public (Diamanti 1993:105).

[17] The only exception was during a phase of the Berlusconi government, when Mr. Bossi appointed himself as protector of democracy, presumably as a means of differentiating the leagues from their coalition partners, and later as a way of providing their electors with a rationale for the breakdown of the coalition.

the true expression of the northern people, the "powerful League" would have automatically found the best way to promote northern Italy's interests (Biorcio 1991; Todesco 1992).

The leagues also showed themselves frequently to be indifferent toward or even intolerant of democratic procedures and the formal requirements of government. Calls for greater respect for procedural rules coming from the center and left-wing opposition in those local councils where the Northern League was now in control usually were dismissed as mere efforts to slow down the "revolutionary" action of the new administrators. Democracy often was viewed as an obstacle to the achievement of practical results, rather than as a set of practices deserving respect as such. According to the League's former ideologue, Gianfranco Miglio,

> [E]ven when they belong to the upper-middle classes, [the supporters of the League] usually do not waste time with doubts, discussions, and sophisticated analyses; they much prefer simple diagnoses and basic values. (Bossi and Vimercati 1992:3)

Each of these aspects of the League's populism was reflected clearly in its political communication, as demonstrated by a content analysis of 43 electoral posters between 1987 and 1992 (Todesco 1992). In four-fifths of these posters, emphasis was placed exclusively on external enemies rather than on positive goals or proactive policies. The most frequently cited targets of hostility were "political parties" (mentioned in 16 posters), the "mafia" (15), and "thieves and corrupted people" (i.e., politicians and civil servants) (12). "Rome" (taken as the symbol of centralized, inefficient power), "the state," and "southern Italy" also were mentioned with some frequency (9, 9, and 6 times respectively). In agreement with other findings about the League's monthly magazine, southern Italy was not treated as an adversarial target in itself, but as part of a broader message (Segatti 1992). In the League's electoral posters, the Mafia and the south occurred together only twice, while the mafia was associated with politicians, the state, and political parties 14 times (Todesco 1992:284–90).

THE POLITICAL OPPORTUNITIES OF REGIONAL POPULISM

One might suggest that the League's populism is a reasonable explanation of its success. After all, it allowed it to incorporate into a single discourse a hatred of political parties and state bureaucracies, suspicion of deviants and Third-World immigrants, and resentment of privileges granted to economic elites. Therefore it could be regarded as an example of successful "frame alignment." This conclusion, however, would prevent us from understanding why the League's mobilizing messages succeeded where competing frames failed. For this purpose we need a more systematic treatment of the connection between the League's frame and the political opportunity structure.

How well do the various dimensions of the political opportunity structure fit the case of the Northern League? Traditional alignments certainly were crumbling in Italy in the early 1990s. According to Eurobarometer surveys, the proportion of those refusing any (even weak) identification with the left-right cleavage had risen from 12 percent in 1977 to 27 percent in 1992 (Martinotti and Stefanizzi 1994). This situation facilitated the spread of alternative points of view, which stressed the emergence of a new cleavage based on territorial differences within the country. It also created opportunities for groups supporting promarket and antiwelfare views.

In this respect, one should note the peculiarities of the Italian left-right cleavage as it emerged after World War II. In contrast to other Western countries, the major right-wing political party in Italy was not a committed advocate of free-market and deregulation policies. Both the left and the Christian Democrats recognized the importance of welfare policies to counterbalance the social costs of market competition. At least in the political rhetoric, emphasis was placed on collective rather than individual responsibility. The ideological differences lay in the definition of the criteria by which citizenship rights should be allocated or in the role assigned to traditional institutions (such as the family or the Catholic Church) in addition to state welfare agencies in the provision of welfare benefits (Ascoli 1985; Zincone 1992).

