

Ethno-Regionalist Parties and Political Representation: The Case of Union Valdôtaine

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Résumé :

Cet article examine les effets de la représentation politique sur les partis ethno-régionalistes, sur les objectifs politiques qu'ils poursuivent et sur les stratégies qu'ils adoptent pour les réaliser. On analyse ici un cas d'étude spécifique, celui de l'Union Valdôtaine, parti ethno-régionaliste actif en Italie. Premièrement, cette contribution vise à décrire les modèles selon lesquels ce parti a évolué dans ses arènes politiques respectives. Deuxièmement, l'étude examine les modalités selon lesquelles l'évolution des destins électoraux et politiques du parti a affecté son organisation interne et les objectifs poursuivis dans les arènes politiques régionale, étatique et européenne. Le but est de vérifier le succès de l'UV dans la mise en œuvre d'une réorganisation territoriale de l'état dont l'objectif est d'accroître l'autonomie de la minorité linguistique représentée.

Introduction

The Aosta Valley in Northern Italy has a long tradition of political independence and administrative autonomy because of its strategic geographical position within the Alps.¹ From 1034 onwards, the province of Aosta belonged to the Dukedom of Savoy. However, it was annexed by the Italian government at the end of the nineteenth century, during the process of unification of the Kingdom of Italy. This specific development prompted the 'invention' of a more concrete notion of the *Valdôtaine* nation as a predominantly French-speaking community - at the end of the 19th century, 94.6% of the population of the Aosta Valley was French-speaking² -, which became a concentrated linguistic minority within the new unitary Italian state being constructed. The political claim for the right of self-determination and autonomy of the French-speaking community arose during the interwar years as a result of the fascist process of standardisation and Italianisation. Even though a Franco-provençal dialect (*patois*) has been widespread among the mountain population and the city elites for the last five centuries along with French, the centrality of the French language as the core identifier of this new autonomist feeling was strengthened during the Second World War (Table 1).

Table 1. Population development in the Aosta Valley (1848-2001).

Source: Région Autonome Vallée d'Aoste (1990). *Aperçu synthétique*. Aosta: Bureau de Presse de la Présidence du Gouvernement; Istat (2001). *Censimento Generale 2001*. The definition of 'immigrants' encompasses foreign citizens as well as people born in Italy but outside the Aosta Valley region.

The Union Valdôtaine (UV) was founded in 1945. Rooted in the antifascist resistance, and in particular in the autonomist movements within the antifascist army, the UV was created as a regionalist trans-party association and became a fully-fledged political party only in 1949. Over a period of twenty years, the UV established itself as the main representative for autonomist political

claims within this region. Afterwards, the party acquired a hegemonic position within the Aosta Valley's political system and has assured the external representation of the region's interests in the Italian and European parliaments in almost every legislature since 1976.

Even though linguistic surveys are quite rare in the Aosta valley region, it is important to underline that the French-speaking (and Franco-provençal-speaking) community decreased from 95% in 1900 to 59% in 1980 and 16% in 2001 (see table 9). The main factor behind this drastic change in the dimension of the two linguistic communities (the Italian and the French/Franco-provençal ones) is the transformation of the Aosta Valley societal groups from an emigration region to an immigration-driven society. Due to major economic developments and the massive financial intervention of the central state in the Aosta Valley's economic structure, the region attracted increasingly large waves of immigrants, initially from other Italian regions and since the end of the 1980s also from foreign countries. This phenomenon triggered a radical change in the linguistic composition of the Aosta valley population as well as substantial modification of the traditional electorate of the UV.

Therefore, considering that during the same period of societal changes, the main ethno-regionalist party of the region, the UV, consolidated its electoral scores as well as its internal unity and cohesion, it would be interesting to investigate to what extent the internal evolutions of the party in terms of organisation and ideology are linked with external factors such as electoral defeats or victories and political representation. The main hypothesis of this study is that the external factors and in particular the gain of political representation at different levels has an internal impact not only in terms of ideology but also on the organisational system. This impact could be very specific and produce original outcomes in the case of new, small, and ideologically distinctive parties like ethno-regionalist ones. In this perspective, one of the most relevant models developed for analysing party change is Pedersen's model of 'party lifespan'.³ Pedersen's model allows one to link the external dimension of political representation with internal organisational and ideological dimensions and is therefore most appropriate for developing the main hypothesis of this study. Ethno-regionalist parties are in most cases new parties, sometimes even protest or extremist ones, which somehow have to adapt when gaining good electoral scores. Many scholars have researched the factors determining the electoral success of ethno-regionalist parties;⁴ what remains less clear is what happens to these parties when they enter on permanent basis the government or the parliament. To what extent do ethnoregionalist parties' goals and organisation change as they move from protest movements to representative and governmental institutions?

In fact, Pedersen's model postulates that as a party develops its electoral strength it goes through five critical junctures. The thresholds defined by the model are the threshold of declaration, the threshold of authorisation, the threshold of representation, the threshold of relevance and the threshold of governance. Passing the threshold of relevance implies that the party affects the existing patterns of party competition, because the party impacts on government policy outputs or on government formation. Sartori⁵ defines a party as relevant either when it has 'coalition potential', i.e. when it is considered as a possible governing coalition partner, or 'blackmail potential', i.e. when it obliges other political parties to respond to its existence.

In this article I shall give a descriptive account of the UV's lifespan from 1945 to 2006 and I shall try to analyse the factors that have led to this specific lifespan pattern. Furthermore, I shall try to examine the consequences of the evolutions in the party electoral fortunes in terms of internal organisation and political goals.

