

Lega Nord: Progression of the Populist Movement

A Senior Honors Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for graduation in the College Honors Program

By  
Ryan Wolfling  
International Business & Economics and International Studies Major

The College at Brockport  
May 2011

Thesis Director: Dr. Andrea Ciliotta-Rubery, Associate Professor of Political Science

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## **Introduction**

Since World War II the Italian political system has been volatile with numerous government turnovers. It was in 1946 the government switched to a democratic republic, and since then, the number of turnovers has exceeded 60. (Background 4) A consequence of this instability is differing coalitions continually vying for power. In order for a coalition to succeed, member parties must garner support and remain loyal to their alliances. The smallest, yet most important part of a coalition alliance is the periphery parties which share some common ideologies and compromise in order to compete with other parties for reform. A relatively new party which has come into existence in the Italian political system is Lega Nord, or more simply put, the Northern League. This party is currently the smallest and periphery party of a coalition, yet it has used its position to its advantage in order to pass numerous reforms through a series of compromises regarding issues which revolve around life and liberty of the Italian citizen.

The Northern League has overcome many obstacles since its formation in the early 1990's, and thus adapted itself into a party which will continue to enjoy success in the foreseeable future. There were many times after its creation that the Northern League was left susceptible to problems which possibly could have led to, what some believed, inevitable failure. However, its strength grew from failures and these failures provided useful learning experiences which helped direct the League into a steadier foundation for its future endeavors. It is only with studying the progressive history of this party, from the creation of Lega Nord and its modest rise, to the present state. This timeline will highlight certain views the party held at different times, behaviors, and strategies so one can understand its present place, failures, and ultimate triumph as a sustainable party in the Italian political system.

## **Background**

Despite the growing enthusiasm for Lega Nord, there are some who are quick to denounce its actions, because of its xenophobic, racist, and separatist venue. The party's actions do not dispute the evidence that these accusations may be true, yet it is a path and strategy which Lega Nord openly accepts. As one observer of the party noted, it "delights in shocking its opponents with scandalous political behaviour." (Barber 1)

This scandalous political behavior stems out of the reality that the party is populist, or for the people. Like any type of political institution, in order to succeed as a party, Lega Nord needs voter support. The base for Lega Nord lies within the industrial and northern portion of Italy. At first glance, one may believe that the large industries would garner much support for the League, yet he or she would be incorrect. After a more in depth analysis, it is found that a main belief of the party is anti-immigration. Industry owners are pro-immigration due to cheaper unskilled labor which results in cutting production costs and essentially creating a 'race-to-the bottom' situation that negatively impacts the domestic economy through higher unemployment. Therefore, the party reacts for the best interest of an average industrial worker.

The next main ideal is federalism. The northern portion of Italy differs in many ways from the southern and central regions. There are disparities in the standard of living (greater in the north), and due to this there are often stereotypes and discrimination. Accordingly, the northern part traces their roots not from the Mediterranean basin, rather to the Celts. The result is the desire for federalism. (Berlusconi 1)

The last main pillar of the party is devolution. This idea is very similar to federalism, yet devolution allows for the powers allotted to different states or provinces to be disproportionate.

The reasoning behind this is once again an ethnocentric tendency of the north, and the desire to cease acting as a crutch for the south.

### **Political System**

Before examining into a timeline for Lega Nord, it is important to first understand the political party and electoral system of Italy. First, it is important to recognize the changes which occurred in the electoral system in Italy primarily because these changes directly impacted the support of the Northern League. From World War II until 1993 the electoral system was like others in Europe and based solely on proportional representation. This means that the percent of the total vote which a party receives is proportional to the percentage of seats in the elected body. Notwithstanding, the system had several changes to it from 1993 to 1995. The two bicameral legislatures, the upper house Senate of the Republic and lower Chamber of Deputies, were now elected using a combination of proportional and a plurality representation. Plurality refers to the system of representation where individual candidates with the highest number of votes in each single-member district would receive a seat. This resulted in 75 percent of the seats in the parliament be awarded due to plurality, and the other 25 percent on proportional representation. Lastly, this system has changed one more time since 1995 to the system which is implemented today. In 2005, it was decided to revert back to a system of full proportional representation. However, there was one dissimilarity between the current electoral policy and the pre-1993 policy of proportional representation. In addition to the pre-1993 policy was the augmentation of bonus seats in the upper house of the Chamber of Deputies to the winning coalition. Duly, this permitted the winning coalition to have a majority, an advantage which any political scientist would agree is great. (Signoretta 1)