In such a context, a greater stability in traditional political identities would have drastically reduced the potential appeal of the League's message. For example, a persisting shared emphasis on social solidarity and cooperation might have discouraged at least some of those who sympathized with goals of decentralization and federalism from supporting the League. These persons were perceived (and stigmatized by opponents) as concerned only with selfish individual achievement and as largely hostile to welfare policies and disadvantaged social groups such as Third-World immigrants. Stronger moral objections would have been voiced against some of the key ideas of the populist frame, and those receiving the message would have perceived more of the internal inconsistencies.[18] Indeed, the only northern Italian areas where the League largely failed to break through were the "red regions" of Emilia-Romagna and Tuscany (Diamanti 1993:35–40); traditional cleavages there have maintained some vitality, even after the dissolution of the old Communist Party (Baccetti and Caciagli 1992).[19]

The relationship between the crisis of dominant alignments and the spread of populism is consistent with the broader arguments that associate the former with the success of challengers of any kind. In other aspects of the political opportunity structure, however, this connection is hardly present. To begin with, the regional leagues could not rely on support from, or alliances with, any established member of the polity; they faced fierce opposition from all traditional political actors across the left-right spectrum. Moreover, the regional leagues

developed in a context where patterned inter- and intra-elite conflicts were hard to detect and understand in political terms. Although a number of conflicts shook Italian elites during the 1980s, their implications were not easily grasped by ordinary people. Therefore, their impact on citizens' broad perceptions of the political context was quite small, and they did not create new opportunities for challengers attempting to gain political recognition.[20] In addition, the regional leagues achieved an impressive degree of success in a political system where institutional channels granted little access to the polity to nonrepresented or poorly represented interests. On the one hand, there were—and still are—few opportunities for interest groups in terms of access to litigation procedures or involvement in consultation forums, hearings, and the like (Diani 1995, chap. 2). On the other hand, until 1993 it was quite easy for challengers to obtain parliamentary or local council seats, thanks to the proportional electoral system.[21] Even so, the general hostility of the established parties toward the Northern League denied the League any capacity for coalition (Sartori 1976). Its chances for autonomous action within the polity were therefore reduced, even from the viewpoint of electoral participation.

Finally, available options for representing interests also depended largely on the new challengers' connections within the system, and on their leaders' political skills. The lack of significant political experience among many League activists and sympathizers, which emerges from preliminary accounts (Diamanti 1992; Segatti 1992), may have largely prevented them from exploiting even those limited options.

Citizens' opinions reflected growing perceptions of a generally hostile political environment. According to surveys conducted in

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[18] For a broader, theoretical argument along related lines, see Friedman and McAdam 1992.

[19] Diamanti (1993) shows in particular that 70 percent of the variance in support for the League at a provincial level may be explained by the strength of the Communist Party (later, PDS) in those provinces. The persistence of the Communist identity in those regions may have been facilitated by the opposition between local left-wing councils and the central Christian-Democratic government. As a result, it may have been easier for the Communist Party to frame the center-periphery conflict (particularly, the northern "periphery" versus Rome) in keeping with a left-right perspective.

[20] This point applies, for instance, to the struggles in the late 1980s, in which Silvio Berlusconi's and Carlo De Benedetti's groups fought for control of Mondadori, the most important publisher in the country. Although these struggles had important political implications, the general public could hardly grasp their political relevance (Giglioli and Mazzoleni 1992).

[21] The new majoritarian electoral system was not put into effect until summer 1993.

1985 and 1992, the proportion who felt that "all parties are the same" increased from 25 percent to 50 percent, while the proportion who felt that political parties were essential for democracy declined from 74 percent to 42 percent (Mannheimer and Sani 1994:8–9). Admittedly, massive mistrust of political elites has been a constant trait of Italian society (Cartocci 1994). Yet the reduction in the early 1990s in the proportion who expressed loyalty to at least one party demonstrates the increasing deficit in representation. No political actor was thought any longer to be reliable, even as a patron of private interests. Moreover, those who rejected left-right differences were also the most strongly disillusioned with political actors in general (Martinotti and Stefanizzi 1994). Most significantly, a strong correlation has been found between electoral support for the League, mistrust of traditional politicians, and refusal to identify with the left-right scheme (Mannheimer and Sani 1994, chap. 4).

If we had treated these dimensions as individual predictors of successful action, our interpretation of the League's success would have been rather weak. The League's expansion should have been prevented, not supported, by the lack of potential reliable allies within the polity, by the absence of patterned conflicts between elites and by the limited number of institutional opportunities for interest representation offered by the polity. We can explain why this was not the case only if we accept that different types of opportunity structures exist, and that the League's populism was aligned with the general perception of politics dominant among significant sectors of Italian public opinion in that period. The League's emphasis on regional differences was wholly consistent with the decreasing salience of traditional political identities, which presupposed in contrast the existence of class or religious cleavages within the Italian population. Similarly, the League's disregard for political elites and institutions matched citizens' perceptions of the political system as a generally closed and hostile milieu, which offered no opportunities for action from within. The League's mobilization message, in other words, was consistent with a widespread antisystem master frame.

