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Austin Nelson  
*Seattle University*

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

**Austin Nelson, International Studies and French**

**Faculty Mentor: Maria Léon**

**Faculty Content Editor: Nova Robinson, PhD**

**Student Editor: Allie Schiele**

## Abstract

When the FN was founded in the early 1970s it was widely irrelevant. However, over the past three decades, the party has managed to enter into and reshape mainstream French politics. In the 1980s, economic, social, and political transformations aided the FN in their popularization. This paper looks at how similar transformations in the 21<sup>st</sup> 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 2008-2009 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 a sense of crisis.

*Keywords:* Front National, neo-nationalism, France

# Introduction

Emanuel Macron's victory over Marine Le Pen in the 2017 presidential election was perceived as a symbolic rejection, not just of Le Pen's party, the Front National (FN), but also of a larger, growing movement of nationalist resistance to globalization that had been gaining popularity, known as neo-nationalism. The 2017 election was thought to have demonstrated 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 French voters had renounced the FN, nor did it symbolize a much larger rejection of neo-nationalism around the world. Le Pen's electoral results were historic for the party, as approximately 11 million French people voted for her in the second round, which were the most votes the FN had ever received. Rather than signifying the demise of the Front National, this election demonstrated that the party has become a serious political force in France.

Overall, this paper seeks to understand the nature of neo-nationalist parties by exploring both why the Front National has gained popularity in the 2010s and the origins of the party's power and support. This paper argues that just as economic, social, and political transformations aided the FN's popularization in the 1980s, similar transformations have taken place in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that have aided the party's resurgence. The consequences of the 2008-2009 economic recession, changing immigration trends, and the presidencies of Nicolas Sarkozy and François Hollande have interacted with one another to benefit the Front National. Collectively, these transformations have heightened fears and promoted the idea that France is in a state of crisis, legitimizing the message of the FN and demonstrating how the FN draws power from instability, fear, and crisis.

## Historical Context: The Rise and Resurgence of the Front National

When Jean-Maire Le Pen founded the Front National in 1972, the party was not able to gain much support. The FN strove to present itself as a right-wing populist, anti-communist, and xenophobic movement advocating for the shrinkage of the public sector, lessening of state intervention, and drastic immigration restrictions (Davies, 1999). However, their political platform elicited no significant electoral response for nearly a decade, as it was seen as an extremist party that did not reflect the concerns of the public or the political agenda in France at the time.

The initial rise of the Front National took place during the 1980s and is linked to specific social, economic, and political transformations that occurred in France during this period. These transformations made the political platform of the FN more appealing as it brought some of the party's main issues to the forefront of the political agenda, which the FN then exploited in order to legitimize and develop its platform (Bréchon & Mitra, 1992). First, the country experienced an economic crisis in the late 1970s and early 1980s, which resulted in rising unemployment and diminished economic growth. Although President Mitterrand sought to implement neo-Keynesian economic policy to counteract economic turmoil, unemployment only increased, leaving many voters unhappy with the economic state of France (Stockemer, 2017). Second, immigration became a more pertinent issue in France due to Mitterrand's easing of immigration policy and an increase in immigrants from North Africa (Stockemer, 2017). These demographic changes began raising fears about increased crime rates in social housing projects (Stockemer, 2017). Lastly, in 1985 President Mitterrand changed the French electoral system from a plurality voting system to a party-list proportional representation system (Miller, 1986). This change made it easier for smaller parties like the FN to win seats in legislative bodies, explaining the party's electoral success in the 1986 legislative election.

The FN exploited the economic crisis, the changing economy, electoral system, and immigration trends in the 1980s by reshaping their political platform to center on immigration and security (Stockemer, 2017). The party used these changes within France in order to advance xenophobic and authoritarian sentiments in French politics, purporting 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's ability to address key voter issues (Stockemer, 2017). The FN 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 FN's ability to use these economic, social, and political transformations to its advantage helped the party achieve its first electoral successes. 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).