Archetypal to many multi-party political systems, there is a left-right spectrum. From World War II until the 1990's the system was constructed of two main parties and numerous smaller factions. One of the two main parties was Partito della Democrazia Cristiana (Christian Democratic Party) which lay on the right side of the spectrum. On the other hand, the left side of the spectrum was the Partito Comunista Italiano (Italian Communist Party). These two parties were predecessors for the coalitions which would begin to emerge in the 1990's and transform through the early and mid-2000's. (Signoretta 2)

Coalitions are a collaboration of parties which unify with one another to create a political alliance. In a multi-party system, smaller political parties play a huge role by helping garner support for the head of the coalition in return for some type of desired action on certain policies and issues. On the left, these parties were the socialist and green party, whereas the right constituted the conservatives and neo-fascists. Lega Nord gained influence through rightist coalitions, playing its supportive role as a periphery party. Despite the League's radicalism, the power gained helped transform the party into the dominant party it is today.

## **History**

In order to fully comprehend the growth of the Northern League, it is important to form a timeline for the relatively new (historically speaking) party. The Northern League began in 1991 as a construction of several smaller regional groups which would eventually amalgamate into a loosely formed populist regionalist movement, created with the intention to oppose the Italian party political system. As alluded to by the name "Northern League," this movement was deeply rooted in the northern and industrial portion of Italy. (Dinmore 1)

From the beginning of the movement, there was always one man who has helped the Northern League evolve. This man would be Umberto Bossi, leader and guide of the party. His role is unmatched in power and has been articulated by others that “the Lega is Bossi and Bossi is the Lega.” (Albertazzi 960) Bossi was born in Cassano Magnago in Lombardy, one of the northern most regions in Italy, to simple origins. He was a medical school student who dropped out and then experimented with brick laying and tutoring math before finding his calling. Bossi then became intertwined with the Northern League where his abrasiveness, aggressiveness, and sometimes obscene outbursts cemented his role as a formidable foe in the Italian political system. (Dinmore 1)

### **The Beginnings**

In Italy, the early 1990’s reflected a time of great fiscal ruin. The Northern League used this opportunity to criticize the Italian government and compose a scapegoat of the southern and less developed portion of the country for the huge public deficit Italy had created. As a result, the notion of a “parasitic south” and a “thieving Rome” was born. (Bull 141) Despite the unpredictability, these are two issues which would remain constant throughout the League’s existence.

However, variability played a much stronger role in garnering support. The original issue which constituted the main focus of the Northern League in the first half of the 1990’s was federalism. Federalism is essentially a system of government in which there is a central authority, yet much of the power is divided between states. This appealed to the Northern League and much of the industrial north because federalism would allow for power to be

distributed amongst the various states of Italy. This power would then allow for some autonomy within the northern states.

Consequently, the League's first presence was felt during the 1992 elections. The majority of the support was found in northern industrial districts. Its headquarters, located in the province of Bergamo, received around 25 percent of the vote. (Albertazzi 954) Overall Lega Nord amassed 8.7 percent of the general vote, a large sum for their first general election. However, many people still believed this was a protest group that was destined for failure and would eventually disappear. (Giordano 220)

Despite this belief, the Northern League continued to radicalize and offered to its members of the north "a sanctuary from the sleaze, corruption and selfishness of traditional parties and politics." (Ignazi 345) However, their actions spoke differently than their words. The next significant year for Lega Nord was 1994. This is the year which the political landscape of Italy began to transform due to the diminished role of the Christian Democratic Party and the establishment of Forza Italia, led by Silvio Berlusconi. Though, the Northern League was a populist party and thus against the government of Rome, Bossi decided to walk the fine line populists face and become intertwined in politics by joining the coalition. The general elections resulted in the Northern League receiving 8.4 percent of the vote. As recalled, there were changes in the election processes, so this simply constituted the percentage of the proportional part of the elections. Consequently, due to the generosity of Forza Italia, the League sent 180 members of parliaments to Rome. (Albertazzi 954)

Yet, following the 1994 elections problems ensued between the Pole of Freedom coalition and Lega Nord. The relationship between Bossi and Berlusconi became tempestuous.