COMPETITION BETWEEN CHALLENGERS: ORGANIZATIONAL RESOURCES AND NARRATIVE FIDELITY

Regional populists, however, were not the only challengers to emerge in that context. Between 1990 and 1993, strong criticism of the old system was also expressed by small parties such as the Greens (who ran in national elections for the first time in 1987) or La Rete (who first ran in 1990). These organizations also were involved in broader coalitions of old and new parties, movement organizations, and public interest groups, which in the 1993 local elections ran under the slogan "reforming politics."

Both the Greens and La Rete shared with the League a peripheral position in the parliamentary arena. Like the League, they had been very active in fighting public corruption and promoting mobilizations against the spread of criminal groups across the country. In principle they were credible alternatives to the League. In many respects their messages also were rather similar: They, too, advocated the replacement of the old political class with new representatives, and believed in overcoming the traditional barriers between left and right. Ultimately, however, they profited far less than the League from the crisis of traditional parties. In the crucial 1992 national elections, La Rete polled 1.9 percent and the Greens polled 2.8 percent, both well below the 8.6 percent polled by the League even though they were not restricted like the League to the northern regions (Istat 1993a).

One of the causes of their failure was the lack of consistency between their messages and antisystem frames. First of all, although the goals and frames of both the Greens and La Rete were difficult to place on a traditional left-right continuum, the majority of their most prominent figures had a background of militancy in left-wing parties or movements. As a result, these leaders were not perceived as reliable sources, or "validators" (Oberschall 1993), of messages advocating the overcoming of the left-right cleavage. This situation was not helped by their frequent association, in local elections and other political events, with traditional left-wing parties such as the PDS (Biorcio

1994). Moreover, regardless of their specific alliances, neither the Greens nor La Rete were prepared to take stances as fully antipolitical as those of the League. Although they were strongly critical of the old parties, their leaders continued to emphasize the specificity of political activity and to accord it a degree of dignity. They also tended to differentiate between the responsibilities of ruling parties (especially the Christian Democrats and Socialists) and oppositional parties (especially the former Communists).

In contrast, as we have seen, the League attacked the political system as a whole. It also strongly criticized notions of political activity as patient mediation between diverging interests, and was scarcely interested in developing internal democratic procedures. Coupled with its activists' lack of involvement in the traditional political class (Diamanti 1992), these attitudes gave its frames stronger "narrative fidelity" (Snow and Benford 1988) than its competitors' in the eyes of prospective constituents with explicit antipolitical sentiments.[22]

In contrast, it is doubtful whether organizational resources mattered in this respect. Admittedly we lack conclusive evidence about the League's real strength. In November 1991, for example, Mr. Bossi claimed about 135,000 members and 300 local branches; in the following May, however, the party's newsletter, mailed to all members, reported only 50,000 copies and 132 branches (Todesco 1992:158–62). Even if the higher figure were the correct one—which I doubt—it would not suggest an organizational structure that was overwhelmingly stronger than that of the League's competitors, especially in light of the small mobilizing capacity demonstrated by most local chapters (Todesco 1992). For example, when the Federation of the Green Lists was established in 1987, it had 125 local branches, not much different from the League (Farro 1991:181).[23]

In any case, the fact that the League became the major "carrier" (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988) of antisystem sentiments cannot be causally related to the existence of a powerful organization. Even the League's use of media and its communication skills were rather poor in technical terms (Todesco 1992). The spread of its messages was not due to an efficient staff or a generous budget, but rather to "free media exposure" (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988:60). As a radically novel phenomenon, the League received increasing media attention, especially TV coverage.[24] This treatment often reflected negative evaluations of the new party. Especially in the case of public TV, however, the sources of those judgments were either full-time politicians or media professionals usually perceived as close to traditional parties. Rather than undermining public perception of the League as a credible challenger, this negative coverage reinforced it. Moreover, media of all political perspectives gave increasing attention to the very issues on which the League was focusing, thus, once again, facilitating consistency between their priorities and the overall public agenda.[25]

Resources mattered, however, in the 1994 elections, when the League faced electoral competition from the newly created party, Forza Italia.[26] In contrast to the leaders of La Rete or the Greens, Mr. Berlusconi was one of Italy's best known entrepreneurs and the

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[22] For discussions of recent developments in Italian politics see Diamanti and Mannheimer (1994), Ginsborg (1994), and Mannheimer and Sani (1994).