During the 1990s, globalization became an important issue in French national politics,

in part a result of the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, which established the European Union and eventually led to the creation of the Euro. In response to the treaty, 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). Opposition to globalization was incorporated into the party's populist rhetoric by "[modifying] 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). This seemed to further their popularity, as in 1993 the party won 12.7% of the votes in the parliamentary election and 14.9% five years later (Norsk Senter for Forskningdata, n.d.). In 1995, Le Pen captured 15% of the votes in the presidential election, a record percentage for the party at the time (Norsk Senter for Forskningdata, 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). During this time many parties began appropriating elements of Le Pen's anti-immigration rhetoric as a strategy to advance their own political agendas. However, this worked to the FN's advantage, giving credibility to its rhetoric (Stockemer, 2017). 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 for the second round of voting (Stockemer, 2017). However, this sparked massive anti-FN mobilization. The defeated PS candidate Lionel Jospin called for voters to unite, regardless of political affiliations, and vote for Jacques 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, accompanied by racist and anti-Semitic comments from Le Pen and internal turmoil within the party, caused long-term damage to the FN and resulted in the party's subsequent alienation by the French public. The loss of the FN's electorate is exemplified by Jean-Marie Le Pen's performance in the 2007 presidential election, as he did not receive enough votes to qualify for the second round.

However, since Marine Le Pen took her father's place as leader of the FN in 2011, the party has experienced a revival. After becoming president, Le Pen launched a *dédiabolisation* ("de-demonization") campaign as a strategy to reverse the French public's negative perception of the party (Beardsley, 2017). This has included expelling controversial members, softening aspects of the party's political agenda, as well as altering the rhetoric of the FN (Stockemer & Barisione, 2017). Marine Le Pen reshaped the party's discourse to minimize its infamous xenophobic messages and replace it with more "respectful" populist rhetoric. While the party under Jean-Marie Le Pen was also characterized as populist, it was the radical element that prevailed, typically manifesting in racist, sexist, and anti-Semitic comments (Stockemer &

Barisione, 2017). Moving away from these radical elements, Marine Le Pen aimed to present the FN as a moderate party, as exemplified by her recent move to change the name of the party from *le Front National* to *le Rassemblement National*. However, her strategy was more indicative of a ploy to distance and disassociate the party from its fascist roots, rather than an actual change in the party's ideology. *Rassemblement* ("gathering" or "rally") has historically been affiliated with traditional right parties, while *Front* has been associated with radical parties on either side of the political spectrum.

There are very few ideological differences between the "old" FN of Jean-Marie Le Pen and the "new" FN of Marine Le Pen. The Front National continues to focus on the concepts of nation and identity, with a neo-nationalist ideology centered on preserving French national identity, society, and culture (Davies, 1999). The FN operates as the self-proclaimed "protector" of France, portraying the French nation as weak and vulnerable to the consequences of globalization and transnational issues like immigration, which threaten the state and therefore the French identity (Stockemer & Barisione, 2017). It is evident that the central basis for the FN, as with other neo-nationalist parties, is not an adherence to rightist or the leftist beliefs. Rather, its basis is rooted in promoting and defending the nation and national identity; thus, directly informing its political, economic, and social agendas. Due to this, the FN's platform tends to overlap with both right-wing and left-wing values. While the FN shares common ideological characteristics with the right, such as an emphasis on traditional values and anti-immigration rhetoric, the party's economic ideology departs from typical right-wing views. Additionally, the FN shares the far-left's anti-establishment populism, a disdain for supranational organizations, and support for social welfare programs. However, 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).

Due to the changing global context and trends, neo-nationalist parties typically have to adjust how they promote their political agenda in order to remain popular, as explicitly exclusionary, racist, or xenophobic rhetoric is becoming more unacceptable (Banks & Marcus, 2006). In this way, Le Pen's emphasis on reshaping the FN's discourse can be perceived as an attempt to remain in mainstream politics by dismissing the party's racist origins, concealing the fact that the party maintains the same ideology, and using these tactics to appeal to a wider audience. However, this shift in discourse alone cannot explain the party's recent popularity. Rather, the FN's re-emergence in French politics echoes its initial rise in the 1980s. The economic, social, and political transformations that enabled the FN to first come to power in the 1980s mirror the global economic crisis of 2008-2009, changing immigration trends, as well as the presidencies of Nicolas Sarkozy and François Hollande. These contemporary transformations have collectively strengthened the rise of the FN in the 21<sup>st</sup> by causing instability and provoking fear.

