

France's FN election success

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France's far right benefits from almost everything in the country: a broken economy; a still-rising unemployment rate; job insecurity and a fear of loss of social status; an endangered welfare system and public services; a repellent "European project"; a wave of migration, heightened by chaos in some Arab countries; coordinated attacks planned by those who claim to act in the name of Islam. And a Socialist Party that for almost 30 years has shared with the right the responsibility for neoliberal policies now locked in through European treaties, and a project of remaining in power indefinitely by presenting itself every election as the last defence against the Front National (FN).

The result: no other political force displays as much momentum and cohesion as the far right, and none communicates as effectively the feeling that it knows the way and owns the future. No party has any convincing strategy for challenging the far right (1). Prime minister Lionel Jospin, ousted from the second round of the 2002 presidential election by Jean-Marie Le Pen, talked of a "thunderbolt" and, as he withdrew from public life, invited his Socialist comrades to "prepare the reconstruction of the future." The task fell to François Hollande...

It is pointless to ascribe such a political phenomenon to a single cause when it has developed over decades. In the UK and Denmark, xenophobic movements have prospered without a ruling socialist party to make that possible, and in Poland and Switzerland, with better economic situations than France has. The far right has not done so well where unemployment rates are higher than in France (10.8%) — in Spain (21.6% in 2015), Greece (24.6%) and Cyprus (15%). Moreover, the FN was already doing very well before the Paris attacks in January and November 2015, and before the recent influx of migrants, even if these events have boosted it. As most things have done.

The important fact is not just that FN candidates came first in six out of 13 regions and in 46 out of 96 départements in the first round of regional elections on 6 December 2015. It is that the FN improved its results almost everywhere in the second round, including regions where it had no chance of winning a majority. For an FN sympathiser, an FN vote now seems a worthwhile vote and the party, far from being an auxiliary force that can be absorbed by the right, is beginning to successfully encroach on its terrain: 18-20% of those who voted for Nicolas Sarkozy in 2012 seem to have switched to the FN last December (2).

The resolution of voters on the far right is all the more significant as the electoral system and current party alliances heavily penalise the FN. It came first in votes cast in December's regional elections (as it had done in May 2014 European elections and March 2015 departmental ones), but it does not control a single regional or departmental council. And in parliament it has only two deputies (out of 577) and two senators (out of 348) (3). This democratic anomaly enables it to continue to portray itself as the victim of a widely despised political class, which it criticises with the sincerity of the excluded.

But in the battle of ideas, the FN is dominant, and its intellectual enemies — overcome with gloom and defeat, riven with schisms and divisions — too often seek comfort and reassurance in the merely theoretical radicalism of universities (4). The mainstream media do not make life for the FN any harder when they alternate reports of "brazen Islam" and reactionary thinkers.

Not just in France

Traditionally, the victory of a leftwing majority coincided with a radicalisation of the right, which felt dispossessed of the power it thought it owned. The hostility François Hollande provokes in

conservative circles is more troubling, because it is hard to see how his policies differ from theirs, except over same-sex marriage: the right did indeed mobilise against that three years ago, but if it were to return to power no one believes there would be any revision of the law (5).

Like the far right, the mainstream right likes to lambast the politically correct. This is not an exclusively French phenomenon (6). In the US, Republican contender Donald Trump's assaults on Mexican "rapists" or Muslim "terrorists" enable him to emphasise his courage in departing from the flabby consensus of the left, intellectuals, the middle class and snobs. His attacks have a guaranteed effect: the media feign outrage, then allow him to explain himself so much that it is difficult to hear anyone but him. Should 11 million illegal immigrants be expelled? Should a border wall be built with Mexico? Should records be kept on all US Muslim citizens and all others prohibited from entering the country? Such "debates" arise time and again. Opposition to these ideas is taken as evidence of cowardice, permissiveness, and contempt for the aspirations of the silent majority, even of willingness to expose the US to new attacks.