[23] Also, according to surveys conducted in 1992 in Lombardy, overall membership in political parties in the region exceeded 500,000, while environmental organizations had 150,000 members (Biorcio and Diani 1993).

[24] The same did not happen to the Greens or La Rete, possibly because they were closer to traditional political styles in spite of the new issues they raised.

[25] Analysis of the most influential "centre-left" daily paper in the country, *la Repubblica*, has shown for instance that editorials addressing issues of political corruption, inefficiencies in the public administration and the political system, the waste of public resources, large regional differences, and immigration-related problems increased from 22 in 1980 to 105 in 1990 (Ruzza and Schmidtke 1993).

[26] I do not consider the new role of the post-fascist Alleanza Nazionale-MSI except to point out that they were also able to put forward credible antisystem frames, having been in the opposition and, at least for the past 30 years, having had no involvement with consociational agreements, as had been the case with the Communist Party (Ignazi 1994).

chairman of a world-class soccer club; this fact made his claims to be a radical alternative to the "*partitocrazia*" ("partitocracy") highly plausible. Also, Berlusconi's emphasis on individual achievement and the virtues of entrepreneurship separated his party from both sides of the old left-right cleavage.[27] These traits made Forza Italia as credible as the League with respect to the production of antisystem frames, and a much stronger actor in organizational terms. In this case, differences in resources were a decisive factor. Although in 1994 the League obtained roughly the same share of votes as they had polled two years earlier, it lost virtually all the new votes it had gained between the national elections of 1992 and the local elections of 1993. In 1993 it reached, or exceeded, 40 percent of valid votes virtually everywhere in northern Italy (Istat 1993b; Biorcio 1994).

Thus, although resources are important for mobilizing consensus, they do not guarantee success (Tarrow 1994:150). Their ultimate effect varies according to the congruence between the challengers' specific frames and the opportunity structure. This congruence converts potential assets into effective assets (Moaddel 1992). Specifically, the effectiveness of organizational resources is increased substantially if the actors' strategies are framed so as to be consistent with the master frames, and if they characterize the opportunity structure at a given time.

CONCLUSIONS

I have focused on mobilization attempts conducted in a single period. The framework presented here may help to clarify why, in a given political period, some frames are less effective than others, although they appear just as plausible at first glance. At the same time, it enables us to capture the differences between opportunity structures at different points in time, and their effects on the likelihood of different mobilizing messages. In conclusion I provide a brief, preliminary illustration of this argument, showing how opportunities for challengers have changed in Italian politics in recent decades.

The 1980s, especially the first half of the decade, were particularly conducive to mobilization attempts framed in terms of political realignment. For example, although the Italian environmental movement failed to displace fully the left-right "materialist" cleavage, its strength was clearly greater in that period, when traditional identities had started to crumble, than in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when industrial conflict played a greater role in the new wave of social struggles. Also, the environmental groups could rely on a number of opportunities for alliances with established members of the polity. The environmentalists' overall political influence consistently increased when the political ecology organizations abandoned their antisystem orientation in the early 1980s and emphasized in their ideological statements the need to interact with political elites and to take institutional constraints into account (Diani 1995). Both changes were consistent with broader transformations of environmental collective action at the European level (Rüdig 1990; Dalton 1994). Most important, both reflected a tendency to frame political reality in a way consistent with "realignment" master frames: a crisis of traditional alignments along with perceptions of opportunities for autonomous action within the polity.

In contrast, the 1965 to 1973 cycle of protest in Italy (see Tarrow 1989a; Ginsborg 1990; and Lumley 1990 for accurate reconstructions of those years of contention) provides a good example of the dominance of inclusion frames (also emphasizing opportunities for autonomous action, but in the context of stable political identities). On a superficial level, these years might well be regarded as the most favorable period for the prevalence of antisystem orientations. This idea would be consistent with the observation that the social movements of the time often supported very radical views. Both students' movements and new, radical workers' organizations openly criticized established political actors. They also aimed at the revo-

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[27] Even later, when Berlusconi's largely right-wing views surfaced, the revitalization of the left-right conflict that he fuelled—already in late 1994—nonetheless differed radically from the previous version of the same cleavage. Above all, he introduced a far more secularized notion of the political right than that which the Christian Democrats had embodied (Ginsborg 1994:667–70).

lutionary overthrowing of the "bourgeois state" (Lumley 1990).