1. The lifespan of the Union Valdôtaine

1.1 The thresholds of declaration and of authorisation

The UV was founded on 13th September 1945, with the legal permission of the allied governments. The UV was created mainly by members of the Italian mainstream parties: the *Democrazia Cristiana* (DC-Christian Democrats) and the *Partito Socialista Italiano* (PSI-Socialist Party). In fact, the UV was created as an inter-party cultural and political association that admitted members ‘without distinction of political ideology’ (art. 2, UV Statute of 1945). The party established permanent organisational structures and mobilised actors within the regional and state-level political arenas in order to influence the political debate among mainstream Italian parties on the design of the new autonomous regional institutions.

However, it would be a further three years before the UV declared its intention to participate in elections. This is due to the fact that the UV was initially constituted as a non-party association and that the association did not at the time have the necessary personnel and financial resources to take part directly in the electoral competition. Instead, the UV supported independent lists that competed in the local elections of 1946 and that gained exceptionally good results. A new Special Autonomy Statute was adopted by the Italian parliament in 1948, thus increasing the scope of the exclusive competences of the Aosta Valley Region and finally guaranteeing its bilingualism by law. Nevertheless, the Special Statute needed many specific implementation laws in order to make the autonomy provisions effective. The nation-wide Italian parties seemed unable to defend these needs as strongly as the UV – or uninterested in doing so. Moreover, the good results achieved in the local elections in 1946 showed that the electorate was ready to support a new autonomist party aiming to represent the specific interests of the Aosta Valley people. Thus, in 1949 the UV changed its statutes (art. 2) to become an independent political party and announced its decision to participate in the regional electoral competition.

1.2 The threshold of representation

The UV passed the threshold of representation at the regional level in 1949. With a majoritarian uninominal regional electoral system having been approved by the Italian parliament in January 1949,⁶ the UV’s list gained the majority of the votes and obtained 28 seats out of 35 in the Aosta Valley’s regional assembly. Since then, and in spite of fluctuating electoral performances, the UV has never lost its representation within the regional assembly (see Table 3). The UV achieved very good results during the 1950s and the early 1960s (see Table 2 and Figure 1). The UV reaped the benefits of this first-past-the-post system based on a single constituency whose boundaries overlapped with the territorial distribution of the region’s French-speaking community.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, the UV’s electoral results declined and were the lowest in its history (see Table 2). One factor explaining this electoral decline was the change in the electoral system to one of proportional representation in 1963.⁷ This had the effect of forcing the party to count only on its own electorate forces, because the UV could rely no longer on the votes allocated to the other parties of the electoral alliances formed with State-wide parties under the majority electoral system (mainly DC, communists and socialists). The Aosta Valley region obtained the competence to define its electoral system autonomously in 1989 and chose to maintain the PR system previously adopted in 1963.⁸ The UV’s electoral performance was also affected,

however, by the creation of new political parties that campaigned directly for the regionalist vote. Rival autonomist parties were established when internal factions within the UV split to create the *Rassemblement Valdôtain* (RV) in 1966, and later the *Union Valdôtaine Progressiste* (UVP) in 1971. The UV also faced increasing competition from the regionalist wing of the state-wide Christian Democrats (DC). The regionalist faction of the DC split in 1970 to establish a new party, namely the *Democratici Popolari* (DP).

After a period of adaptation and transition, the UV began to increase its electoral share from the late 1970s onwards. The UV regained control over the minority nationalist political space in 1976, with the break-away groups being re-incorporated into the party. Since then, the regional electoral results of the UV have followed an almost constant growth trajectory, which has seen the party increase its vote share by an impressive 36% in thirty years. Over the last thirty years, therefore, the UV has been an extremely successful party at regional level; whilst the party came close to securing an absolute majority of votes and seats within the regional parliament several times during this period, this was finally achieved in 2003.

Table 2. Electoral performance of the UV (in % of Aosta Valley vote).

Source: Compiled from data from the Aosta Valley Regional Council (2006).

Table 3. Members of the Regional Parliament divided by legislature and by party (1949-2006, number of seats over 35).

Source: Compiled from data from the Aosta Valley Regional Council (2006) and from the Presidency of the Regional Council of the Aosta Valley (quoted in Gillo, 1996). Notes: 1: *The local PCI became the PDS in 1990 following the reform of the national party*; 2: *The DP became ADP in 1984 following the integration of a part of the UVP. Fédération Autonomiste (FA) was founded in 1996 by a faction of ADP*; 3: *NSVA: Nuova Sinistra Valle d'Aosta; LA : L'Arcobaleno. 'Other Reg.': other regionalist parties (RV, UVP, FA). 'Right': MSI-AN (Movimento Sociale Italiano-Alleanza Nazionale), FI (Forza Italia), LN (Lega Nord), CdL (Casa delle Libertà).*

Figure 1. Electoral performance of UV (in % of Aosta Valley vote).

Source: Compiled from data from the Aosta Valley Regional Council (2006).

At state level, the UV only began competing in elections to the Italian Parliament in 1958. Since then, the UV has gained at least one of the two seats reserved for the Aosta Valley constituency on the basis of the Special Statute (art. 47). In fact, the Special Statute and the Italian Constitution (art. 57) guarantee the Aosta Valley population, in terms of political representation, one representative in the Italian Chamber of Deputies and one Senator in every election, by defining the Valley as a single member constituency. The results in state-level electoral competitions have generally been good, with the party regularly polling at least 30% of the votes (see Table 4 below). This is mainly due to the fact that the electoral system of the Aosta Valley for state-level elections has always been a pure uninominal majority system with a single ballot.⁹ This territorially concentrated party benefited from the majority system because of the small size and the shape of the single constituency, defined to follow the territorial distribution of the French-speaking community. Being the party that claimed to defend the interests of this linguistic minority, the UV easily gained the majority of the votes within the constituency and accessed political representation in the state assembly. The state-level electoral formula for the Aosta Valley's constituency has not changed substantially since 1948, adding a trend of stability to the regional political system.

