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Seattle University

The Rise of Neo-Nationalism and the Front National in France

A Thesis Submitted to
The Faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences
In Candidacy for the Degree of
Departmental Honors in International Studies

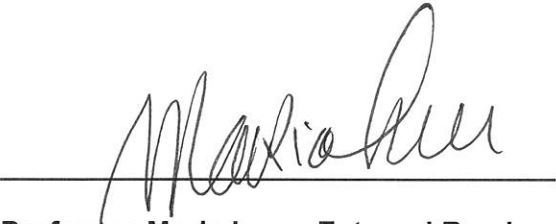
By
Austin Nelson

June 2019

The signatures below constitute approval of this departmental honors thesis by Austin Nelson.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Robert Andolina", written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Robert Andolina, Thesis Instructor

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Maria Leon", written over a horizontal line.

Professor Maria Leon, External Reader

When the FN was founded in the early 1970s it was widely irrelevant. However, over the past three decades, it has managed to enter into and reshape mainstream French politics. Historically, economic, social, and political transformations have aided the party in their popularization. This paper looks at how similar economic, political and social transformations in the 21st century have enabled this neo-nationalist party to gain such unprecedented electoral success. More precisely, this paper looks at how these factors, identified as the 2008-09 Global Economic crisis, changing immigration trends, and the presidencies of Nicolas Sarkozy and François Hollande, have all interacted and intersected to create a favorable climate for the rise of the FN by promoting fear and crisis.

Keywords: Front National, neo-nationalism, France

Introduction

Starting in the 2010s, the world began to see a resurgence of nationalism, indicated by a spike in popularity for parties rooted in this “new nationalism”, such as the Sweden Democrats, the National Restoration Party in Costa Rica, or the One Nation Party of Australia. A party that exemplifies this trend is the French political party the Front National (FN), often cited as the principal neo-nationalist party from which others have since been modeled after (Hauwaert, 2019).

When the FN was founded in the early 1970s it was widely irrelevant. Yet, over the past three decades, it has managed to reshape mainstream French politics, making its first real breakthrough at the national level in 2002, when Jean-Marie Le Pen, its founder and leader, made it to the second round of the presidential election. However, it was unable to achieve the same success in the 2007 presidential election. The party seemed to be deteriorating as a result of various scandals and xenophobic/racist comments revolving around Jean-Maria Le Pen, destroying both its public image as well as alienating it from politics. However, in 2011, Le Pen’s daughter, Marine, became the leader of the party, marking the beginning of a revival for the FN. This paper aims to identify and understand the reasons for this revival.

Historically, economic, social, and political transformations have aided the party in their popularization. This paper looks to identify how similar transformations occurring in the 21st century have continued to aid the FN. It aims to suggest that it is through their intersections and interactions that these contemporary economic, social, and political transformations— specifically the 2008-09 Economic Recession, changing immigration trends, and the presidencies of Nicolas Sarkozy and François Hollande – have created a favorable climate for the Front National by promoting fear and crisis.

Historical Context: The Rise of the Front National

The FN was founded in 1972 by François Brigneau, François Duprat, Alain Robert, and most notably Jean-Marie Le Pen, who was chosen to be the first president

of the party (Stockemer, 2017). The FN strove to present itself as a populist, anti-communist, xenophobic movement that surpassed traditional conceptions of left and right (Davies, 1999). “It advocated for the shrinking of the public sector, the minimization of state intervention, drastic and restrictive changes to immigration policy...and the usage of proportional representation voting system in all elections” (Stockemer, 2017, p.11). For the initial 10 years following the FN’s creation, it operated on the fringes of the political sphere, being ignored by mainstream politics. Internally, the FN was unsuccessful at building a cohesive platform that satisfied moderate to extremist supporters leading to the party’s poor performance¹ (Stockemer, 2017).

During the 1980s the FN began making electoral gains. Most notably, in the 1984 European Parliament elections, the FN won 11% of the votes, giving them 10 seats in the European Parliament (France Politique, 2015). Two years later in 1986, the FN won 35 seats in the *Assemblée Nationale* (France Politique, 2015). In 1988 the party and Jean-Marie Le Pen won 14.38% of the vote in the presidential election (France Politique, 2015). This unexpected progress made by the FN is linked to social, economic, and political transformations that occurred in France during the early 1980s, which the party exploited in order to legitimize and develop their platform (Stockemer, 2017). First, many voters were unhappy with the economic state of France. The country had experienced an economic crisis in the late 1970s, early 1980s, which resulted in rising unemployment and diminished economic growth. President Mitterrand sought to implement neo-Keynesian economic policy in order to counteract economic turmoil. Yet, unemployment only increased (Stockemer, 2017). Second, immigration became a more pertinent issue in France due to Mitterrand’s easing of immigration policy/regulation as well as the increased number of North African immigrants in France (Stockemer, 2017). These

¹ In the 1973 legislative election, the FN only received 1.32% of the votes (108,000 votes) (Stockemer, 2017).

changes began raising fears about increased “ghettoization” and high crime/delinquency rates in social housing projects as a result of these populations (Stockemer, 2017). Lastly, in 1985, President Mitterrand changed the French electoral system from plurality to a party-list proportional representation voting system. (Miller, 1986). However, this also made it easier for smaller parties to win seats in legislative bodies, explaining the FN’s electoral success in the 1986 legislative election².

The FN exploited these developments by reshaping their political platform to center on immigration and security (Stockemer, 2017). It exploited the changing immigration trends and economic instability of France in order to advance xenophobic and authoritarian sentiments in French politics, promoting that there was a connection between the increase in non-European immigrants and the rise of crime and unemployment in France. Additionally, Le Pen began upholding a more populist message that could attract a wider audience and address the growing lack of confidence in the established political system, regarding its ability to address key voter issues (Stockemer, 2017). The party used populism both as a means to differentiate itself from mainstream parties and to present itself as the alternative to the French political system (Stockemer, 2017). Their new language stressed a discourse promoting “exclusionary conceptions of community” that countered multiculturalism and inclusion (Stockemer, 2017, p. 15). Le Pen emphasized the idea that power needed to be returned to the French people and that populist free-market capitalism was the best way to achieve this.

The 1990s were a period of electoral success as well as crisis for the FN. Despite internal turmoil in the 1980s and early 1990s, the final decade of the 20th century offered the FN a pinnacle time for development. Bruno Mégret became the general director of the party and significantly modified its rhetoric, disguising the party’s

² Following this election France reverted back to a plurality voting system for legislative elections.

xenophobia by reformulating it into the notion of *préférence nationale*³ (Stockemer, 2017). Additionally, during this period, globalization became an important issue in French national politics, in part as a result of the signing of the Maastricht Treaty⁴ in 1992. In response to this, the FN began transitioning towards economic protectionism and criticizing neo-liberalism, arguing that the government's commitment to global free trade was the reason the economy was declining (Bastow, 1997). Globalization was also incorporated in the party's populist rhetoric. "It modified its divisive 'us/them' discourse to include new political "enemies" such as elites from the European Union and other supranational organizations" (Stockemer, 2017, p. 20). These changes seemed to further their popularity. In 1993 the party won 12.7% of the votes in the parliamentary election and 14.9% five years later (NSD, n.d.). In 1995, Le Pen captured 15% of the votes in the presidential election, a record percentage for the party at the time (NSD, n.d.).

Through the 1980s and 1990s, the FN integrated its economic and political concerns into the French mainstream political agenda, forcing other political parties to engage with these topics (Davies, 1999). Many parties began appropriating elements of Le Pen's anti-immigration rhetoric as a strategy to advance their own political agendas. However, this backfired and worked to the advantage of the FN by giving credibility to its rhetoric (Stockemer, 2017, p. 21). The unforeseen progression of the FN into mainstream politics became visible in the 2002 presidential election, during which Le Pen became the first leader of a nationalist party to qualify to the second round of voting in France (Stockemer, 2017).⁵

³ Translation: national preference

⁴ The Maastricht Treaty founded the European Union, established its structure, and eventually led to the creation of the Euro.

⁵ In the first round, Le Pen won 16.86% of votes, taking second place and beating the PS candidate Lionel Jospin (NSD, n.d.). In the second round of voting, the Le Pen was able to attain

By the 2002 presidential election, the FN was vulnerable, still recovering from the loss of at least half of its electorate and executives due to the expulsion of Mégret from the party (Stockemer, 2017). Another significant reason for the party's subsequent decline was that the 2002 election sparked anti-FN mobilization⁶. The defeated PS candidate Lionel Jospin called for voters to unite, regardless of political affiliations, and vote for Chirac in order to block Le Pen from winning (Stockemer, 2017). French media outlets largely denounced the FN as a nationalist threat, tarnishing the credibility of the party as well as shrinking its electorate. This scandal caused long-term damage to the party and its electoral success,⁷ signifying that the FN may be on its way out of the political scene.