Bossi rashly accused Berlusconi as being “mafioso, fascist, and worse.” (Dinmore 1) Thereupon the Northern League distanced itself from the coalition and the two would eventual part ways.

### **Temporary Success and Decline**

In many ways 1996 represented the beginning of a new era for the Northern League. One of the biggest differences was a party which was becoming more radical and seemingly outlandish in its ideals. A change occurred which resulted in a shift of focus on federalism to a desire and venue for secessionism. This was perhaps the largest political “stunt” Lega had performed, yet it was only met with enthusiasm and support. To build on its xenophobic tendencies, the League differentiated them from the southern portion of Italy and declared its intention to break away and form their own nation. This new ‘country’ formulated of northern provinces was to be named Padania and the party was likewise renamed Lega Nord per l’Indipendenza della Padania, or the Northern League for the Independence of Padania. Consequently, on September 15, a formal and written Declaration of Independence and Sovereignty of Padania was procured. It begins by stating the collection of provinces which would be forming Padania and these included: Friuli, Liguria, Lombardy, Marche, Piedmont, the Romagna, the South Tyrol-Alto Adige, Tuscany, Trentino, Umbria, Valle d’Aosta, Veneto, and Venezia Giulia. (Declaration 1)

The reasons for this proclaimed secession were multifold. First, the ancestral background of the regions in the north, which is mostly Celtic in composition, played a huge role in shaping the sense of a “unique” identity. Second, oppression resulted from the bureaucratic system of government, as well as the welfare state of the South. The conclusion of the declaration states “We the peoples of Padania solemnly proclaim: Padania is an independent and sovereign federal

republic. In support of this Declaration we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.” (Declaration 2)

Essentially the result of this declaration was reproducing the mistrust many Italians had for the current government and anger towards the current economic situation of the country. There was already a brash attitude towards the government, yet the financial situation created more disgust in Italian voters. Umberto Bossi and the league then inherently used southern Italy as a scapegoat, a tactic commonly used by Italian politicians.

As aforementioned, this tactic was very important in creating support for the Northern League. It was able to change its political line while maintaining its core supporters. This resulted in the 1996 general elections, once again solely for the proportional seats, 10.1 percent of the vote. This was higher than the 8.7 or 8.4 percent received in 1992 and 1994 respectively. (Albertazzi 954) A byproduct of this vote was 90 seats of parliament were held by the League.

Despite this statistical success, the year 1996 was a peak which was followed by the inevitable decline. Lega Nord failed to capture the much power in the legislature. This was due to the L’Ulivo, or Olive Tree coalition, defeating Berlusconi and taking power. This leftist coalition, unlike the Poles of Freedom, did not have many similar ideals and beliefs with Lega Nord. As a result, the power and influence of the periphery parties lay with the communist and green parties.

The April 1997 local elections resulted in the share of vote dropping from 40 percent it had in 1993 to solely 15 percent. Another negative occurrence was the results in the symbolic center of the Northern League in Venice. Here the vote won was about a tenth of the total vote. This detrimental pattern did not end in this year but continued into 1999. This European election

saw a 1.5 percent decrease to 4.5 percent of the party's share of the national vote. (Giordano 221)

Negatively correlated with these decreasing statistics were the tensions arising amongst officials and members of the parties. The League was ready for another shake-up and re-evaluation of what strategies and tactics should be implemented. However, there were many differences in opinions on what should be the next steps for the party. These differences became so extreme that they could no longer be reconciled and splits from the party began to occur. The first was in 1998 when a group of party officials from the Liga Veneta left. However detrimental this split may have been, it was nothing compared to the second one which was to come in the following year. The culprit of this split was the president of the Piedmont region, Domenico Comino. The reason why this split was so much more damaging than the previous was that Comino formed a "regional and local-level electoral alliance with Forza Italia." (Giordano 221) This action directly defied the wishes and orders of Bossi, which undermined his authority and revealed the organizational problems and internal conflicts that were amounting and could not be resolved.