Table 4. Parliamentary elections 1948-2006: Aosta Valley Members of Italian Parliament.

Source: Compiled from data from the Aosta Valley Regional Council (2006). Note: C= Aosta Valley Representative in the *Chamber* of Deputies; S= Aosta Valley Representative in the *Senate*.

Nevertheless, at state level it is not possible to identify a pattern of electoral growth during the last thirty years similar to the one described at regional level. The results have been rather fluctuating, even if generally high, ranging from a minimum of 32% to a maximum of 55% (see Table 2 above). Thus, the UV's results show strong variations among regional and state-level elections and its electorate changes according to the type of election. If one looks at Figure 1 one may see that, even though the UV's higher results in state elections are probably linked to the functioning of the FPTP system, the electoral trends at state level do not correspond to those at regional level.¹⁰

At European level, the UV has dominated electoral competition for the European Parliament since the first direct elections held in 1979. The UV has always polled over 30% of all votes cast in the Aosta Valley. However, due to the inclusion of the Aosta Valley region in a bigger electoral constituency (North-Western Italy),¹¹ the UV's list has never reached the threshold of 50,000 votes necessary to gain a seat in the EU Parliament on its own. In 1999, the UV's candidate Luciano Caveri, because of his personal political link with the centre-left list's leader Romano Prodi, decided to run in the European electoral competition with this centre-left list called '*I Democratici*' and entered the European Parliament in 2000 as a substitute for one of the resigning MEPs of PDS (Democratic Party of the Left). This gave the UV, and the Aosta Valley, its first and only political representation at European level.

The UV's strong electoral performance in elections at all three territorial levels results from the transformation of the regional party system. When the competitiveness of the party system is examined, one can see that, from 1945 to the late 1960s, the Aosta Valley political system was rather competitive: the distance between the two main parties in terms of votes was in average 7.7% during the 1950s and remained lower than 10% during the 1960s and 1970s.¹² This fact shows that the slightly fluctuating electoral results of the UV during this period were also the consequence of its nature as a new party entering the electoral competition. The more recent elections, from 1990 to 2006, show a very different pattern (see Table 5). The party competitiveness of the Aosta Valley political system is now among the lowest in Italy. Since the 1990s, the distance between the two main parties has increased from 8.5 to 22.7% and the UV has always been the party with the higher electoral result during this period. This fact suggests that the UV has become a dominant party within the regional political system.

Moreover, the analysis of data concerning the effective number of parties (ENP) shows that until 1990 the regional party system was characterised by a high number of actors competing in the electoral contest, well above the state-level average. This was a consequence of the presence of a few regionalist parties in addition to the state-wide parties. From 1995 to 2000, the ENP of the Aosta Valley declined by almost three points, a trend which is the reverse of the one seen at the state level. The transformations that occurred in the Italian party system during the 1990s and the dissolution of the DC strengthened the relative weight of the UV, positively affecting its electoral performance. In addition, even if the Aosta Valley party system has never been completely separate from the Italian one because of the constant presence of state-wide parties, the regional voting is very specific. The UV is present only in this particular constituency and historically focussed its action in winning regional elections. We may see that the distinctiveness of regional voting has always been the highest in Italy and has increased over the years (from 38% in 1983 to 69.5% in 1998).¹³

Table 5. Competitiveness and effective number of parties in Italian regions.

Source: TRONCONI (F.), 'Party Systems and Party Competition in European Regions: A Comparative Exploration', *ECPR Joint Session of Workshops*, Grenada, 14-19th April 2005.

1.3 The threshold of relevance

On the regional political level, the threshold of relevance was crossed by the UV immediately after its foundation. The UV forced other parties to respond to its claims when it indirectly entered¹⁴ the first temporary regional government set up by the Italian Prime Minister in 1946. Moreover, the UV strongly influenced the results of local and state-level elections in 1946 and 1948 by supporting independent lists. In this sense, the UV passed the threshold of relevance before it passed the thresholds of declaration, authorisation and representation.

After competing directly in the 1949 regional elections, the source of the UV's relevance changed: it participated in the formation of the first elected government, obtaining not only 3 regional ministers out of 7 but also the presidency of the 'Giunta'. From 1954 to 1959, the party's vote share declined, and the UV was confined to an opposition role. Nonetheless, the party, even when not in government (from 1966 to 1974), has always been considered as a possible coalition partner because it had governed before and because it allied both with left parties and with the DC - both in terms of electoral alliances and governing alliances. In fact, during this period the UV formed several parliamentary and governing alliances¹⁵ with the DC (in 1949 and 1975) but also with communists and socialists (in 1954, 1959 and 1963) and was therefore considered as willing to make electoral alliances with both these parties according to contingent electoral strategies, thus playing a pivotal role in the coalition formation process.