This was not the reaction, however, to a generally closed attitude of the political establishment toward new demands. Careful analysis of the protest wave has shown that the rise of autonomous mobilizations was encouraged by changes and innovations among traditional political actors (Tarrow 1989a). Significant sectors of the elite were willing to engage in dialogues with challenging groups; they also mobilized against attempts to increase the costs of participation by means of police repression, as became clear in the aftermath of the 1969 bombings in Milan.

Moreover, despite efforts to drastically reframe the traditional left-right opposition, and to place a new emphasis on the leading role of the working class and on social actors' autonomy in relation to old left organizations (Tarrow 1989b), the centrality of the left-right cleavage was never questioned. In that period the issue was the rule of the Christian Democrats and their allies rather than the cleavage as such. Indeed, as the cycle progressed, reform-oriented policies began to be implemented. Traditional left-wing parties and unions strengthened their links with the oppositional movements and ultimately regained their leadership over these movements (Tarrow 1989a).

This approach explains why the bearers of antisystem frames—namely the most radical new left parties and movement organizations—largely failed to establish themselves as powerful political actors in the mid-1970s, despite the favorable electoral system and the impressive amount of unconventional protest activities occurring at that time. Most of their potential constituents continued to identify with traditional alignments; they still believed that traditional left-wing organizations had a positive role in the representation process. The new left leaders often adopted frames that portrayed the old left organizations as betrayers of the working class and advocated their replacement by the new left groups (Bobbio 1990). This may have provided their core activists with strong symbolic incentives, but it ran counter to the dominant views among their prospective supporters and thus rendered frame alignment more problematic.

The years preceding 1968 were different again, in that the political system was shaped by Communist-Socialist and Catholic identities and was reluctant to offer challengers opportunities for autonomous action. In such a context, "revitalization" frames proved the most appropriate option. For example, new ideas started to spread within the Catholic Church well before the 1968 protest cycle began (Tarrow 1989a). However, obstacles to explicit contestation of the Church hierarchies encouraged concealment of attempts to innovate. At first, support for new ideas was not expressed in openly critical terms; support took the form of arguments that suggested new and different interpretations of doctrinal principles while it formally reconfirmed loyalty to these principles. Opportunities for independent, explicit action were perceived by those favoring a more socially concerned Church only later, when ideas originating from the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council became more diffuse and a fragmentation of the hierarchy began. At that point the number of independent religious communities increased, and even explicitly left-wing Catholic political organizations such as *Cristiani per il Socialismo* (Christians for Socialism) were created (Cuminetti 1983). Revitalization frames remind us that collective action often originates within institutions rather than outside and against them (Tarrow 1994).

One additional advantage of this framework, therefore, is its capacity to identify the differences between political phases, particularly those phases which were characterized by similar attitudes toward politics and the political class. As these examples suggest, harsh criticism of the establishment and of government policies was found in Italy both in the period 1968 to 1973 and in the early 1990s, but the two periods differed both in the opportunities perceived by challengers and in the impact of different mobilizing frames. Similarly, both the early 1960s and the 1980s were characterized in broad terms by a decrease of interest in politics and a greater political consensus. Once again, however, differences in the salience of traditional identities and perceptions of opportunities for autonomous action created chances for somewhat different types of frames.

Swidler (1986) has remarked that ". . . in unsettled cultural periods, explicit ideologies directly govern action, but structural opportunities for action determine which among competing ideologies survive in the long run" (p. 273). The framework described here offers us a clearer way of specifying those opportunities. It also reminds us, however, that challengers' mobilizing messages may be effective in any political structure, albeit in different guises, and that their impact need not be restricted to the effervescent, unsettled periods on which most analysts of collective action usually focus.

Mario Diani is Professor of Sociology in the Department of Government, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow. His current research focuses on environmental politics and policy, voluntary action, and network analysis of social movements. Publications in English include Studying Collective Action *(co-edited with Ron Eyerman, Sage, 1992),* Green Networks: A Structural Analysis of the Italian Environmental Movement *(Edinburgh University Press, 1995), and* Social Movements *(with Donatella della Porta, Blackwell, forthcoming).*

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