However, since Marine Le Pen took her father's place as leader of the FN in 2011, the party has experienced a 'revival'. This revival is exemplified by the 2017 presidential election in which Le Pen made it to the second round of voting. While Le Pen did not win this election, it is important to realize this was only the second time that the FN had made it to the second round of voting in a French presidential election. Yet, this time, Marine Le Pen won twice as many votes in the second round as her father did in 2002.⁸

In general, there are very few differences between the ideology of the "old" FN of Jean-Marie Le Pen and that of the "new" FN of Marine Le Pen. Despite her *dédiabolization*⁹ campaign to repair the image of the party, the Front National continues to focus on the concepts of nation and identity (Davies, 1999). The party has always

17.8% of the votes, resulting in his opponent Jacques Chirac becoming the next president of France (NSD, n.d.).

⁶ Beginning between the first and second rounds of voting

⁷ In 2002 the FN won 11.12% of the vote in the parliamentary election, however, in 2007 the party only acquired 4.29% (NSD, n.d.). Two years later in 2009, the FN went from having 7 seats in the European Parliament to having 3 (winning 6.3% of votes in that year's election) (NSD, n.d.).

⁸ Marine Le Pen won 10 million votes in the second round of voting (NSD, n.d.).

⁹ Translation: de-demonization

held a nationalist ideology focused on preserving French national identity, society and culture (Davies, 1999). With this ideology, the party perceives (and portrays) the French nation as a weak and vulnerable. Thus, increasing non-European populations in France are understood 'external' elements' that threaten the state, and therefore the French identity and way of life. As a result of this perceived threat, the FN operates as the self-proclaimed 'protector' of France promoting an agenda of law-and-order political platforms, welfare chauvinism, economic protectionism, Euroscepticism, and opposition to immigration, particularly of Muslim immigrants (Stockemer & Barisione, 2017).

One area of change, however, is that Marine Le Pen has significantly reshaped the party's discourse to minimize the party's infamous xenophobic messages and replace it with a more populist rhetoric. While the party under Jean-Marie Le Pen was also characterized as populist, it was rather the radical element that prevailed, typically manifested in racist, sexist, and anti-Semitic comments (Stockemer & Barisione, 2017). This transition is particularly evident with the framing of the FN's message. The FN of Jean-Marie Le Pen was based on anti-immigration sentiments, viewing immigration as the most important problem and thus basing all other policy through an anti-immigration lens (Stockemer & Barisione, 2017). However, under Marine Le Pen, "the FN's anti-immigration platform is no longer presented as an end in itself but rather as part of a holistic solution" to the main concerns of the general French public (Stockemer & Barisione, 2017, p.107). In this way, her emphasis on populism can be perceived as an attempt to simultaneously dismiss the party's racist origins, conceal the fact that the party maintains the same ideology, and appeal to a wider audience in order to gain more support and remain in mainstream politics.

However, a shift in discourse alone cannot explain the party's recent popularity. By examining the history of Front National, starting out as an irrelevant extremist group in the 1970s and evolving into the political contender it is today, the party's expansion

becomes evident. Yet it also becomes clear that the ideology and message of the party has remained the same. Rather, the party's strategy and rhetoric has continued to develop in order to capitalize on the varying social, political, and economic circumstances that have occurred in France over the past three decades. Marine Le Pen's recent changing of the name of the party from *le Front National* to *le Rassemblement National* is more so indicative of a strategy to distance and disassociate the party from its fascist roots, rather than an actual change in the party's ideology.¹⁰

Methodology

I am approaching my analysis of the Front National (FN) as an important case study of how and why neo-nationalism and its supporters have gained political power and popularity since 2007, as following this year the FN began to perform better in elections. While there are other neo-nationalist figures, such as US President Donald Trump and the Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, relevant to the evolution of neo-nationalism, the FN is considered one of the oldest and main developers of this new form of nationalism. The party epitomizes neo-nationalism in that it does not operate through an adherence to right- or left-wing politics; rather, it operates on a basis of promoting and defending the nation and national identity. The party's political platform exemplifies the characteristics commonly associated with this new form of nationalism, such as protectionism, nativism, Euroscepticism, opposition to immigration, and Islamophobia.

This study's focus point is on political power and influence, which is measured using quantitative data, expressed as electoral results. Moreover, these concepts are

¹⁰ *Rassemblement* has historically been affiliated with traditional right parties, while *Front* has been associated with radical parties (on either side of the political spectrum). This paper makes the strategic choice to continue to refer to the party as *le Front National*. In doing so, this paper asserts that the "new" party of Marine Le Pen and the "old" party of Jean-Marie Le Pen are essentially the same and seeks to ensure that this rebranding does not dissimulate the racist and xenophobic ideology (or history) of the party.

then explored through demographic, economic, and political trends in order to determine how these facets of society can collectively strengthen political power and influence.

Lastly, this study is secondary research done by other researchers, as I am unable to travel to France to collect my own data. I gathered my information from scholarly articles, departmental statistics of France (such as election results and unemployment rates by department) taken from French government pages and the World Bank, as well as news articles.

Literature Review: Defining Neo-Nationalism

Marcus Banks and Andre Gingrich (2006) define neo-nationalism as a social phenomenon characterized by the re-emergence of nationalism within a different global and transnational context. This context emerged following the end of the Cold War and can ultimately be understood as the growing presence of globalization and transnational issues (Banks & Marcus, 2006). While they find that there are basic characteristics of earlier variants of nationalism that still apply to neo-nationalism as they all claim to uphold eternal values, defend timeless aspirations, and work towards a continuous invention of tradition (Banks & Gingrich, 2006). Banks and Gingrich determine that the defining characteristic of neo-nationalism is that it is essentially an oppositional response to the realities and exchanges that result from living in a globalized world. This is reflected in neo-nationalist fundamental values such as oppositional attitudes towards immigration, Islam and Muslim populations, social welfare programs, and the EU, as well as in their populist/anti-establishment rhetoric (Banks & Marcus, 2006).

Additionally, Banks and Gingrich address how changes regarding supporter demographics have reoriented the message of neo-nationalists. The rural base for nationalists has been steadily shrinking, due to rural to urban migration as well as urbanization in Europe. Moreover, the diversity that exists within urban settings has forced many neo-nationalist leaders to deviate from traditional nationalist conceptions of

cultural uniformity (Banks & Gingrich, 2006). Neo-nationalists have put a new emphasis on 'assimilation' or 'separation' as a means of trying to reestablish this homogeneity (Banks & Gingrich, 2006). Therefore, Banks and Gingrich argue that as a result of changing global context and trends, neo-nationalists have had to adapt and therefore adjust the way in which they promote their political agenda in order to remain relevant and gain support.

Maureen Eger and Sarah Valdez (2015) use the Manifesto Project Dataset, which is based on content analyses of parties' election programs in over 50 countries since 1945, to survey what issues parties prioritize in order to determine how radical right parties have changed overtime. Eger and Valdez determine that contemporary radical right parties are better characterized as 'neo-nationalist' (rather than far, extreme, or radical right) due to the context these parties emerged in as well as the changes their political platforms.

According to Eger and Valdez, neo-nationalist parties are working within the confines of consolidated nation states, unlike the previous contexts in which earlier forms of nationalism prevailed in Europe (Eger & Valdez, 2015). As a result of this, neo-nationalism is better understood as a "boundary-maintenance project" rather than a "nation-building project" (Eger & Valdez, 2015, 127). Eger and Valdez argue, "neo-nationalism occurs in a context in which boundaries have been settled, are widely accepted both internally (nationally) and externally (internationally), but are perceived to be under threat" (Eger & Valdez, 2015, 127). Neo-nationalism is a boundary-maintenance project in that it is centered on the idea of defending the structure, sovereignty, identity and other significant elements of the nation-state from what ever is perceived to be threatening it.

In terms of their political platforms, the most significant shift in these former radical right parties is their abandonment of right-wing economic agendas between 1996

and 2010 (Eger & Valdez, 2015). According to their research, when these parties' economic and social stances are looked at separately, it becomes evident that these parties are more economically left leaning than conservatives (Eger & Valdez, 2015). This leftward shift is exemplified by these parties' support of welfare chauvinism, rather than cutting welfare programs. Moreover, in terms of ideology, they find that the most significant change that occurred was their greater emphasis on nationalist claims. According to their data, these parties have become more socially conservative over the years, which suggests "it is these parties' stances on social issues that pull them towards the right-wing margin of the political spectrum" (Eger & Valdez, 2015, p. 121). This is evident in contemporary parties' opposition to multiculturalism and their promotion of xenophobic anti-immigrant policy.