At state level, the UV's minimal numerical presence in the Italian parliament (a maximum of two members of the parliament out of 945 elected members) never allowed the party to acquire coalition potential. Regarding policy relevance on the state level, the role of the UV has undoubtedly been marginal given its small electoral strength within the national party system (around 0.1% of the Italian votes), but not insignificant. The UV managed to work with other mainstream parties, rather than other ethno-regionalist parties representing other linguistic minorities (like for example the Südtiroler Volkspartei representing the German-speaking minority in South Tyrol), to push for regionalist issues. The Union has tended to collaborate more often with traditional parties, especially with the Socialists and the Communists during the 1970s and the 1980s, to obtain the legislative implementation of the financial autonomy of the Aosta Valley region. The political relationship between the UV's MP Luciano Caveri (Italian Deputy from 1987 to 2001) and the PC-PDS leadership during the last 15 years has strengthened the policy impact capacity of the UV at state level. Nevertheless, this special relationship at state level between the UV and the centre-left electoral and parliamentary cartel was severely weakened after 2001, when the UV's MPs entered the linguistic minorities' parliamentary group.

1.4 The threshold of governance

With the exception of the 1954-1959 legislature and of the period between 1966 and 1974, the UV has always participated in the formation of governments at the regional level (see Table 6 and Table 7 below). Even though the UV has never formed a single party government, it has been the largest coalition partner in the majority of the 25 regional governmental coalitions ('Giunte') that

were in power until 2007. After moving from a protest position directly to government in 1949, the Union moved backwards over this threshold during the 1960s and the early 1970s, being excluded from executive formation seven times in twenty years. The threshold of governance is the only critical juncture that has been crossed backwards by the party at regional level. In the last seven cabinets, the number of portfolios allocated to the UV has grown rapidly and since 1993 the party has nominated 7 regional ministers out of 8 (Table 6). In the last fifteen years, the party has obtained 80% of government portfolios and all the presidency posts (Table 7). The regional government has begun to be considered as being one with the party; the UV has also succeeded in penetrating the regional and local public administration, thus developing some traditional 'cartelisation' mechanisms.¹⁶

Table 6. Composition of the Aosta Valley Regional Government (1949-1983)

Composition of the Aosta Valley Regional Government (1983-2006)

Source: Compiled from data from the Aosta Valley Regional Council (2006). Note: In parentheses, the number of regional ministers from the UV out of the total number of regional cabinet members. *UV*: Union Valdôtaine; *DC*: Democrazia Cristiana; *RV*: Ressement Valdôtain; *UVP*: Union Valdôtaine Progressiste; *MAV*: Mouvement Autonomiste Valdôtain; *DP*: Democratici Popolari; *DPUVP*: Fédération DP-UVP; *ADP*: Autonomisti Democratici Progressisti; *PCI*: Partito Comunista Italiano; *PCI/PDS*: Partito Comunista Italiano/ Partito dei Democratici di Sinistra; *DS(GV)*: Democratici di Sinistra (Gauche Valdôtaine); *PSI*: Partito Socialista Italiano; *PSDI*: Partito Socialista Democratico Italiano; *PRI*: Partito Repubblicano Italiano; *PLI*: Partito Liberale Italiano; *PSU*: Partito Socialista Unificato; *FA*: Fédération Autonomiste-Federazione Autonomista, *Ligue*: Raggruppamento Indipendente Valdostano et Campagnards Valdôtains. *External support of the UV to the regional government.

Table 7. Members and Presidents of the Regional Government divided by party (percentage, 1946-1993)

Members and Presidents of the Regional Government divided by party (percentage, 1993-2006)

Source: Compiled from data from the Aosta Valley Regional Council (2006).

At state level, the UV's minimal numerical presence in the Italian parliament (one MP and one Senator at best, as said above) never allowed the party to be considered as relevant for the formation of the Italian government. Nevertheless, the party always tried to exploit its marginal position in the Italian parliament in order to cross the threshold of governance. This was achieved only once, when the UV's vote was decisive for securing the vote of confidence in, and the parliamentary majority of, the D'Alema II government in 1999. From December 1999 to June 2000, the regional representative to the chamber, Luciano Caveri, became the first and sole Aosta Valley member of the Italian government ever, after being nominated State Secretary for the Presidency of the Council.

2. Changes in party organisation

The UV organised five party congresses between 1946 and 1947 (*assemblées du peuple valdôtain*), with the participation of about 2500 grass-roots members per congress coming from the first local branches created during the previous year. The aim of these congresses was to define the first political programme of the party and to reach a social consensus on the autonomy issues. The grass-roots members and sections of the party played a major role in building the first organisational

structures and in defining the main political goals.

During the subsequent two decades (1950-1970), in contrast, wider transformations were realised within the party, resulting in a clear shift of power away from the grass-roots members of the party to the party in public office. On one hand, the UV was progressively endowed with even simpler central direction structures – the main political decisions were taken directly by the president of the party, who, at the time, was also the president of the region, and were implemented by the central direction with hardly any consultation of the general assembly of the members. Until 1950, the distinction between the ‘legislative’ and the ‘executive’ branches of the party’s central direction was absent.¹⁷ The party gravitated around the charismatic figure of its first chairman, Séverin Caveri, who held the presidency from 1946 to 1973. Some scholars have applied to the UV’s initial organisational typology the concept of ‘liberal pre-fascist’ organisation,¹⁸ because the organisational structure of the UV reminded one of the form of the liberal Italian parties of the nineteenth century, which had weak extra-parliamentary structures, strong leadership and narrow assembly organs. This centralised, hierarchical organisation with a minor role for party militants, typical of the cadre or ‘caucus’ party, persisted over time.