### **Revision in the Works**

Lega Nord survived the end of the millennium, a feat many did not believe to be possible. After the split of Comino, Bossi was forced to set a strategic plan for Lega's future. In order to reverse the ill fortunes of the party, it was decided that the next step would to once again renew the alliance with Berlusconi and his coalition. It was evident that the narrow loss of Berlusconi's coalition in 1996 could have been reversed if ties with the Northern League had remained established. In return for this new alliance resulted in compromise of certain issues between the

two leaders. More specifically, the demands for the independence were toned down and a new shift in issues prevailed. (Giordano 222)

This marked the beginning of the devolution phase of Lega Nord. Devolution, closely related to federalism, allowed for the central government to give power to certain states. An agreement was formed between the coalition and Lega that Lega would remain loyal to Berlusconi and his policies as long as Berlusconi would guarantee approval of devolution. This was done in order to prevent the League acting irrationally as it did in 1994. (Albertazzi 956)

Soon following the end of 2000, was the 2001 general elections. In the proportional part, the Northern League received a measly 3.9 percent of the total vote. This was the lowest it had ever been in the short history of the League and looked to be a continuation of the results in the late 1990's. However, despite how discouraging this percentage was, the Berlusconi coalition titled Casa della Liberta won the elections. This was advantageous to Bossi and the League because it allowed for them to have a privileged relationship with the prime minister. Consequently, Lega Nord became part of an axis which was a "main driving force of the second Berlusconi government." (Albertazzi 956)

A result of this relationship was the ability of the League to continue to work towards creating stricter anti-immigration laws. The focus at this point in time shifted from southern Italy to the rest of the European Union, as well as the Islamic community in the Mediterranean basin. In 2002 a law titled the Bossi-Fini Act was created. Together with Gianfranco Fini, leader of Alleanza Nazionale, or the National Alliance, Bossi helped enact stricter standards on immigrants who impacted the labor market. This legislation established that anyone who employs illegal aliens can be liable to fines of up to €5,000 and ten months in jail. (Giordano 222) Additionally, a work permit can only be received if the applicant first secures a job and

place of residence, and that the employer can guarantee the return of the individual to their home country if he or she becomes unemployed. This issue received little disagreement from those within the Berlusconi coalition primarily because of the agreement made between Bossi and Berlusconi before the 2001 elections. As a result, the passing of this law helped improve support from the average industrial north worker. (Zaslove 111, 112)

The last year before the mid-point of the decade was 2004. In this year, there was a European election in which the League received 5 percent of the vote, one-half of a percent higher than it had received in 1999. (Albertazzi 954) Despite the minute increase, it was a sign that times were turning around for Lega Nord. Then, an event occurred which placed the party in a position which it had not been in since its formation. Umberto Bossi suffered a serious stroke which left his speech impaired. Previously it was noted that “the Lega is Bossi and Bossi is the Lega.” (Albertazzi 960) Consequently it was a huge obstacle which had many political scientists believing Bossi’s time had passed. Once again, this belief was proved wrong and the party continued to gain influence on a local level. Fortunately for the Northern League, Bossi would soon return and resume his role as leader. (Dinmore 3)

### **The Growth of Influence**

The next year in which there was a national election was 2006. Many were unsure if Lega Nord would remain loyal to the Berlusconi coalition, especially if the center-right coalition were to lose. Fortunately, the Berlusconi coalition prevailed once again for the third time. If it were not for the League, the re-election bid would have been damaged. After the election occurred, it was estimated that the League’s support lay somewhere between four to five percent. (Barber 1)

Once again Lega Nord changed the forerunning issue of the party. As has been duly noted it had gone from federalism, secessionism, devolution, and finally to fiscal federalism. Fiscal federalism would allow for control of the purse to be apportioned to the wealthy instead of those who act parasitically. In other terms, the northern portion of Italy should be able to control fiscal policies due to their superior industrial regions producing more of the country's wealth. In 2008, Lega announced a desire of a mechanism which would allow for the minimum amount of resources to be transferred to the poorer regions from the richer. Additionally, the poorer regions would have to attain a certain target of revenue. This desire turned into a radical program which would ultimately increase the fortunes of the north while degrading the south into a worsened state. (Bull 135, 136)

The issue of fiscal federalism was continually reinforced, despite its incompatibility in a unitary state, until the next set of elections which occurred in 2008. By this time a system of full proportional representation was enacted for the general elections of the country. This election was an important occurrence because it cemented the re-emergence of Lega Nord as a party which once again held much influential power. It was not expected, but the rightist coalition of Berlusconi, Popolo della Liberta or People of Freedom, won a landslide victory which marked a shift of power which favored the League. This shift was due mainly to the collapse of the radical left parties. This collapse was so monumental that it was the first time since the end of World War II that no communist parties would have representation in Parliament.