While these may appear to be two conflicting shifts, Eger and Valdez argue that they are rather compatible, as these parties possess a strong desire to defend their nation, which includes its welfare system. "Individuals who possess a strong sense of identity with their national community, and who are attached to its exclusionary norms and/or to its political institutions, will perceive their weakening as a loss" (Eger & Valdez, 2015, p. 126-127). Moreover, Eger and Valdez argue that the term neo-nationalism correctly identifies contemporary radical right parties because it explicitly classifies them as a group of parties with nationalist ideology while also distinguishing them from right wing populist parties. Historically, for right wing populist parties, economic concerns were central to their agenda (Eger & Valdez, 2015). However, "for neo-national parties, nationalism is the primary political concern" (Eger & Valdez, 2015, 128). As a result, these parties tend to overlap with both far right and left wing values. While they share common ideological characteristics with the right, such as an emphasis on returning to traditional values and law and order, their economic ideology has changed. Moreover, while they share far left anti-establishment populism, disdain for supranational

organization as well as support for social welfare programs, they remain distinct from left-leaning parties due to their nationalist desire to protect and increase the benefits of ethno-nationals while simultaneously cutting benefits for foreigners (Eger & Valdez, 2015). From these distinctions, it is evident that the central basis for neo-nationalist parties is not an adherence to rightist or the leftist beliefs, but rather to whatever the party sees as promoting and defending the nation and national identity; thus, directly informing these parties' political, economic, and social agendas.

Eger and Valdez's definition of neo-nationalism generally agrees with the definition proposed by Gingrich and Banks. Both argue that neo-nationalist parties are largely populist, anti-EU, anti-immigration, xenophobic, and focused on restoring society to what it used to be. However, Gingrich and Banks tend to focus more on the impact of globalization on neo-nationalism. While, Eger and Valdez agree with Gingrich and Banks' emphasis on the globalized context in which neo-nationalism exists within, they also elaborate on the role of the nation-state system on this new form of nationalism. When examining the ideology of the FN, it becomes evident that this party best aligns with both Gingrich and Banks' and Eger and Valdez's definitions of neo-nationalism, as they are complementary. The FN's platform reflects a strong sense of nationalism aimed at defending the French nation-state and corresponding national identity, as well as a strong discontent with globalization and the phenomenon that has result from it. This study seeks to contribute to this existing understanding of neo-nationalism by identifying where neo-nationalist parties locate their power and influence within society.

Factors that have contributed to rise of the Front National in the 21st Century

Economic: Global Crisis of 2008-09

The economy is the most common factors cited for contributing to the rise of the FN. Since the 2008-09 global recession, France's economic state has been inconstant and unable to fully recover, as illustrated by their GDP (Figure 1) and unemployment

rates (Figure 2).

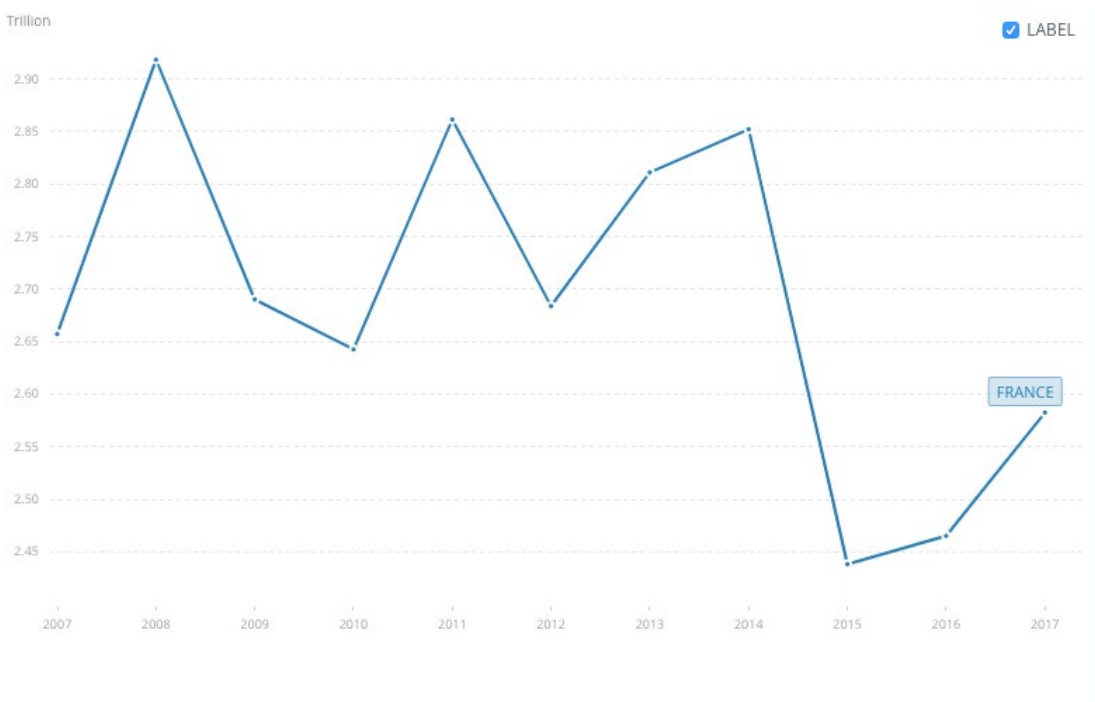


Figure 1: GDP (current US\$) of France from 2007-2017. Adapted from GDP (current US\$), n.s., 2017, World Bank. Retrieved March 17, 2019 from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?end=2017&start=2007>. Copyright 2019 by World Bank Group.

Since 2009 the GDP has continued to fluctuate, yet never fully returning to its peak level of 2008. However, in 2015 it reached an all-time low since the recession at 2.438 trillion in 2015 (World Bank, n.d.). Since this low point, France’s GDP has been slowly increasing, making it to 2.583 in 2017 (World Bank, n.d.).

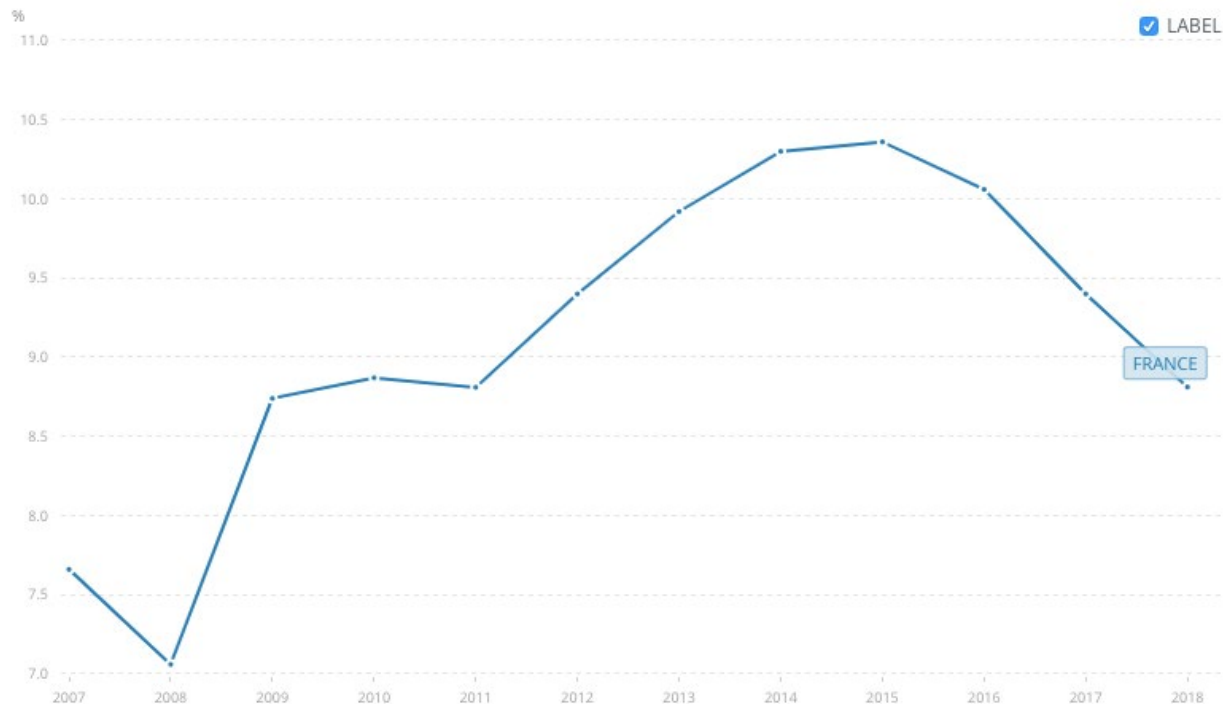


Figure 2: total unemployment rate (% of total labor force) in France (2007-2018). Adapted from "unemployment, total (% of total labor force) (modeled ILO estimate)", international Labour Organization, ILOSTAT database, 2018, *World Bank*. Retrieved March 17, 2019 from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.ZS?end=2018&locations=FR&start=2007>. Copyright 2019 World Bank Group.

France's total unemployment rate followed a similar pattern. Since the 2008 recession unemployment has gradually continued to rise, peaking in 2015 at 10.36% (a record high since 1999) (World Bank, 2018). Since then, France's rate of unemployment has been gradually declining, being at 8.812% in 2018 (World Bank, 2018).