On the other hand, since the 1950s the UV had been affected by some important but informal and practical transformations. The consolidated cadre-party internal structure was radicalised and the party in public office progressively strengthened its position. By the end of the 1960s, almost all the members of the party’s executive organs also held political mandates and therefore the party was dominated by the party in public office. This development was the direct result of the passing of the threshold of representation at the regional level: the UV chose to concentrate the decision-making power in the hands of its president and its regional representatives in order to consolidate the fluctuating electoral results of the party during the 1960-1970 period. The regional parliamentary group designed the party agenda and for several years the party chairman and the regional Prime Minister were the same person, Séverin Caveri.

From 1949 to 1976, the weight of MPs and regional government members within the party council (*Comité Central*) and the executive committee (*Comité Exécutif*) was overwhelming¹⁹ and the power of designing the party agenda and take final decisions was monopolised by the party in public office through informal rules and procedures.²⁰ Although this cadre party organisational structure, with weak extra-parliamentary organisation, low membership and hierarchical decision-making,²¹ probably eased the UV’s smooth adaptation to political representation, it infringed heavily on the internal democracy and proved to be unable to contain internal fights and party ruptures. These tensions occurred principally during the period of electoral instability in the late 1960s. They were linked, on one hand, to the vote-seeking strategy of the party, and were prompted by a lack of agreement with regard to the best electoral strategy to be adopted in an attempt to recuperate the party’s electoral appeal. On the other hand, they also reflected protests by some groups of the party elite against the authoritarian management of the UV’s president Séverin Caveri.

These tensions were an effective challenge to the UV’s party organisation, since they prompted the main wave of internal organisational reforms implemented by the UV. The party’s statutes were reformed for the first time in 1974, when the incompatibility between the chair of party president and the posts of regional cabinet president, of regional minister and of state-level MP was introduced. In 1976, at the time of the re-incorporation of three regionalist movements into the UV, further changes saw the party’s assembly, the *Congrès National* meeting every five years, being designated as the highest organ and constitutive power of the party, gaining the formal

power to decide the party's political programme and to elect the president. Relations with local branches and civil society were also improved and their decision-making responsibilities increased. The most important change was the introduction of detailed electoral regulations for the selection of political personnel. As a result of these organisational reforms, the UV became a considerably more complex political party that increasingly resembled a traditional mass party. Nevertheless, the party in public office and the figure of the party president remained important features of the UV's organisational structure after these reforms, even though the reforms represented a significant change from a personalised organisation to more modern structures.

A last wave of organisational reform was implemented in 1996-1997. These were not the direct result of crossing any threshold, but were a consequence of a period of political scandals linked to the UV's intelligentsia that caused a strong internal crisis within the party. The charismatic 'Unionist' president of the Aosta Valley regional government, Auguste Rollandin, was then involved in two major legal scandals for bribery in 1991 and declared guilty by the regional section of the First Instance Court in 1992. The scandal caused strong reactions of disillusionment with, and contestation of, the centralised mode of leadership chosen by the party, among the rank-and-file members as well as among the party elites. Local branches requested the creation of a system of balance of power between the party in central office,²² i.e. the central bodies of the party, and the party in public office, i.e. the elected members of the party, whose role in the decision-making process was predominant. In the 1997 statute reform, the total incompatibility between the mandates of regional government president, of regional minister, of regional and state level MP was extended to all the components of the executive organ of the party. The UV's regional representatives and the mayor of Aosta were banned from membership of the executive committee, now called *Comité Fédéral*. They could participate in the party's 'legislative branch', the *Conseil Fédéral*, but not in the executive body. The 1997 reforms constituted a first attempt to re-equilibrate the power of the party in public office within the UV's organisational structure.

If one looks at membership and leadership figures, one sees that the pattern of the UV's organisation as a leader-dominated party has been reinforced by the limited dimensions of the groups of militant and passive members. Although membership increased from 1977 to 1990, the number of members as a proportion of the electorate (M/E) has been generally low compared to other European ethno-regionalist parties (Table 8). The data concerning the UV's membership are available only after 1977 and after showing a peak at the end of the 1990s (about 4,200 members in absolute terms), the number of members slowly decreased by approximately 1,500 between 1990 and 2005. The UV's membership increased from about 7% of the UV's electorate in 1988 to 12% in 2005, but this fact was mainly due to the party's growing electoral strength. However, the party leadership has been relatively stable over time: the first president led the party for more than thirty years and two other for nine and twelve years respectively.²³ Therefore, the personal charisma of the chairman has always been fundamental in the party's organisation.

Table 8. UV membership in absolute and relative terms (membership rate, 1977-2005)

Source: UV Archives and Aosta Valley Regional Council (2006).

On the basis of these membership data, we may conclude that the process of party reform and modernisation implemented during the 1970s and the 1990s was sound, but not ambitious enough to transform the very nature of the UV's organisation completely. The party did not have a highly 'mobilisable' membership and the overall size of the party was well under the average of other

European ethno-regionalist parties.²⁴ The UV's internal organisation essentially remained that of a elite-centered and hierarchical cadre party, in which the party in public office, i.e the elected members of the party, keeps control over the party's agenda and in which the extra-parliamentary organisation is rather underdeveloped.