# Factors that have Contributed to the Rise of the Front National in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

## Economic: Global Crisis of 2008-2009

Economic instability is one of the most commonly cited contributing factors to the rise of the FN, as the party tends to gain more votes during periods of high unemployment and low economic growth. According to a study conducted by Manuel Funke, Moritz Schularick, and Christoph Trebesch (2015), far-right parties are the largest beneficiaries of economic crises. According to their research, “in general, voting for far-right parties increases from about 6% to about 10% following a financial crisis” (Funke, Schularick, & Trebesch, 2015, p. 14). In recent years, neo-nationalist and right-wing populist parties have benefited more from economic instability than traditional extreme right parties, having more pronounced spikes in electoral gains. As a result of these voting trends, the strengthening of opposition forces increases fragmentation within national political systems, resulting in a weaker and less effective government (Funke et al., 2015). These developments can hinder crisis resolution due to political polarization, therefore slowing down a country’s economic recovery.

Since the 2008-2009 global recession, France’s inconstant economic state mirrors the economic conditions that are conducive to the rise of neo-nationalist parties. France’s GDP has continuously fluctuated since 2009, yet it has not returned to its peak level in 2008. In 2015, GDP reached its lowest point since the beginning of the recession, leveling at \$2.438 trillion (World Bank, n.d.). However, since this point, France’s GDP has been slowly increasing, reaching \$2.583 trillion in 2017 (World Bank, n.d.). France’s total unemployment rate followed a similar pattern, gradually rising until reaching 10.36% in 2015, France’s highest rate since 1999 (World Bank, 2018). After peaking in 2015, France’s rate of unemployment has been slowly declining, reaching 8.812% in 2018 (World Bank, 2018).

Yet it is during this period of economic instability in France that the Front National made significant gains in their electoral success. The party experienced an approximate 10% vote increase in both departmental and legislative elections between the 2007-2008 and 2011-2012 elections. In the 2012 presidential election, Le Pen almost doubled her vote share compared to her father’s 2007 election results (Norsk Senter for Forskningdata, n.d.). Furthermore, in the 2009 European Parliament election, the party only won 6.34% of the vote, obtaining only four seats in the parliament and placing sixth nationally. Yet, in 2014, the FN won the majority by achieving 24.86% of the vote, which allotted them 24 of the 74 seats in parliament (European Parliament, 2014).

These electoral gains demonstrate how during periods of economic instability, the political rhetoric of neo-nationalist parties tends to have a greater appeal to voters. The FN’s economic agenda promotes economic “patriotism” and national preference, demonstrated



through proposals to implement high taxes on companies that manufacture their products outside of France or to revert back to using the Franc (“Le programme de Marine Le Pen”, 2012). France’s period of economic turmoil creates an appealing climate for the economic platform of the FN, as French people experiencing the consequences of economic instability are going to respond more positively to this platform since they are fearful for their livelihoods and wellbeing.

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. In 2012, unemployment rates were the lowest towards the North, as seen in Somme Aisne (department 2; 13.83%) and Pas-de-Calais (department 62; 12.79%), and towards the South of France, in Pyrénées-Orientales (department 66; 13.67%) and Hérault (department 34; 13.77%) (Actualix, 2012). Based on the FN’s regional results in the 2012 presidential election, 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 appear to have voted the most for the FN (Norsk Senter for Forskningdata, n.d.) Therefore, these numbers suggest that regions of high unemployment tend to be significant electoral bases for the FN.

The FN tends to gain votes in regions plagued by unemployment and economic turmoil. Departments in the North and South were hit the hardest by the 2008 economic crisis, predisposing these regions to economic hardship. As a result of their status as centers of industrialized economic activity in decline, these regions had higher unemployment rates and lower wages compared to other regions in France. However, the recession caused unemployment in these areas to rapidly increase while economic productivity quickly declined. France’s economic crisis became particularly visible within these areas, heightening fears within the region. Likewise, lingering economic instability, as well as the French government’s inability to alleviate the situation, not only intensified economic insecurities in the region, but also made people fearful of globalization and neo-liberalism. The fear and insecurities sparked by the 2008 economic crisis have boosted the appeal of the FN’s protectionist and exclusionary platform.