During this economic instability in France, the Front National made significant gains in their electoral success. According to a study conducted by Manuel Funke, Moritz Schularick and Christoph Trebesch, far right parties are the biggest beneficiaries of economic crises (2015). "In general, voting for far-right parties increases from about 6% to about 10% following a financial crisis" (Funke, Schularick, & Trebesch, 2015, p. 14). Moreover, neo-nationalist and right-wing populist parties have benefited more in recent years than traditional extreme right parties, having more pronounced spikes in

electoral gains. As a result of these voting trends, fragmentation within the government increases, due to the strengthening of opposition forces, creating a weaker and less effective government (Funke, Schularick, & Trebesch, 2015). These developments can hinder crisis resolution due to political polarization, therefore slowing down a country's economic recovery to said crises.

Following the 2008 global recession, neo-nationalist and right-wing populist parties in Europe roughly doubled their vote shares, with the FN having the most significant over all electoral gains (Funke, Schularick, & Trebesch, 2015). The party experienced an approximate 10% increase in votes in both departmental and legislative elections (between the 2007-2008 and 2011-2012 elections).¹¹ In the 2012 presidential election, Le Pen almost doubled her vote share compared to her father's 2007 election results (NSD, n.d.)¹². Lastly, in the European parliament elections of 2014, the FN won the majority by achieving 24.86% of the vote, which allotted them 24 seats (out of 74) (European Parliament, 2014). Yet, in the previous elections of 2009, the party only won 6.34% of the vote, ranking them in sixth place with only 4 seats in the parliament (NSD, n.d.).

Moreover, this correlation between electoral gains for the FN and the poor economic state in France becomes even more evident when comparing voting trends and unemployment in various regions of France.

¹¹In the departmental elections of 2011, the FN won 15.06% of the vote whereas in 2008 the party only won 4.85% (Funke, Schularick, & Trebesch, 2015). In the legislative elections of 2012, the FN won 13.60%, when in 2007 the party won 4.29% (Funke, Schularick, & Trebesch, 2015).

¹² In 2012, Marine Le Pen won 17.90% (6,421,426 votes) in the first round, while in 2007 her father only acquired 10.44% (3,834,713 votes) (NSD, n.d.).

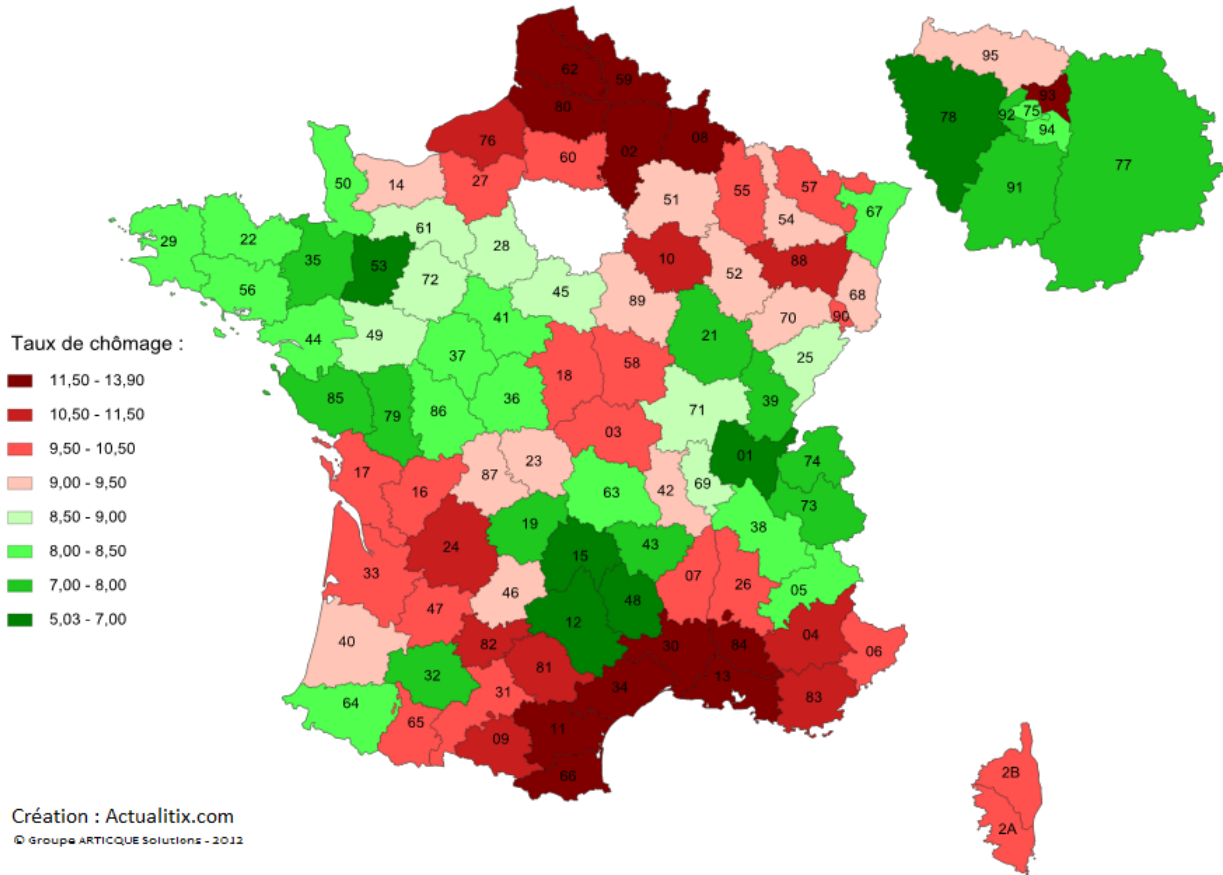


Figure 3: Unemployment rates by region. Adapted from “Taux de chômage par département” by n.s., 2017, *Actualitix*. Retrieved March 3, 2019, from <https://fr.actualitix.com/blog/taux-de-chomage-par-departement.html>. Copyright 2012 by Groups Articque Solutions.

In 2012 unemployment rates appeared to be the most severe towards the north, including: Somme Aisne (department 2; 13.83%) and Pas-de-Calais (department 62; 12.79%), and towards the south of the France, including: Pyrénées-Orientales (department 66; 13.67%) and Hérault (department 34; 13.77%) (n.s., 2012) (See figure 3).

Élection présidentielle 2012 - premier tour : Le Pen (17,90%)

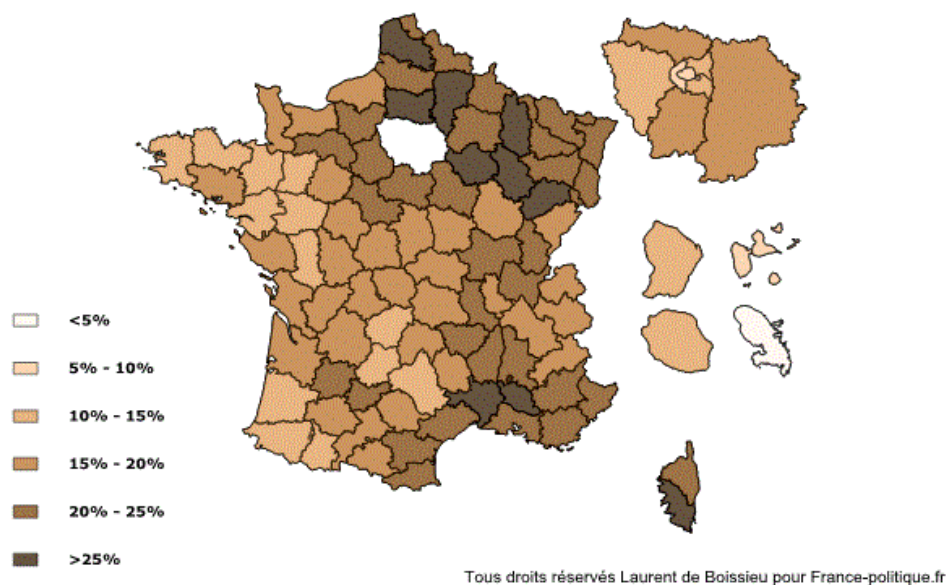


Figure 4: FN 2012 presidential election results by region. Adapted from “ Les résultats électoraux du Front National by L. de Boissieu, 2015, *France Politique*. Retrieved March 2, 2019, from <http://www.france-politique.fr/elections-fn.htm>. Copyright 2015 by Laurent de Boissieu pour France-politique.fr.

Based off the FN's regional results in the 2012 presidential election (figure 4), the party appears to have higher electoral success in departments towards the north and south of France, mirroring the regions with high unemployment rates. Several departments that had some of the highest unemployment rates in the country, such as Pas-de-Calais (department 62; 25.53%), Aisne (department 2; 26.33%), and Vaucluse (department 84; 27.03%), also appeared to have voted the most for the FN (NSD, n.d.) Therefore, this comparison suggests that regions of high unemployment tend to be significant electoral bases for the FN.