3. The shifts in ideology and party goals: from traditionalism to ethno-regionalism

When the UV was founded in 1945, it was constituted as a national collective movement in which the pro-autonomy wings of the mainstream state-wide parties worked together in order to achieve the main goal of gaining political autonomy. The movement's ideology was strongly linked, in its first years, with the values of catholic anti-modern traditionalism. The UV represented the people of the Aosta Valley, which was seen as one cohesive entity formed by the two linguistic minorities and the few immigrants coming mainly from Northern Italy, but who were generally well integrated into the local community. The references to culture and identity were linked to a set of traditional values founded on the French language and on social conservatism. The '*ancien régime*' social model was combined with the themes of territorial identity and the championing of pre-industrial economic models. It was only later, in the 1960s and 1970s, that a more ethnic dimension would be added to this discourse, which defined the people of the Aosta Valley as a distinct ethnic group. Having started its political career at the margins of the party system, the Union was a policy-seeking party during the first years of its presence in the regional political system, from 1946 to 1949. It did not enter the electoral competition directly, but the party worked alongside state-wide parties in order to represent the interests of the local linguistic minority.

After deciding to enter the electoral competition directly at the regional level in 1949, the UV's goal changed from policy-seeking to vote-seeking. In order to meet this objective, the UV understood the need for clearly differentiating itself from the traditional parties; the party thus undertook to situate itself more clearly on the centre-periphery cleavage, whilst the latter continued to be predominantly defined in terms of their position on the traditional left-right ideological axis. The UV modified its territorial demands and, whilst the party's aim had always been the achievement of autonomy and the protection of bilingualism, the party isolated its irredentist and pro-annexationist factions. Thus, whilst initially policy influence from outside political institutions was the UV's priority, the decision to compete in elections at different territorial levels increased the importance of vote-seeking in order to exercise policy influence within regional and state-level democratic institutions.

Having achieved political representation at all three territorial levels - regional (1949), state (1958), and European (2000) - the party further adapted its political goals to its new status. At State and European level the party continued to aim principally at obtaining electoral success, because its relative weight within the State and European political arenas was almost insignificant and the UV hardly possessed the negotiating power necessary to influence policy outcomes. At the regional level, in contrast, the UV in 1949 very rapidly moved from opposition to potential and actual government partner within the regional political arena, thus becoming a new governing party. With the goal of office incumbency having been achieved, the UV had a major role in shaping policy-making within the regional assembly. These goals were periodically re-assessed as a result of the UV's fluctuating electoral fortunes in the subsequent twenty-year period; when the UV did not take part (potentially or actively) in the formation of the regional government between 1954 and 1974, vote-seeking became once again a priority, as a means to re-enter government office and

re-gain control over the policy agenda.

After having been the senior coalition partner in the 1949-54 and 1959-66 regional cabinets, the UV suffered a series of electoral defeats at the regional and state levels. The creation of the DP in 1970 placed new pressure on the UV to re-examine its political programme. The DP proposed a political project that conceptualised the Aosta Valley as a society without any ethnic or linguistic distinctions - insisting in its political and electoral programmes on the concept of territorial specificity and distinctiveness rather than on the concept of ethnic distinctiveness, but claiming with equal force the need for wider autonomy for the Aosta Valley. This diverged from the UV's programme of defending the linguistic minority's interests through autonomist claims. The UV's response was to redefine its ideology and political demands in order to restore internal order and recover its power position within the regional political system. As such, the UV began to adapt to power, modifying its ideology as a result of being or having been in government or of having achieved parliamentary representation, only after having lost it, as a direct consequence of electoral defeats and the crossing back over the threshold of governance (when excluded from regional government formation between 1966 and 1974). The UV reacted to the DP's competition in the regionalist arena with the radicalisation of its own ideology.

Between 1966 and the reunification congress in 1976, the UV defined a new political programme that was elaborated in the subsequent thirty years. The shifts in party ideology and in party goals proceeded in a parallel way. The new paradigm was based on three constitutive elements: the Aosta Valley's historical and cultural *particularisme*, federalist theories, and the construction of a separate ethnic identity for the region.²⁵ The UV's elites attempted to reconstruct the autonomist identity of the Aosta Valley through the centuries and generated a burgeoning literature that interpreted the history and the traditions of the region instrumentally.²⁶ In fact, there were new attempts to re-assert the distinctiveness and uniqueness of the regional culture and language, in such a way that they contradicted the DP's territorial and non-ethnic claims. According to this literature, the Aosta Valley people had since the Middle Ages constituted a specific linguistic and cultural community different from the Italian-speaking ones living in the nearby Piedmont and Lombardy regions.²⁷ Federalist theories - especially those associated with the figure of Emile Chanoux, a federalist intellectual killed by the fascists in 1944 - inspired the UV to formally commit itself to 'global federalism' in its 1976 party congress. With the launching of a process of regionalisation in Italy in 1970, the UV demanded a federal structure for the Italian Republic. In subsequent debates on the constitutional organisation of the Italian state, the UV continued to demand the transformation of Italy into a federal state.²⁸

Moreover, the concept of ethnicity became the main feature of the UV's political programme in later years: the autonomist tradition of the region was thus linked to the existence of a specific ethnic group and not only to that of a linguistic minority.²⁹ The concept of the Aosta Valley's native 'people' was also further developed during this period, as was the theme of an external threat to this regional identity from the centralistic Italian government, unaware of or uninterested in the Aosta Valley's specificity. This process of ideological change was also explicitly linked to the party's electoral goals, namely the 'reconquista' of regional power and the achievement of the absolute majority at the regional elections in the long run, in order to become the '*maîtres chez nous*'.³⁰