## **Social: Changing Immigration Trends**

The FN is arguably the most well-known for its anti-immigration stance that has been central to its ideology since its founding. When the FN made its first significant electoral gains in the 1980s, immigration trends in France were changing, as more people from non-European countries were moving to France. As immigration from outside Europe continues to steadily

increase in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, so have the public's fears about the impact of immigration on French society. The combination of these trends reinforces the FN's message that immigration is something to be feared.

During World War II and its immediate aftermath, Europeans were the dominant group immigrating to France. In 1946, immigrants from North Africa made up 2.3% of the total foreign population, while European immigrants accounted for 88.7% (Stockemer, 2017). However, for the rest of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the percentage of European immigrants moving to France continued to drop. By 1982, the percentage of European immigrants in France's foreign population reduced to 56%, whereas the percentage of African immigrants increased to 34% (Barou, 2014). Furthermore, European immigration has continued to decrease while African immigration continued to rapidly increase. According to the most recent data on immigration trends published in 2014, immigrants made up 9.1% of the total French population (National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies, 2018). Within this percentage, European immigrants made up 36.1% of the foreign population in France, while African immigrants made up 43.8% (National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies, 2018).

Increased visibility of non-European immigrants within France has shifted the public's perspective on immigration, specifically heightening concerns regarding the increase in immigrants from predominately Muslim countries. Immigration trends, like those France has experienced, are "one of the most common constructed threats to societal security . . . which is viewed as something that can change the receiving society's identity by shifting the composition of the population" (Alkopher, 2015, p. 431). A study by the Ifo Institute that analyzed how immigration impacts voting for far-right and far-left parties in France found that immigration increases support for far-right candidates, with little to no impact on voting for far-left candidates (Edo, Giesing, Öztunc, & Poutvaara, 2017). According to this study, "looking at different immigrant groups shows that the increase in the electoral support for the far-right is driven by [the presence of] low educated immigrants from non-Western countries" (Edo et al., 2017, p. 27). These researchers determined that heightened negative attitudes towards immigration are largely a result of concerns over "compositional amenities", or concerns regarding population composition of the receiving country in regards to characteristics like religion, race, ethnicity, and culture (Edo et al., 2017).

Surveys over the past three years in France echo the findings of the Ifo Institute's study, indicating that the French public has a more negative attitude regarding immigration. The 2016 Eurobarometer, which measures public opinion in EU member states about various topics, shows that the two main concerns of the French are immigration and terrorism (European Commission, 2016). The 2017 Special Eurobarometer reports that there is a disconnect between the French public's perception of the size of the immigrant population and its actual size. In this report, about 21% of the French public estimated that immigrants made up between

12% and 25% of the total population in France (European Commission, 2017). The average respondent estimated that the proportion of immigrants in the country was at 18.1%, while in actuality immigrants only comprised 9.1% of the total population (European Commission, 2017). Additionally, this survey showed that 38% of the French population sees immigration from outside the EU as a problem for France rather than an opportunity, while only 17% believed the opposite (European Commission, 2017). Lastly, a survey conducted by the Institute of International Affairs at the Chatham House did a poll in 2017 asking 10,000 people from 10 different European countries if “all migration from mainly Muslim countries should be stopped” (Chatham House, 2017). In this survey, about 61% of French people surveyed agreed that immigration from Muslim countries should be stopped, whereas only 16% disagreed with this statement (Chatham House, 2017). This data indicates that a significant portion of the French population sees rising immigration rates and the increasing presence of non-European, Muslim immigrants as a threat to the compositional “well-being” of the country.