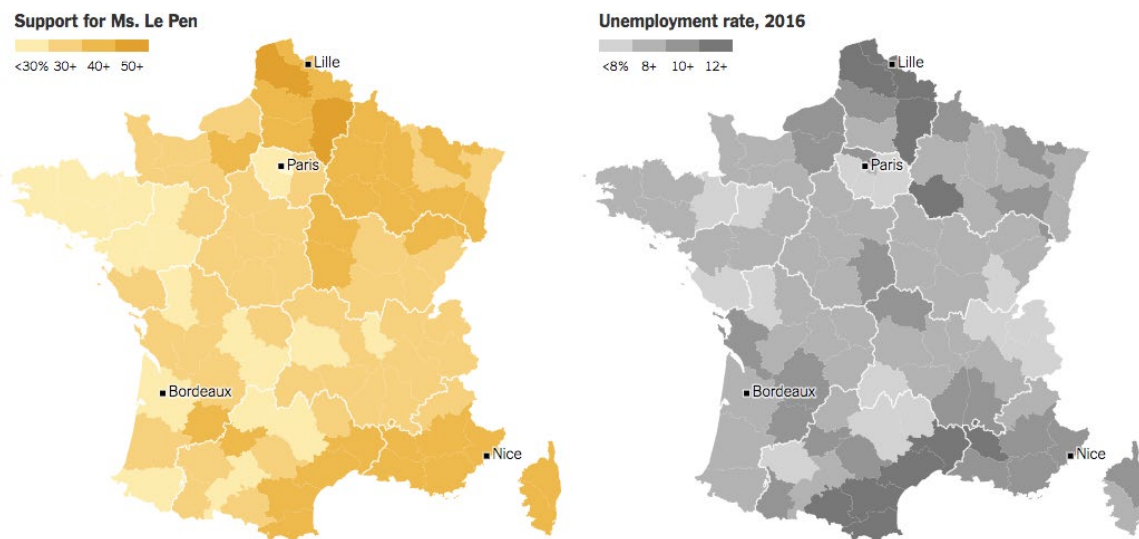


Figure 5: Regional breakdowns of electoral results for Marine Le Pen and unemployment rates. Adapted from "How France Votes", by G. Aisch, M. Bloch, K.R. Lai, and B. Morenne, 2017, *New York Times*. Retrieved March 3, 2019, from <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/05/07/world/europe/france-election-results-maps.html>. Copyright 2017 by NYT.

The FN tends to gain votes in regions plagued by unemployment and economic turmoil (see figure 5). Following the 2008 Economic Crisis, departments in the north and south were hit the hardest. These regions already had higher unemployment rates and lower wages than other regions in France, as a result of historically being centers of traditional industrialized economic activities (which were already declining). However, the recession caused unemployment in these areas to rapidly increase and economic productivity to continue to decline at a faster rate. France's economic crisis became particularly visible within these areas, heightening regional fears. Likewise, the lingering of this economic instability, as well as the French government's inability to alleviate the situation, has not only intensified economic insecurities in the region, but has also made people fearful of globalization and neo-liberalism. It can be understood that the fear and

insecurities sparked by the 2008 economic crisis has boosted the appeal of the FN's protectionist and exclusionary platform.

Social: Changing Immigration Trends

The FN is arguably most well known for their strong anti-immigration stance that has been central to their ideology since it was founded. Around the same time that the FN made its first significant electoral gains in the 1980s, immigration trends in France were changing. Since the end of World War II, the number of immigrants in France has continued to increase.

Proportion d'immigrés dans la population française

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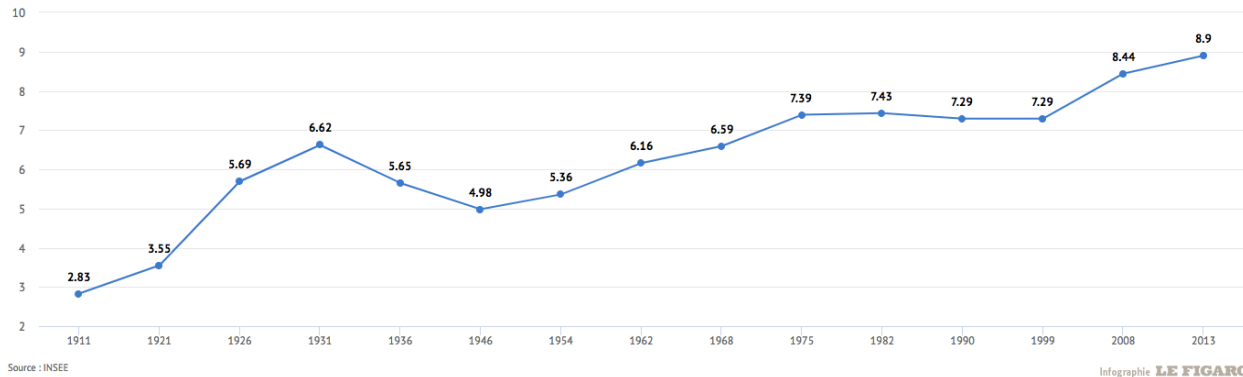


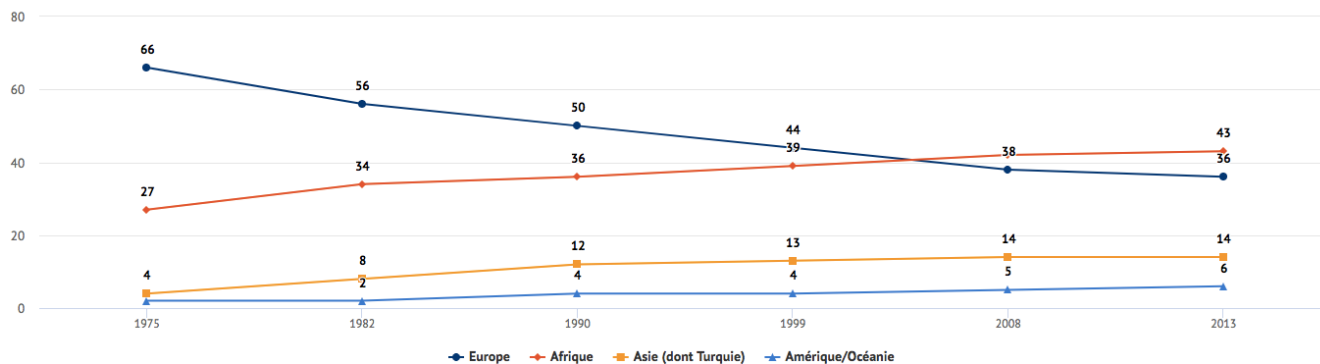
Figure 6: Percentage of immigrants in total French population. Adapted from “Les chiffres de l’immigration en France,” by A. Feetchak, 2018, *Le Figaro*. Retrieved March 4, 2019, from <http://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/2018/06/19/01016-20180619ARTFIG00310-les-chiffres-de-l-immigration-en-france.php>. Copyright 2018 by *Le Figaro*.

According to the most recent data from 2014, immigrants make up 9.1% of the total French population (INSEE, 2018). Correspondingly, the demographics of immigration to France have also continued to change since World War II. Before and immediately following the war, Europeans used to be the dominant group immigrating to France. In 1946, immigrants from North Africa made up 2.3% of the total foreign population, while other populations, originating from European countries, accounted for 88.7% (Stockemer, 2017). In 1962, European populations represented roughly 78.7% of

the foreign population, while immigrants from North Africa only represented 14.9% (Barou, 2014). However, for the rest of the 20th century the percentage of European immigrants moving to France continued to drop.

Origine géographique des immigrés

PAYS DE NAISSANCE DES IMMIGRÉS



Source : INSEE

Infographie LE FIGARO

Figure 7: Geographical origins of immigrants in France. Adapted from “Les chiffres de l’immigration en France” by A. Feetchak, 2018, *Le Figaro*. Retrieved March 17, 2019, from <http://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/2018/06/19/01016-20180619ARTFIG00310-les-chiffres-de-l-immigration-en-france.php>. Copyright 2018 by *Le Figaro*.

In just twenty years the percentage of immigrants coming from Africa had more than doubled. In 1982 the European immigrant proportion of the French foreign population reduced to 56%, whereas the percentage of African immigrants (specifically from the Maghreb¹³) increased to 34% (Barou, 2014). Furthermore, European immigration continued to decrease while African immigration continued to rapidly increase. In 2014, European immigrants made up 36.1% of the foreign population in France, while African immigrants made up 43.8% (INSEE, 2018).

As non-European immigrants, specifically those from predominantly Muslim countries, have become more visible, this has shifted the French public’s perspective on immigration. “One of the most common constructed threats to societal security... is immigration, which is viewed as something that can change the receiving society’s identity by shifting the composition of the population” (Alkopher, 2015, 431). Moreover, a

¹³ Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco; predominantly Muslim region.

study analyzing how immigration impacts voting for far right and far left parties in France, by the IFO Institute found that immigration increases support for French far right candidates (identified as the FN), with little to no impact on voting for far left candidates (Edo, Giesing, Öztunc, & Poutvaara, 2017). “Looking at different immigrant groups shows that the increase in the electoral support for the far-right is driven by low educated immigrants from non-Western countries” (Edo, Giesing, Öztunc, & Poutvaara, 2017, 27). These researchers determine that this is largely a result of concerns over “compositional amenities”, or concerns regarding the population composition of the receiving country in regards to religion, race, ethnicity, culture, etc.