Nicolas Sarkozy is familiar with the American right's tricks (7). On 9 December he criticised "this political correctness that prevents debate. [...] As soon as someone says something about immigration, he's a racist; as soon as someone utters the word Islam, he's Islamophobic; as soon as someone asks a question about French identity, he's reactionary." Sarkozy, a former French president and party leader supported by many press and business leaders, being transformed into an internal dissident is quite a thought. It is not surprising, therefore, that the FN is winning the battle of ideas, given that its so-called adversaries fight on its behalf, on its favourite themes. A week before the April 2002 vote, Jean-Marie Le Pen had already declared victory of a sort: "Politicians, journalists and commentators speak a language not very different from mine, when it does not incorporate it. [...] I have become mainstream because everyone speaks like me. It's been called the *LePen-isation* of minds" (8).

Now this trend is being continued by the French president, and in the domain of public freedoms (see [Towards a permanent state of emergency](#)). Addressing parliament on 16 November, Hollande said: "We must be able to strip an individual found guilty of an attack on the nation's fundamental interests or of an act of terrorism of his French citizenship, even if he is French-born, if he also has another nationality." Such a measure, lifted from the far right's ideological playbook, would not have dissuaded attackers willing to sacrifice their lives, so the main consequence of Hollande's announcement was to legitimise discrimination against French people on the grounds of their origins, as those who hold joint nationality are mainly the descendants of immigrants. Marine Le Pen reaped the benefit on 27 November. She boasted: "The FN has a serious, realistic programme which is even a source of inspiration for François Hollande."

'Fuel source for the FN'

For 30 years — in the name of "needed reforms", necessary savings, the containment of public debt — welfare policies and public services have been attacked: pensions, family allowance, housing benefit, free healthcare and higher education. Such unravelling, especially when it coincides with mass unemployment and low growth, exacerbates mutual suspicion, individualist reflexes and a sense that "it all goes to them and there's nothing left for us". Language that vilifies state handouts, foreigners and "the migrant suction-pump effect" feeds on this, and will not dry up soon, since the EU has ruled out any change of economic direction, as demonstrated in the case of Greece. A couple of years ago, a French Socialist minister, Arnaud Montebourg, was entitled to accuse the EU's then president, José Manuel Barroso, of being the "fuel source for the Front National" (9).

The political link between economic insecurity and home bias, favoured by the FN, is focused on social benefits, which Brussels often judges over-generous. The more those benefits are threatened or have their universality eroded through means testing (family allowance, housing benefit for students), the more the competition for them feeds the fear — especially among vulnerable sectors of the working class — of benefit cheats and the hunt for scapegoats.

Analysing the results of the first round of the March 2015 departmental elections in which the FN won 26% of the vote (much more among the working class and the unemployed who voted; much less among graduates, professionals and senior management), political scientist Céline Braconnier found

that, among far-right voters, “the ‘fake poor’ are constantly mentioned in interviews: the neighbour who lives on benefits and whose children get free school meals while poor workers are deprived of this because of prohibitive costs; the Roma who get free accommodation in camps when they arrive, when it is impossible for immigrants [...] to get council housing in the town where they have lived for decades; the cheats who are said to take advantage of food banks” (10).

The conclusion seems obvious, especially when jobs are rare, hard and badly paid, and many benefit recipients come from sectors of the population with immigrant backgrounds — xenophobia in the name of equality, and “home bias” as a way of rejecting alleged favouritism for immigrants (11). Marine Le Pen can thus claim, as she did in September: “There is a profound violence towards the French when they hear that 77,300 emergency places are being made available within a day [for political refugees], when there are one and a half million French households waiting for social housing, sometimes for years, and according to the Abbé Pierre Foundation millions of French people are in poor quality housing, or have no housing at all. So I’m the politician who says that the French must not be served last.”