Increasing immigration and heightened anti-immigration sentiments in France have benefitted the FN by strengthening the appeal of their anti-immigration message. This development becomes significantly more evident when comparing the geographic location of immigrants in France with the regions where the FN performs well in elections. A study conducted by Daniel Della Posa discovered a strong regional connection between immigration size and voter support for the FN. Della Posa’s research determined that immigrant population size has a positive relationship with FN support on a department level and a negative relationship on a commune level (Della Posa, 2013). However, Della Posa concludes that “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, pp. 269-270). Thus, in other words, the FN-suppressing effects of the commune electorate have not been strong enough to negate the party’s positive electoral effects on the regional level.

Della Posa’s finding that large immigrant populations positively impact regional electoral support for the FN is exemplified by the party’s electoral success in Southern France, where immigration appears to be the highest outside of Paris. In a poll conducted by Le Monde in 2013, 97% of voters from Southern France emphasized that “there are too many immigrants in France,” and 85% of them stated, “I no longer feel safe” (Mestre, 2013). As non-European immigration has become more visible within southern regions, many voters perceive it as a threat. In return this fear has made reactionary anti-immigration attitudes and the rhetoric of the FN more appealing, creating a strong regional voter base for the party.

## **Political: The Sarkozy and Hollande Presidencies**

### 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, Sarkozy capitalized on the rhetoric of the FN in order to attract the support of Marine Le Pen's electorate. While he is not the first mainstream politician to embrace the FN's neo-nationalist discourse in order to win an election, Sarkozy is seen as a central figure for the legitimization of the party's ideas since no other politicians had made use of this rhetoric "in such a persistent and open manner [as he has]" (Mondon, 2013, p. 29).

Sarkozy's role is most evident in his appropriation of the FN's populist, exclusionary, and fear-based language. During his 2007 presidential campaign, Sarkozy claimed 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, p. 33). Sarkozy claimed that people had stopped being proud of their "Frenchness" and that if he was elected, he would revitalize the French identity (Mondon, 2014). However, 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. Consequently, Sarkozy fabricated connections between immigration and this identity crisis, 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 to integration. Consequently, this divided immigrants into two groups: immigrants who came legally and assimilated into French society, thus deserving to be French, and immigrants who had come illegally and/or appeared to be holding on to their original culture, therefore undeserving of becoming French (Mondon, 2013). This second group, often depicted as the Muslim community, was seen as a threat to the economic well-being of France through accusations this group was taking advantage of France by stealing social services, jobs, housing, and money that rightfully belonged to French citizens. Additionally, the portrayed incompatibility of these immigrants with French values was perceived as a threat to the preservation and longevity of French culture.

After Sarkozy entered office in 2007, 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). Moreover, he continued to use these populations as scapegoats and specifically targeted

the Muslim community. In 2009, Sarkozy declared that “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, p. 339). Subsequently, in 2010 the *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. This law prohibited women from wearing veils and attire that covered the face in public, such as the burqa and niqab, and was largely seen as a tool to specifically discriminate against Muslims (Gastaut, 2012). Sarkozy’s targeted discrimination continued in 2011 after he outlawed street prayers, an idea originally devised by Marine Le Pen (Vinocur, 2011). This was a clear, strategic attempt by Sarkozy to attract the FN’s electorate to his side for the 2012 presidential election, similar to his strategy from the 2007 election. Moreover, in an interview in 2012, Sarkozy solidified the FN’s normalization even further, stating that Marine Le Pen’s FN was a “democratic party” and their values were “in accordance with the values of the Republic” (Mondon 2014, p. 311). However, by the election in 2012, Sarkozy’s use of the FN’s rhetoric 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, p. 38).

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. Sarkozy’s approval rating during his presidency is indicative of the French public’s lack of trust in his leadership. Although his popularity peaked at the beginning of his presidency with an approval rating of 65% in July 2007, a year later the public’s support of Sarkozy drastically changed (Kantar TNS, 2012). In July 2008, only 33% of the French population expressed confidence in Sarkozy, while 65% expressed having no confidence (Kantar TNS, 2012). His presidency revealed that there were inconsistencies between his campaign platform and the actions he took in office. During his campaign, 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 only benefitting the elite were introduced, unemployment skyrocketed, and France lost its AAA credit rating (Erlanger, 2012; Chrisafis, 2012). Those he initially claimed to represent ended up in worse standing following his time in office. Even with the impacts of the global economic crisis, it was clear that Sarkozy’s actions fell short of his campaign promises (Gastaut, 2012). Sarkozy’s emphasis on security, immigration, and identity generated more fear in France, but his policies 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). Between 2008-2011, the UMP experienced several electoral defeats, greatly weakening their influence in the French government, eventually resulting in UMP candidates distancing themselves from the President to salvage their political reputation