Surveys over the past three years in France and Europe reflect this, indicating that the French public has a more negative attitude regarding immigration to France. The 2016 Eurobarometer shows that the main concerns of the French are both immigration and terrorism (Eurobarometer, 2016). The 2017 Special Eurobarometer reports that there is a disconnection between the French public’s perception of the size of the immigrant population and its actual size. Twenty-one percent of French people estimated that immigrants made up between 12% and 25% of the total population in France (Eurobarometer, 2017). The average respondent estimated that the proportion of immigrants in the country was at 18.1%, while in 2017, immigrants only comprised 8.9% of the total French population (Eurobarometer, 2017). Additionally, this survey showed that the majority of the French population sees immigration from outside the EU as a problem for France, rather than as an opportunity (Eurobarometer, 2017). Thirty-eight percent of French people stated that it was a problem, 32% said that it was both, and only 17% said it was more of an opportunity (Eurobarometer, 2017). Lastly, a survey done by Chatham House, the Institute of International Affairs did a poll in 2017 asking 10,000 people from 10 different European countries if “*all migration from mainly Muslim countries should be stopped*”. Sixty-one percent of French people surveyed agreed that

immigration from Muslim countries should be stopped, 23% said neither agree nor disagree, and only 16% said that they disagree (Chatham House, 2017). Furthermore, this data indicates that a significant portion of the French population sees rising immigration rates and the increasing presence of non-European, specifically Muslim immigrants as a problem and/or threat to the “compositional” wellbeing of the country.

This transition has benefitted the FN by strengthening the appeal of their anti-immigration message. This becomes significantly more evident when comparing the geographic location of immigrations in France (figure 8) and regions where the FN preforms well in elections (figure 9). A study looking at how immigration size impacts voting for the FN, conducted by Daniel Della Posa, asserts that on the regional level, the two are strongly connected. Posa’s research determined that immigrant population size has a positive relation with FN voting on the regional level and a negative relation on the commune level (Della Posa, 2013). Yet, “department *etranger* population’s positive association with [FN] voting is considerably stronger in magnitude than commune *etranger* population’s counteracting negative association” (Della Posa, 2013, 269-270). Thus, in other words, the FN-suppressing effects of the commune level are not strong enough to negate the positive electoral effects of the regional level on the FN.

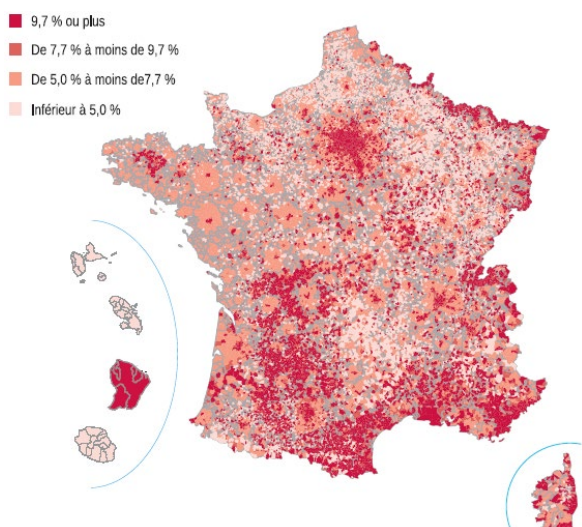
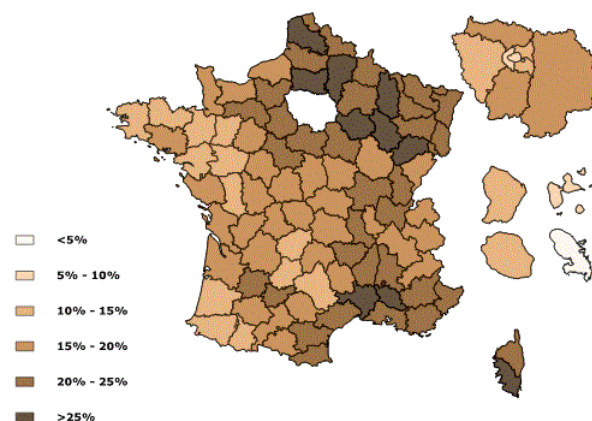


Figure 8: Geographic distribution of immigrants. Adapted from “La localisation géographique des immigrés”, by C. Brutel, 2016, *INSEE: Institut national de la statistique et des études économique*. Retrieved March 4, 2019, from <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/2121524>. Copyright 2016 by INSEE.

Élection présidentielle 2012 - premier tour : Le Pen (17,90%)



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Figure 9: FN 2012 presidential election results by region. Adapted from “Les résultats électoraux du Front National” by L. de Boissieu, 2015, *France Politique*. Retrieved March 2, 2019, from <http://www.france-politique.fr/elections-fn.htm>. Copyright 2015 by Laurent de Boissieu pour France-politique.fr.

In conjunction with Della Posa's study, these results indicate that there is a correlation between voter support for the FN on a regional level and large immigrant populations in the South of France. This is predominately true in Southern France, where immigration appears to be the highest (outside of Paris). In a poll conducted by Le Monde in 2013 that interviewed voters specifically from the South of France, 97% of them emphasized that "*il y a trop d'immigrés en France*"¹⁴ and 85% of them stated "*je ne me sent plus en sécurité*"¹⁵ (Mestre, 2013).

These southern regions, with increasing non-European immigrant populations, have become a center for reactionary anti-immigration attitudes because most of the French see these changing immigration trends as a visible threat, legitimizing the anti-immigration rhetoric of the FN from the perspective of southern voters and creating a strong regional voter base for the party.

Political: The Sarkozy and Hollande Presidencies

A. The Sarkozy Administration (2007-2012)

Nicolas Sarkozy played an important role in integrating the FN ideology into mainstream politics in two notable ways. First, Sarkozy largely legitimized and normalized the FN's platform. Throughout his 2007 and 2012 presidential campaigns, as well as during his presidency, Sarkozy capitalized on the rhetoric of the FN in order to attract the support of Le Pen's electorate. While he is not the first mainstream politician to embrace neo-nationalist tendencies in order to get elected into office. Sarkozy is seen as a central figure for this legitimization of the FN's ideas since no other politicians had

¹⁴ Translation: "there are too many immigrants in France."

¹⁵ Translation: "I no longer feel safe."

made use of this rhetoric “in such a persistent and open manner [as he has]” (Mondon, 2013, 29).

Most evident was Sarkozy’s appropriation of the FN’s populist, exclusionary, and apocalyptic/fear-based language. Sarkozy promoted himself as ‘the voice of the people’ yet used strategic language to create his own exclusionary version of ‘the people’. “He emphasized the division between those who worked hard and those who did not; those who deserved help, empathy and sympathy, and those who were responsible for their exclusion; those who worked hard to be French and those who did not and should leave” (Mondon, 2013, 31). He fabricated a polarizing narrative that positioned the French public (‘the people’) against a common, “threatening” enemy (the corrupted elites, the left, Muslims, “non-assimilated” immigrants). Furthermore, similarly to Le Pen, Sarkozy then used this “enemy” as a scapegoat for the problems in France (Mayaffre & Scholz, 2017).

During his campaign for the 2007 presidential election, Sarkozy made the claim that France was experiencing a crisis of national identity. He argued, “Our republican model is in crisis. This crisis is first and foremost a moral crisis...a crisis of values, a crisis of landmarks, a crisis of meaning, a crisis of identity. The denigration of the nation is at the heart of this crisis” (Mondon, 2013, 33). He argued that people had stopped being proud of their Frenchness and that if he was elected, he would revitalize the French identity (Mondon, 2014). In doing so, Sarkozy was not attempting to address systemic failures or problems within the French state (Mondon, 2013). Rather, he was fostering fear and promoting the FN’s exclusionary conception of French identity, in which those who were “deviant” from traditional French culture became the “Other” and were portrayed as responsible for this crisis. He, therefore, fabricated connections between immigration and this crisis of identity as well as immigration and security.

In order to avoid being labeled as racist, Sarkozy's rhetoric promoted a dichotomy that shifted the focus from heredity (who has French blood) to integration (who is compatible with French culture). Consequently, this divided immigrants into two groups: those who deserved to become French (immigrants who came legally and had assimilated into French society) and those who did not (immigrants who had come illegally and/or appeared to be holding on to their original culture) (Mondon, 2013). This second group, which more often than not was depicted as the Muslim community, was accused of taking advantage of France by stealing social services, jobs, housing, and money that rightfully belonged to French citizens; therefore being a threat to the financial and economic wellbeing of France. Additionally, their portrayed incompatibility with French values was also perceived as a threat to the preservation and longevity of French culture.