This process of ideological re-positioning did not generate tensions between vote-seeking and the dilution of core party values. On the contrary, the UV's programmatic changes served to strengthen its electoral position, and the party rapidly re-gained access to regional government and stabilised

its political representation at regional and state levels from the late 1970s onwards. Upon first consideration, this is surprising not least because, during the last 50 years, Italian immigration to the Aosta Valley has increased enormously, and has significantly transformed the linguistic make-up of the region (see Table 1 and Table 9). The UV's re-assertion of the historical, linguistic and ethnic particularity of the Aosta Valley thus coincided with a trend whereby the traditional elements of regional identity began to lose their actual weight.³¹

Table 9. Population development in Aosta Valley according to linguistic groups (%)

Source: Région Autonome Vallée d'Aoste (1990). *Aperçu synthétique*. Aosta : Bureau de Presse de la Présidence du Gouvernement and Fondation Emile Chanoux (2001). *Une Vallée d'Aoste bilingue dans une Europe plurilingue*. Aosta: Tipografia Valdostana. Note: 1. Almost all of the French-speaking people also speak the Franco-Provençal dialect. The two groups in fact overlap. This is the reason why the total of the row for 1980 is more than 100%.

There are several reasons why the UV has succeeded in reconciling its ethnic-linguistic nationalism with an increasingly ethnically and linguistically heterogeneous regional community in the Aosta Valley. Firstly, the party declared itself willing to embrace Italians from other regions who shared the same political objectives and values. This 'strategy of inclusion' aimed to garner electoral support from inhabitants of the Aosta Valley regardless of their ethnic origins. At the same time, however, the UV actively promoted a nationalist discourse that focused on the ethnic community, the language, the history and the geography of the region, and adopted a simpler and more folkloristic rhetoric that could be more easily shared by people belonging to different ethnic and linguistic groups. The party supported the creation of specific bodies for the defence of regional ethnic identity (*Comité des Traditions*), introduced the teaching of regional history and civic culture into primary and secondary schools, and promoted French language teaching through civil service institutions (i.e. by creating specific regional agencies for the formation and evaluation of French language teachers as well as for the development of the use of French and Franco-Provençal by the population and especially the children).

Secondly, the UV claimed to be the representative of the interests of the Aosta Valley people against the external threat posed by the central state to regional autonomy. Many Italian immigrants accepted the UV's political programme because they benefited from the policy outcomes implemented at regional level by the Union Valdôtaine.³² The political autonomy of the Aosta Valley guaranteed the economic and social wealth of the region, especially after the enormous increase in the financial revenues, especially in 1981, and the UV was the only party whose political action was specifically and formally aimed at achieving this goal.

Thirdly, the UV has managed to deliver these policy outputs because it has been very successful in consolidating its electoral dominance within the region. For example, the UV has joined different electoral coalitions at the local level, and at regional and national level the party has cooperated further with state-wide parties (mainly left-wing ones) in order to maintain control over the regional political system.³³ The UV has also penetrated the vast majority of political, economic and social bodies within the region. The 'cartelisation' of the party has enhanced the UV's ability to cultivate a stable electoral constituency. Since the 1980s, for example, the regionalist trade union Syndicat Autonome Valdôtain des Travailleurs (SAVT) has played an important role in political recruitment for the UV and the mobilisation of the party's electoral base. In sum, the UV successfully expanded its electoral support outside the French-speaking minority, and has contributed to the foundation of a civic sentiment of belonging to the regional community based on the shared acceptance by all parties of the principles of autonomy and of the importance of the Aosta Valley's Special Statute.³⁴

Conclusions: the UV as a dominant minority nationalist party

The pattern of the UV's lifespan has been very peculiar. The Union Valdôtaine is a relatively new party, founded almost a century after the creation of traditional Italian parties during the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, in the perspective of the evolution of the party during its lifespan, it can be described as an extremely successful party. The UV's policy goals were implemented during the first twenty years of its presence in the Aosta Valley political system, and the realisation of the new set of further autonomy goals designed by the party programmes at the end of the 1970s is on its way. All the classical party lifespan critical junctures at regional, state and European levels were crossed in a relatively short period of time, and in most cases they never have been crossed back (the UV, for example, never lost representation in the regional parliament and very rarely lost representation in the national one). In terms of vote seeking, after its fluctuating results during the 1960s and the 1970s, the party became a market leader at regional level and consolidated its monopoly over the outward representation in the Italian parliament during the 1980s. The electoral success and consequent dominant position of the party at regional level remains solid today. The party has been very successful in terms of office seeking as well: the UV led the last six regional cabinets and has dominated government formation processes since 1974. Therefore, the UV can be described as a dominant minority nationalist party, given its hegemonic position within the Aosta Valley.

The UV's lifespan prompted the party to adapt its organisational structures and party goals at different junctures in its evolution. Thus, for example, whilst crossing the threshold of representation led to the dominance of the party by the party in public office (i.e. the elected members of the UV), subsequent electoral decline during the 1960s and 1970s prompted attempts at democratising the UV's internal organisation. In essence, however, the UV retains many of the features of a cadre party - weak extra-parliamentary structures, dominant party leadership and narrow assembly organs. These adjustments to power when out of power (when losing parliamentary representation at national level or when excluded from regional government), plus the development of deep roots in society and its appeal to immigrants, have been the most important factors in securing that the UV has succeeded in retaining its hegemonic position within the Aosta Valley, despite its key territorial demands having been achieved very early on in its lifetime.

Notes

¹ A modified version of this article is to be published as a chapter in ELIAS (A.) and TRONCONI (F.), *Minority Nationalist Parties and the Challenges of Political Representation: A Framework of Analysis*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press (forthcoming, 2009).