In 2012 US Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney let slip that his neoliberal message was not getting through to what he claimed were the “47%” of Americans who depended on government programmes, proportionally more numerous among blacks and Hispanics; they voted for Obama (whereas for 40 years the majority of the white vote has almost always gone to the Republicans). Now, with US worries over “controlling the borders” getting mixed up with panic over identity, this reasoning has fuelled the theory of a “great replacement” at the ballot box. Republican candidate Ted Cruz, also a senator for Texas, is opposed to regularising the status of illegal immigrants, and argued: “What Chuck Schumer and Barack Obama wanted was very simple: they wanted millions of new Democratic voters. There is a reason why the new politically correct term is no longer illegal aliens, it’s now undocumented Democrats.”

The FN could draw on such material, but France’s mainstream right got there first. In 2012 the then secretary general of Sarkozy’s party, Jean-François Copé, let out that “the undocumented are now the only people who can benefit from a 100% free-of-charge system, with no contribution on their part.” He added: “It would be naive to believe that all these decisions, which cause a pull effect for illegal immigration [...] are the result of chance. It’s a deliberate strategy to replace the working class vote with a community vote” (12) — needless to say, a vote neither European nor Catholic.

Set poor workers against cheats, then French against immigrants, and then “whites” against “Muslims”, as the economic crisis becomes tougher and spreads through the working classes. Those who benefit from the crisis focus everyone’s attention on these conflicts, condemn populism and keep on governing. In the regional elections, there was much talk of working class discontent and anger, and promises to heed the message. Yet, the day after the vote, the Socialist government announced that the minimum wage would not be re-assessed.

Prime Minister Manuel Valls believes that the FN’s concept of France is “small and narrow”, and “has no solution to offer those who are suffering”. That fits his own government just as well. Four years ago he called for the elimination of “words which have lost their meaning or are outdated: socialism, comrade, party.” That wish now matches Hollande’s electoral strategy, as he is keen to sweep away any leftwing baggage and challenge leaders on the right for the role of the presidential candidate of a large “moderate, republican” broad centre ground, who would be automatically elected in the second round as his only rival would be the FN. This candidate’s programme (whoever he or she may be) is already known — holding the course set by François Mitterrand in 1983, when he renounced an economic policy that deviated from neoliberal orthodoxy, and through various expedients remained in power for two terms. One of his expedients was the cynical use of repeatedly setting himself as a bulwark against the far right.

If it comes off, the revival of such a dismal project will owe much to the Front National itself, since this system and those who run it need the far-right party. They know that as long as it remains their main adversary, they have nothing to fear, nothing to change and nothing to concede.

(1) See Serge Halimi, "[We can't go on like this](#)", and Frédéric Lordon, "[What's left for the left?](#)", *Le Monde diplomatique*, English edition, respectively September 2013 and September 2014.

(2) *Les Echos*, Paris, 8 December 2015.

(3) In June 2012, a French Socialist member of parliament required on average 27,200 votes to get elected; for a Front de Gauche (Left Front) candidate it was 179,000 votes, and for a FN one (or FN affiliate), 1,764,000.

(4) See Pierre Rimbert, "[Academia's rebel alliance](#)", *Le Monde diplomatique*, English edition, May 2011.

(5) The UK's Conservative leader David Cameron put forward a similar law in the UK, and in Sweden a centre-right government sponsored it.

(6) See Serge Halimi, "[US: phoney culture wars](#)", *Le Monde diplomatique*, English edition, June 2006.

(7) See Serge Halimi, "[France: Sarkozy's old familiar song](#)", *Le Monde diplomatique*, English edition, June 2007.

(8) France Inter, 16 April 2002.

(9) "Tous politiques", France Inter, 23 June 2013.

(10) Interview in *Le Monde*, 26 March 2015.

(11) See Alexis Spire, "[Xénophobes au nom de l'État social](#)" (Xenophobes in the name of the welfare state), *Le Monde diplomatique*, December 2013.

(12) Jean-François Copé, *Manifeste pour une droite décomplexée* (Manifesto for an uninhibited right), Fayard, Paris, 2012.