After Sarkozy won the presidential election of 2007 and entered into office, his rhetoric and actions continued to match the discourse of the FN. He restricted immigration laws and significantly reduced the rights of immigrants, arguing that in doing so it would improve the state of France (Gastaut, 2012). However, he continued to use these populations as scapegoats and specifically targeted the Muslim community. In 2009 Sarkozy declared, "the burqa is not welcome on the Republic's territory. It does not fit with the Republican concept of the dignity of women" (Gastaut, 2012, 339). Subsequently in 2010, *Loi interdisant la dissimulation du visage dans l'espace public* (the law prohibiting concealment of the face in public space) was passed in the Senate, prohibiting women from wearing veils and attire that covers the face in public (such as the burqa and niqab), which can be seen largely as a tool to specifically discriminate against Muslims (Gastaut, 2012). Moreover, this discrimination continued in 2011 as Sarkozy outlawed street prayers, originally Le Pen's idea (Vinocur, 2011). However, this was a clear, strategic attempt by Sarkozy to attract the FN's electorate to his side for the

2012 presidential election, as he had done in 2007. Moreover, in an interview in 2012, Sarkozy solidified the FN's normalization even more by stating that Marine Le Pen's FN was a "democratic party" and that their values were "in accordance with the values of the Republic" (Mondon 2014, 311). However, by the election in 2012, Sarkozy's use of the FN's rhetoric had altered how people perceived Le Pen and her party, making the FN's rhetoric and platform "widely accepted as part of the political establishment, clear of stigma" (Mondon, 2013, 38).

Second, Sarkozy's other main contribution to the rise of the FN is that his presidency furthered the French public's distrust for the traditional political parties. Figure 10 shows Sarkozy's popularity ratings throughout his presidency (2007-2012).

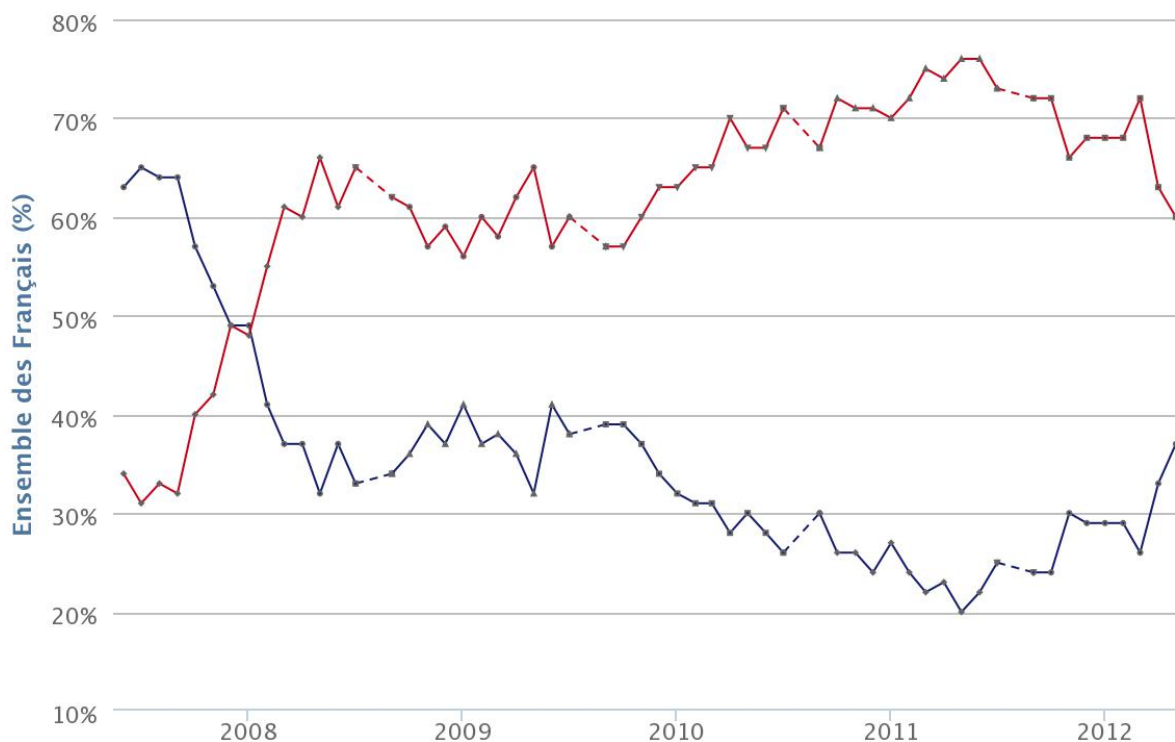


Figure 10: Nicolas Sarkozy's approval ratings (2007-2012). Adapted from "Cote de confiance - Nicolas Sarkozy" by Baromètre Kantar TNS / Figaro-Magazine, n.d., Kantar TNS. Retrieved March 15, 2019, from https://www.tns-sofres.com/dataviz?code_nom=sarkozy&type=1. Copyright 2019 by Kantar TNS.

Sarkozy remained the most popular at the beginning of his presidency (see figure 10). In July 2007, 65% of the French population expressed having confidence in the new president, while only 34% did not (Kantar TNS). A year later this had drastically changed. In July 2008 only 33% of the French population expressed having confidence in Sarkozy, while 65% expressed having no confidence (Kantar TNS). His approval ratings wavered throughout his presidency, slightly increasing and decreasing, but never going above 41% (Kantar TNS). By the end of his presidency, only 37% of the public expressed having confidence in him, while 60% disapproved of him (Kantar TNS).

This data demonstrates the French public's lack of trust in Sarkozy. His presidency revealed that there were inconsistencies between his actions/policies and what he had promised during his campaign. When elected Sarkozy vowed to transform

France in a way that would benefit the poor, those who felt scorned by globalization, and those who felt neglected by the traditional French parties. Yet, during his presidency there was little to no economic growth, tax reforms were passed that benefitted the elite, unemployment skyrocketed, government spending was cut, purchasing power was diminished and France lost its AAA credit rating (Erlanger, 2012; Chrisafis, 2012). Many of the people he initially claimed to represent were worse off following his time in office. Despite the impacts of the Global Economic Crisis, it was clear that in general his actions fell short of his campaign promises (Gastaut, 2012). Sarkozy's emphasis on security, immigration, and identity generated more fear and insecurity in France, but his policies (such as tightening of immigration) did not ameliorate the condition of the French state.

The public's dissatisfaction with Sarkozy, undoubtedly unfolded as dissatisfaction and distrust for his party, the *Union pour un Mouvement Populaire* (UMP):

Presidential unpopularity translated into electoral defeats for the UMP.

The least poor result was that of the 2009 European elections, when the center-left's vote split between Socialists and Greens and made the UMP's 27.8% look respectable. But at the municipal elections of March 2008, the regionals of March 2010, and the cantonales of 2011, the UMP lost ground. [As a result of this] some UMP candidates, indeed, avoided association with the president" (Knapp, 2013, p. 440-441).

This unpopularity and division within the UMP largely favored the FN in two significant ways. First, electoral defeat and internal turmoil, due, in part, to public dissatisfaction with the Sarkozy, resulted in the UMP dissolving in 2015. Following Sarkozy's loss in the 2012 presidential election, his reputation had severely been smeared and French voters had largely disregarded the UMP. As the UMP had been a significant competitor for the FN in elections, its fall aided the neo-nationalist party by

making it the central contender for the right-wing electorate (Mondon, 2013). Second, it augmented anti-establishment sentiments and distrust of traditional right-wing parties. Sarkozy's presidency communicated to the public that dominant/mainstream right-wing parties, such as the UMP, were unable to effectively address the problems plaguing France because they were part of the problem. This furthered the appeal that the FN was the alternative party France needed in order to be "restored".

B. The Hollande Administration (2012-2017)

In response to Sarkozy's presidency, the French public gravitated to the other side of the political spectrum, electing François Hollande (leader of the *Parti Socialist* (PS)) as president in 2012. Sarkozy's presidency communicated to the public that the French traditional right parties were unable to address the problems facing the French. It can be assumed that France elected Hollande with the hopes that the traditional left would be able to do what the traditional right could not.

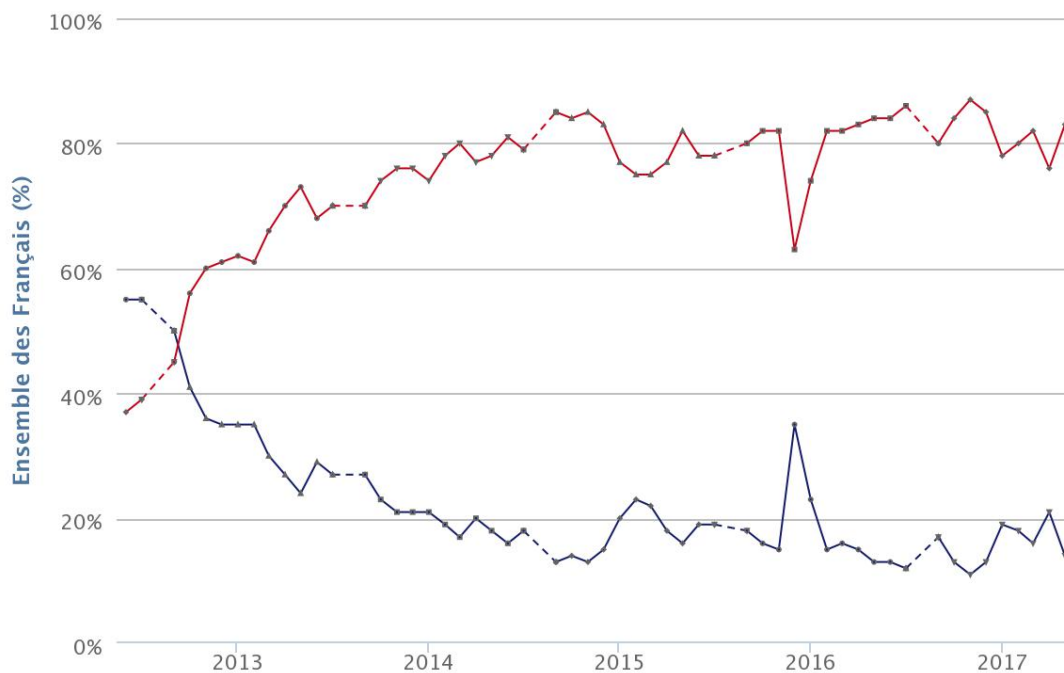


Figure 11: François Hollande's approval ratings (mid-2012 to 2017). Adapted from "Cote de confiance - François Hollande", Baromètre Kantar TNS / Figaro-Magazine, n.d., *Kantar TNS*. Retrieved March 15, 2019 from https://www.tns-sofres.com/dataviz?type=1&code_nom=hollande. Copyright 2019 by Kantar TNS.