According to the statistical collection of data, The People of Freedom coalition received more than 1.5 million additional votes than they had received in 2006. Additionally, the League more than double it support in 2006 and experienced levels of support which had not been accomplished in over a decade since the beginning of their decline. Many of the votes came

from the north, yet the party began to expand into previously untouched regions such as Emilia-Romagna and Trentino. (Brunazzo 426, 427)

Due to the relatively recent occurrences, it is impossible to determine what will occur in the relatively volatile Italian political system. However, the changes which arose in the shift in the balance of the political left-right spectrum can allow for speculation of the future. The Northern League has continually adapted into a role which is essentially the whip of the rightist coalition. This power will be utilized to help undergo policy changes which can no longer be challenged by the weakened left-wing.

### **Strategies**

As the issue of immigration continues to enflame the parties of all Europe, and Berlusconi's future remains legally tenuous, one cannot help but wonder whether or not the League can expand upon its most recent successes? One of the largest factors is its role in Berlusconi's coalitions. Despite uncertainty about the re-election of Berlusconi, the League has positioned itself so that its versatility will allow for it to play a role in a different regime. Additionally, as stated, the League has not intentions of de-radicalizing even though certain compromises will result in softer results in certain policies. Radicalization is a strategy which will always be utilized by the Northern League to garner support through creating anger and fear through its constituents.

### **Relationship with Berlusconi**

A quick review of the relationship between Berlusconi and Bossi would reveal that both did not always get along. After 1994, the League left the first Berlusconi coalition, which

unknown to both parties would be a great mistake. The League was entrusted with power which they could not implement due to a more powerful leftist coalition and Berlusconi lost the vote and was presented a weaker role in government. However, the sour relationship began to rebuild itself which resulted in Lega Nord partaking in the second and eventual third coalitions of Berlusconi.

One reason these two parties had the potential to get along with one another is that they both had similar ideologies. The differences arose due to the more radical nature of Lega Nord, one which Berlusconi's parties would not have been able to sustain. Additionally, another difference was the parties' areas of support. Lega Nord, as implied by the name, was based primarily in the northern areas whereas Berlusconi's parties were focused towards Rome and the central regions of Italy. Lastly, the League can say what Berlusconi cannot. The radical nature allows of Lega Nord to have more flexibility and less repercussions for its actions. One example is regarding the euro. It was stated that "Mr. Berlusconi has reproved the League for attacking President Carlo Azeglio Ciampi for his role in steering the country into the euro, he has not condemned the substance of its proposal." (Berlusconi 1) In other words, Berlusconi slaps the League on the risk for making the accusations, but he himself does not make the statement that he disagrees with what the League had done.

Despite the seemingly perfect relationship during the second and third coalition, the benefits and costs were not evenly distributed. At first glance, it may seem that this relationship would favor Berlusconi's party, however the opposite is true. Lega Nord used its necessity of its role in the coalition to hold Silvio Berlusconi hostage. (Italy 1) As described, without the support of Lega Nord, the coalition's chances of re-election would be greatly damaged. Regardless of Berlusconi's position on a certain issue, he has to take into account the wishes of

Lega Nord in order to appease and prevent the sometimes loyal party seceding from the coalition.

The benefits and costs are not evenly distributed, yet there still are some costs to the Northern League. These lie primarily in the necessity to compromise. The biggest compromise is joining the coalition and ‘becoming’ part of government, an action that populists must be wary of or will face a loss in support. Next, is the compromises which the League has to make within the coalition. For some issues, Berlusconi will act in favor of Lega Nord, yet make adjustments so the issue will happily comply with the rest of the parties in the coalition. This is typical of any coalition. Lastly, Berlusconi needs to keep the League in check with reality. The radical nature sometimes puts Berlusconi in the position which he needs to draw a line or repress some actions of the Northern League. An example of a situation in this case is the League promoting their anti-immigration policy so vehemently that people, such as the Roman Catholic Church, become offended by the actions . This could possibly result in the reduction of votes in support of Berlusconi, a problem which is overall troublesome. (Italian 1)