² WOOLF (S.), *Storia d'Italia, Le Regioni dall'Unità ad oggi, La Valle d'Aosta*, Torino, Einaudi, 1996, p. 32.

³ PEDERSEN (M.), 'Towards a New Typology of Party Life-spans and Minor Parties', *Scandinavian Political Studies*, vol. 5, n° 1, 1982, p. 1-16.

⁴ TRONCONI (F.), *I partiti etnoregionalisti. La politica dell'identità territoriale in Europa Occidentale*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2009; MONTABES PEREIRA (J.), ORTEGA VILLODRES (C.) and PEREZ NIETO (E.), 'Sistemi elettorali e voto ai partiti regionalisti in Europa Occidentale', *Quaderni dell'Osservatorio Elettorale*, n° 51, 2004, p. 53-80.

⁵ SARTORI (G.), *Parties and Party Systems. A Framework for Analysis*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1976, p. 123.

6 President of the Republic's Act, 8th January 1949, n° 2.

7 National Law, 5th August 1962, n° 1257.

8 Constitutional Law n° 3/1989 and Regional Law n° 3/1993.

9 The N.L. 5th February 1948 n° 26 defined the specific rules for the Aosta Valley constituency, while for the rest of the state a pure proportional representation system was adopted. The national system was transformed into a mixed majority electoral system with proportional corrections in 1993, but the Aosta Valley region kept a pure majority system with a uninominal constituency, even after the 2005 new electoral reform.

10 The curve drawn on the basis of regional electoral results for the period 1948-2006 is 'V' shaped, while the curve drawn on the basis of state electoral results for the same period is 'M' shaped, converging only in 1973-1978 drastic electoral drops both at state and regional levels.

11 National Law, 24th January 1979, n° 18.

12 TRONCONI (F.), 'Party Systems and Party Competition in European Regions: A Comparative Exploration', *ECPR Joint Session of Workshops*, Grenada, 14-19th April 2005.

13 *Ibidem*.

14 The UV's regional MPs were at the same time members of other mainstream parties and were nominated on the basis of their affiliation to the latter.

15 The parliamentary alliances within the Aosta valley regional assembly correspond to the governing alliances within the regional government, with the two exceptions of the UV's external support to the DP-socialist government (1970-1973) and of the DC's external support to the UV-PSI government (1974-1975).

16 MARTIAL (E.), 'Un dopoguerra lungo cinquant'anni', in WOOLF (S.), *op. cit.*, p. 775-843; CURTAZ (C.), *Accanto al potere. Sette anni e mezzo a Palazzo regionale*, Aosta, Tipografia La Vallée, 2006.

17 BOIARDI (F.) et DI CAPUA (G.), *Grande Enciclopedia della Politica. L'Union Valdôtaine*, Roma, Ebe Edizioni, 1994, p. 160.

18 Martial, (E.), *op. cit.*, p. 833.

19 PROMENT (E.), *Une vie pour l'idéal. Vie de l'Union Valdôtaine*, Aosta, DUC, 1996, p. 64 and 90.

20 MARTIAL (E.), *op. cit.*, p. 823.

21 DUVERGER (M.), *Les partis politiques*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1951; WOLINETZ (S.), 'Beyond the Catch-all Party: Approaches to the study of parties and party organisations in contemporary democracies', in GUNTHER (R.), MONTERO (R.) and LINZ (J.)(eds), *Political Parties: Old Concepts and new Challenges*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 136-165.

22 KATZ (R.S.) and MAIR (P.), 'The evolution of party organizations in Europe: the three faces of party organization', *American Review of Politics*, n° 14, 1993, p. 593-617.

23 Séverin Caveri (1946-1973); Mario Androne (1974-1975); Joseph-César Perrin (1975-1984); Alexis Bétemps (1984-1997); Charles Perrin (1997-1998); Auguste Rollandin (1998-2001); Aurelio Marguerettaz (2001-2003); Manuela Zublena (2003-2006); Guy Césal (2006-2008), Ego Perron (2009).

24 DE WINTER (L.), GOMEZ-REINO (M.) et LYNCH (P.), *Autonomist parties in Europe: identity politics and the revival of the territorial cleavage*, Barcelona, ICPS, 2006.

25 SALVADORI (B.), *Pourquoi être autonomiste*, Aosta, Musumeci Editore, 1968.

26 COLLIARD (L.), *Précis d'histoire valdôtaine*. Aosta, Musumeci Editore, 1965; ZANOTTO (A.), *Histoire de la Vallée d'Aoste*, Aosta, DUC, 1968.

27 *Ibidem*.

28 For instance, in 1991 the UV's MPs presented a law project for the federalisation of Italy. Unsurprisingly, the discussion of the law project reached a deadlock in the Constitutional



Committee (Constitutional Law project n° 6042, 23rd October 1991).

29 For instance, the regional historical archives published between 1973 and 1975 a series of historical reviews that draw an alleged *summa* of the Aosta Valley's traditions based on the ethnic nature of regional identity (*Cahiers sur le particularisme valdôtain*, Archives Historiques Regionales, 1973-1975).

30 MARTIAL (E.), *op. cit.*, p. 830.

31 CUAZ (M.), 'La valle d'Aosta. Un'identità di frontiera tra Italia, Europa ed etnonazionalismi', in NEVOLA (G.), *Altre Italie. Identità nazionale e Regioni a statuto speciale*, Roma, Carocci, 2003, p. 1-18.

32 CUAZ (M.), *op. cit.*, p. 12.

33 CURTAZ (C.), *op. cit.*

34 CUAZ (M.), *op. cit.*, p. 13.

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