Just after taking office, Hollande had an approval rating of 61% (Kuhn, 2014). However, by the end 2012, this had drastically changed (figure 11). For the rest of his presidency, Hollande had particularly low approval ratings, remaining below 30% from 2013 to mid-2015 (Kantar TNS). His ratings only improved in November 2015, following the terrorist attack in Paris, increasing to 35% in December of that year (Kantar TNS). By February 2016, however, his ratings had dropped again: 15% of the French public expressed having confidence in Hollande, while an overwhelming 82% expressed dissatisfaction (Kantar TNS).

Hollande's unpopularity is attributed to his inability to uphold his campaign promises, specifically regarding unemployment and economic growth, during his time in office.

Hollande came to power at a time when the French economy was performing poorly, as evidenced by low levels of economic growth (0.3% in 2012, 0.3% in 2013 and 0% in each of the first two quarters of 2014)—compared with 2.4 % in 2007, the year in which Sarkozy came to power. Public debt has also increased: 90.6% of GDP by the end of 2012 and 93.5% by the end of 2013—compared with 63.2% at the end of 2007 (Kuhn, 2014, p. 441).

As a result of this economic background, Hollande was unable to reduce the unemployment rate. When Hollande came into office unemployment was at 9.7% (Kuhn, 2014). The unemployment rate continued to skyrocket throughout the course of his presidency, peaking in 2015 at 10.39% (World Bank, 2018). The economy of France continued to remain in crisis, making Hollande appear ineffective and useless:

“Despite several policy measures to try and aid those seeking work, specifically the youth, the president’s pledge on employment could not be achieved because a sufficiently high level of economic growth (it is generally agreed that around 1.5% is required to have an impact on employment) was not forthcoming” (Kuhn, 2014, p. 441).

Populations hit the hardest by this economic instability were those of low education levels and skills – specifically those working manufacturing jobs (Kuhn, 2014). Yet, this portion of the population was traditionally the main electorate of the PS (Kuhn, 2014). Furthermore, as a result of Hollande’s presidency, people lost trust in the left, exemplified by Benoît Hamon, the PS candidate in the 2017 presidential election.¹⁶

Betrayed by Sarkozy (UMP) and then Hollande (PS), it became clearer from the perspective of the public that these traditional parties were no longer able to address the

¹⁶ Hamon was the PS candidate in the 2017 presidential election and was unable to make to the second round of voting. As already stated, the PS has been one of the two major parties in France since the establishment of the Fifth Republic. Moreover, the fact that Hamon, as the PS candidate, was unable to make it to the second round of voting is indicative of the party’s loss of support.

needs and concerns of the French people. Hereby strengthened the appeal of the FN as an alternative party, neither for the left nor the right, but rather for the French.

Discussion and analysis of interactions

Separately, each of these transformations benefited the FN, as each presented an economic, social, and political justification for supporting the party. However, by examining how these transformations interacted and intersected with one another, it provides a more holistic understanding of how these transformations strengthened the rise of the FN.

The economic recession of 2008 strengthened the appeal of the FN's protectionist approach, particularly in regions with high unemployment and low economic growth. Rising immigration rates and the increasing presence of non-European, specifically Muslim immigrants complemented this protectionist stance because it reinforced the FN's claim that there is a connection between immigration and unemployment. Sarkozy, through his appropriation of the FN's rhetoric, asserted that there was also a relationship between immigration, security, and national identity. Thus, normalizing the FN's rhetoric and ideology. Moreover, the economic recession of 2008, and its lasting grip on the French economy/unemployment, greatly contributed to the public's dissatisfaction with both Sarkozy and Hollande, thus indirectly strengthening anti-establishment sentiments and reinforcing the appeal of the FN as an 'alternative' political party.

Above all else these factors demonstrate how the FN benefits from crisis and fear. The rhetoric surrounding these transformations communicates to the French public that their country is in a state of "crisis": an economic crisis, an identity/security crisis, and a political crisis. The FN's platform underscores this, promoting the idea that the French state has been weakened and made vulnerable by the globalized world (as well as the missteps of past presidential administrations). Moreover, these crisis translate into fears: the fear of another global recession; the fear that French culture is being

threatened by the presence of “incompatible” cultures and religions; and the fear that the French government is ineffective and unable to tackle these “crises”, thus resulting in their permanency. Consequently, when people are afraid for their safety and wellbeing they are drawn to what they believe is going to protect them. The FN has built their image around *la préférence nationale* and the idea that they prioritize and protect the wellbeing of the French people. The FN thrives and gains power/influence in times of heightened instability and crises in society because fear of difference (and what could result of it) is the basis of their ideology. This is exemplified by how the FN tends to win the most votes in regions with high unemployment, low economic growth, and/or large immigrant populations, because these are the areas where these ‘crises’ are the most visible. Furthermore, this is, in part, what distinguishes the FN from other extremist groups: the Front National is strategic, adaptive and during times of crisis, when chaos ensues, it is at its strongest.

Conclusion

This paper identified how the 2008-09 Global Economic crisis, shifting and increasing immigration trends, and the presidencies of Nicolas Sarkozy and François Hollande interacted with one another to strengthen the rise of the French neo-nationalist party, the Front National. Ultimately, these transformations collectively support the notion that France is in a state of crisis, requiring an alternative party to take power, therefore bolstering the appeal of the FN.

It is important to note the limitations of this analysis. Realistically, there are a number of other transformations that have contributed to the success of FN that have not been covered in this paper, such as how other French politicians (besides Sarkozy and Hollande) have normalized and legitimized the values/beliefs of the party or the way

*la laïcité*¹⁷ is implemented in France. Additionally, this analysis and understanding of how these transformations interact is also limited in this paper. Moreover, this analysis is not meant to be limiting or to provide a relatively simple explanation for a very complex situation. Rather, it is meant to contribute to a general gap in research regarding how multiple transformations have collectively bolstered the popularity of the FN and it is meant to be a starting point from which other researchers may build.

Following Macron's victory in the 2017 election, many assumed that this symbolized the end of the FN. It represented that France was willing to try new 'alternatives' to traditional political parties (i.e. Macron's centrist political platform), rather than accepting the exclusionary neo-nationalist platform of the FN. However, Le Pen's loss did not mean that the FN was finished in French politics, nor did it symbolize a much larger rejection of neo-nationalism around the world. During this election Le Pen won a historical amount of votes for her party. Moreover, since 2017, other neo-nationalist politicians have made instrumental gains in their own countries, such as Jair Bolsonaro winning the 2018 presidential election or Matteo Salvini serving as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior of Italy since mid-2018. In the recent 2019 European Parliament elections, neo-nationalist parties made headlines not only because there was a historic number of these parties on ballots, but also because of their electoral results: The Front National, the League (Italy), the Freedom Party (Austria), the Swedish Democrats (Sweden), the National Alliance (Latvia), the Alternative for Germany, and several others all winning majorities within their respective countries (Damgé & Breteau, 2019).¹⁸

¹⁷ In simple terms, *la laïcité* is the French conception of secularism.

¹⁸ The FN won 23.3% of votes, the League won 34.3%, the Freedom Party won 17.2%, the Swedish Democrats won 15.4%, the National Alliance won 16.4%, and the Alternative for Germany won 11%.

Arguably now more than ever it is important to understand where the support and power of the FN comes from as it not only provides powerful insights about other neo-nationalists parties but is also important for the future of France. Since his inauguration in 2017, Macron and his policies have remained particularly unpopular, as indicated most recently by *Mouvement des gilets jaunes* (yellow vests movement), which calls for his resignation among other demands. The general dissatisfaction in France regarding Macron, among people who did not vote for him as well as those who did, could mean that Le Pen and her party are seen as the best option for the French presidential election of 2022.

Word count: 8,274

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