(Knapp, 2013). By the end of his presidency, 60% of the public expressed dissatisfaction with Sarkozy (Kantar TNS, 2012).

The unpopularity of and division within the UMP largely favored the FN in two significant ways. First, electoral defeat and internal turmoil, partly due to dissatisfaction with Sarkozy, resulted in the UMP dissolving in 2015. Following Sarkozy's loss in the 2012 presidential election, his reputation was severely smeared and his party had lost its electorate. 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, the UMP's unpopularity augmented anti-establishment sentiments and distrust of traditional right-wing parties. Sarkozy's presidency communicated to the public that 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 of the FN as the alternative party France needed in order to be "restored".

#### The Hollande Administration (2012-2017)

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

Although shortly after taking office Hollande had an approval rating of 61%, by the end of 2012 his rating drastically changed (Kuhn, 2014). For the rest of his presidency, Hollande had particularly low approval ratings, remaining below 30% from 2013 to mid-2015 (Kantar TNS, 2017). His ratings only improved following a terrorist attack in Paris in November 2015. However, by February 2016 his ratings had dropped again, with only 15% of the French public expressing confidence in Hollande (Kantar TNS, 2017).

Hollande's unpopularity is attributed to his inability to uphold his campaign promises, specifically those regarding unemployment and economic growth. When Hollande came into office, the French economy was still experiencing the consequences of the global economic crisis, with the unemployment rate at 9.7% and rising public debt (Kuhn, 2014). As a result of this economic context, Hollande was unable to reduce the unemployment rate. Due to an insufficient level of economic growth throughout his time in office, Hollande's policy measures aimed at reducing unemployment proved unsuccessful (Kuhn, 2014). The unemployment rate continued to skyrocket throughout the course of his presidency, peaking in 2015 at 10.39% (World Bank, 2018). Thus, the economy of France continued to remain in crisis, making Hollande appear ineffective and useless.

The populations hit the hardest by this economic instability were those with low

education levels and skills, specifically those working manufacturing jobs, which historically had been the main electorate of the PS (Kuhn, 2014). Therefore, as a result of Hollande's presidency, people lost trust in the left. This loss of support is exemplified by the PS performance in the 2017 presidential election. Not only was the PS candidate, Benoît Hamon, unable to make it to the second round of voting, but he placed 5th in the first round of voting, receiving both the lowest rank and number of votes a PS candidate has ever received in a presidential election (Bonnetous & Chapuis, 2017). Betrayed by Sarkozy (UMP) and then Hollande (PS), it became clear to the public that these traditional parties were no longer able to address the needs and concerns of the French people. This belief ultimately 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, the economic recession of 2008, changing immigration trends, and the presidencies of Sarkozy and Hollande benefited the FN, as each presented an economic, social, and political justification for supporting the party. However, examining how these transformations interacted and intersected with one another provides a more holistic understanding of how these changes 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, 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 an additional relationship between immigration, security, and national identity, thus normalizing the FN's ideology. Moreover, the economic recession of 2008 and its lasting grip on the French economy greatly contributed to the public's dissatisfaction with both Sarkozy and Hollande, 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 crisis, and a political crisis. The FN's platform underscores this message, promoting the idea that the French state has been weakened by the globalized world and the missteps of past presidential administrations. Moreover, these crises translate into multiple fears contributing to the FN's permanence: the fear of another global recession, the fear French culture is being threatened by the presence of "incompatible" cultures and religions, and the fear the French government is ineffective

and unable to address these crises. The FN has built its image around the prioritization of the French people, capitalizing on the notion that when people are afraid for their safety and wellbeing they will be drawn to what they believe will protect them. The FN thrives during times of heightened instability because the fear of difference is the basis of their ideology. This is exemplified by the FN's tendency to win the most votes in regions with high unemployment, low economic growth, and large immigrant populations, as these are areas where the "crises" are the most visible. In part, this is what distinguishes the FN from other extremist groups— the Front National is strategic and adaptive during times of crisis. Therefore, when chaos ensues within French society, the party is at its strongest.