### **Garnering Support**

Support has been an issue for the Northern League that had almost caused its extinction, yet also allowed for its prosperity. One of the issues which is constantly understood, is that Lega Nord is a radical party which inherently offends some people. Its radicalism has not been in short supply and there are instances of their irrational behavior documented in many newspaper articles. Examples of these actions begin with a high ranking official, Roberto Calderoli. His strong desire for anti-immigration created a hatred for outsiders, particularly Muslims. As a result, he decided to wear a t-shirt with a cartoon depicting the Prophet Mohammed, a serious

offense in the Muslim world. Additionally, other members let a pig desecrate land intended for a mosque by letting it roam the property. Another example of extreme actions include supporters carrying campaign posters which read “with no control on immigration, they ended up on reservations” including a picture of a Native American with a headdress. (Dinmore 2)

The question ‘why’ is asked in relation to these typically unacceptable actions. What are the reasons behind these incidents? The answer is anger. Throughout the 1990’s and 2000’s, even arising earlier, Italians have been upset with loose immigration laws and the financial situation of the Italian government. Immigration has allowed for competition in local economies for jobs, rises in unemployment, and consequently, racial discrimination. The economic situation had created a lower standard of living than many Italian citizens were willing to accept. Once again, anger was funneled towards a scapegoat, and the League was able to turn this anger into policy.

Anger was focused primarily on past and present situations, yet the Northern League used another emotion relying on future presuppositions. This emotion would be fear. The volatility of the Italian political party system allowed for many changes to be implemented, yet the people were still afraid and uncertain for what the future would hold. In the Declaration for the Independence of Padania, it is stated that the reason for secession was partially due to the defense of civilization and the safeguarding of cultural traditions. (Declaration 1,2) Immigration, was viewed as a reality of these fears. Lega Nord thus arose as an acknowledger and champion of fears. Often, the party would boast improvements in achieving stricter standards for immigration. One example was the Bossi-Fini Act which was a huge accomplishment for the party. However, throughout the years other, more minute achievements were accomplished. A turnaround for many Libyan immigrants in Tripoli was viewed as a victory. (Italian 1) Though

Libya was previously a colony of Italy, Libyans immigrating to Italy posed a threat to sustaining its cultural and political identity.

## **Conclusion**

The relatively short amount of time in existence for Lega Nord has not prevented it from achieving results and having a vital impact on the Italian political system. It began as a conglomeration of regional movements and formed itself into an integral party with great influence. Being successful has always been depended upon and has been met through a variety of ways.

First, Lega Nord had successfully walked the fine line which many populist parties find themselves situated with. In essence, the party became a part of politics while sustaining a supportive or periphery role. A consequence of this was the ability to remain core supporters whilst competing for new constituents. If the League failed to balance their priorities, it would have become another short-lived movement which many opponents and observes had predicted the party to become.

Next, is the ability of the party to position itself for success in the Italian political system by endorsing federalism in the early 1990's, secessionism in the mid-1990s, devolution in the beginning of the millennium, and fiscal federalism at the end of the 2010's. It was important to continuously change ideologies while maintaining core principles in order to adapt to the ever changing global and political environment. Bossi and the party had to continually rethink Lega Nord's strategy in an attempt to remain an influential party and to see reform in issues it deemed important. However, in addition to the adaptive position the League held to gain voter support, in order to gain influence and reach its peak, it needed to align itself with a winning coalition.

This then resulted in a powerful proportion of seats in parliament and an important position to make compromises to pass its reforms. In 1996, when Lega Nord had no position in a coalition, despite its adaptive nature to gain voter popularity, it could not pass any reforms. Thus, the Northern League is strongest when it compromises because without a coalition it cannot pass its reforms.

Lastly, the continued radicalism of the League was an appeal for many members. In politics, nothing is indelible. Inevitably change will occur, and the Northern League helped advance the change through their policies. People accepted the change out of anger for pre-existing policies and fear for restrictive and damaging policies of the future.

Therefore, the Northern League has overcome many obstacles since its formation in the early 1990's, and thus adapted itself into a party which will continue to enjoy success in the foreseeable future.

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