## Conclusion

Many assumed that Macron's victory in the 2017 election symbolized the end of the FN. His victory represented France's willingness to try a different approach rather than accepting the exclusionary neo-nationalist platform of the FN as an alternative to traditional political parties. 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.

This paper identified how the 2008-2009 global economic crisis, shifting immigration trends, and the presidencies of Nicolas Sarkozy and François Hollande have interacted with one another to strengthen the rise of 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. However, there are several other transformations that have contributed to the success of FN that have not been covered in this paper, such as how French politicians aside from Sarkozy and Hollande have normalized and legitimized the values of the party or the way *la laïcité* is implemented in France.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, the analysis and understanding of how these transformations interact are limited in this paper. However, this analysis is not meant to provide a relatively simple explanation for a very complex situation. Rather, it is meant to contribute to a general gap in research and serve as a starting point from which other researchers may build.

Arguably now more than ever it is important to understand the source of the FN's support, as it provides powerful insights about other neo-nationalist parties. Since 2017, other neo-nationalist politicians have made instrumental gains in their own countries, such as Jair Bolsonaro's victory in the 2018 Brazilian presidential election or Matteo Salvini's terms as the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior of Italy. In the recent 2019 European Parliament elections, neo-nationalist parties made headlines not only because there was a historic number of these parties participating, but also because of their electoral results. Several



of these parties won majorities within their respective countries, such as 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 (Damgé & Breteau, 2019).<sup>17</sup> Moreover, understanding where the power and support of the FN comes from is also important for understanding the future of France. Since his inauguration in 2017, Macron and his policies have remained particularly unpopular, recently indicated by the *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 will be seen as the best option for the upcoming French presidential election in 2022.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Following this election, France reverted back to a plurality voting system for legislative elections.

<sup>2</sup> In the first round, Le Pen won 16.86% of votes, taking second place and beating the PS candidate Lionel Jospin (Norsk Senter for Forskningdata, n.d.). In the second round of voting, the Le Pen was able to attain 17.8% of the votes, resulting in his opponent Jacques Chirac becoming the next president of France (Norsk Senter for Forskningdata, n.d.).

<sup>3</sup> Beginning between the first and second rounds of voting.

<sup>4</sup> For example, under the leadership of Jean-Marie Le Pen, the FN proposed that France halt all immigration to France. Since Marine Le Pen took over, the party now calls for the number of immigrants France accepts to be reduced to 10,000.

<sup>5</sup> 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 dissimulate the racist and xenophobic ideology and history of the party.

<sup>6</sup> In 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).

<sup>7</sup> 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) (Norsk Senter for Forskningdata, n.d.).

<sup>8</sup> For example, the FN proposes a drastic cut to the number of immigrants France accepts each year, from 200,000 to 10,000; employers, housing, and social welfare programs should prioritize French people; that *le droit du sol* be replaced with the *droit du sang*; that if an immigrant enters France undocumented for any reason they shall be deported with no exceptions; that demonstrations showing support for undocumented immigrants should be made illegal (“Le programme de Marine Le Pen”, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> i.e. Town or city.

<sup>10</sup> i.e. State or regional.

<sup>11</sup> Original: “*il y a trop d’immigrés en France.*»

<sup>12</sup> Original: “*je ne me sens plus en sécurité.*”

<sup>13</sup> Only 34% of the French population expressed dissatisfaction with Sarkozy (Kantar TNS, 2012).

<sup>14</sup> Sarkozy’s approval rating was at 37% (Kantar TNS, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> His approval rating improved to 35% (Kantar TNS, 2012).

<sup>16</sup> In simple terms, *la laïcité* is the French conception of secularism.

<sup>17</sup> 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%.