

The Marinisation of France Marine Le Pen and the French National Front

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Abstract

In 2011, Marine Le Pen became the most powerful female extreme right leader in Europe. She took over as the new leader of the French National Front after her father, the party's founder Jean Marie Le Pen, stepped down citing age and health reasons. Since then she has transformed the party into a modern day right party shedding a lot of the party's historical baggage. She has abandoned the party's anti-Semitism, chauvinism, and revisionist versions of WWII, and is now openly appealing to young and female voters. This article shows how the party is in a good position to become the largest and most powerful party in France by the end of 2014 and how Marine Le Pen has positioned herself to be a strong contender for the 2017 French presidential elections.

Keywords: France, female politicians, extreme right, immigration

1. Introduction

Marine Le Pen took over as the chair of the National Front in 2011. The National Front was on the decline, having money problems, and not being able to extend its support beyond the traditional 10-12 percent of the vote it had received for most of the last 40 years. Marine realized that to be able to attract more support she had to transform the National Front into a modern day mainstream political party. To be able to do so, she toned down the party's historical anti-Semitic rhetoric, abandoned the laissez faire capitalism her father had embraced in the 1980's, and began to target young and female voters.

Under her new leadership, the National Front received 15 percent of the vote in regional elections in 2011, up from 4.5 percent in the previous 2008 regional elections (Jeanbart, 2012). One year later Marine Le Pen surprised political pundits when she came in third in the French presidential elections, receiving 17.9 percent of the vote, the party's best showing in its 40 year history (Jeanbart, 2012). Her refusal to endorse incumbent conservative President Nicolas Sarkozy is widely seen as the major reason he lost to socialist Francois Hollande in the May 2012 run-off elections. In the 2014 European parliamentary elections, the National Front became France's largest party with close to 25 percent of the vote, making Marine Le Pen a strong contender for the 2017 French presidential elections.

2. The New National Front

When Marine Le Pen took over the National Front in 2011, polls showed that the French electorate was concerned with immigration, high unemployment and continuous economic decline. Many blamed cheap immigrant labor, the European Union and the Euro for the French economy. In addition Islamic extremism and crime were powerful issues. A decay of national culture and family values rounded out the top issues French voters were concerned about. Using these issues, Le Pen began to reach out to young and female voters.

One of the major issues she used to appeal to voters was immigration and the fear of the Islamification of France. However she did not attack Muslims personally, instead focusing on the threat Islam poses for women's rights and secularism in France.

For this reason her rhetoric seemed less harsh than her father's and she did not come across as bigoted, chauvinistic, or racist. Instead, many looked upon her as a defender of women's rights in France and a protector of the secularism of the French Revolution.

Technologically, she brought the National Front into the 21st century. She began to focus on social media, targeting tech-savvy first-time voters. In addition, online and Facebook polling became a part of her strategy, helping her to discover issues for her 2012 presidential campaign.

Finally, Marine Le Pen managed to successfully use her own image and life story to portray a more moderate image to the French electorate. Born in 1968, she is a fairly young candidate, attractive, has children, has gone through divorce and has been a successful business woman. According to Frédéric Dabi, the associate director general of the French public opinion firm IFOP: "Marine Le Pen has very good ratings among young people. Why? Because she is different from her father." "For this generation, there is a bigger proximity factor. She is a woman, she herself is young, she was born in 1968, she has children and she has a job. So there is an identification process that is stronger among young people" (Inzaurrealde, 2012).

3. The 2012 Presidential Campaign

Marine Le Pen's strongest issues in 2012 were the mix of immigration and economic decline. These issues were especially relevant to young lower middle class voters. These voters did not have a college education, and were directly threatened by cheap immigrant labor. Unemployment among them was as high as 22.2 percent and they blamed the political establishment, both right and left, as well as Muslim immigrants (Inzaurrealde, 2012).

Who were the voters the National Front was targeting? "It is the small shopkeepers who are going under because of the economic crisis and competition from the out-of-town hypermarkets; it is low-paid workers from the private sector; the unemployed" (Schofield, 2012). "The FN scores well among people living in poverty, who have a real fear about how to make ends meet" (Schofield, 2012).

Marine Le Pen's call for restricting legal immigration to 10,000 per year, down from the current 200,000 per year, resonated with them. In addition, she successfully shifted economic blame away from the French people by blaming globalism and International Organizations, such as the European Union, the European Central Bank and the World Trade Organization for the current crisis. As an alternative, she offered the closing of French markets to foreign competition and the return of the French franc. She further presented a new mercantilist vision for the country and economy, breaking with the party's traditional neoliberalism. Under her leadership, the National Front has embraced traditional French statism, advocating a strong governmental role in certain aspects of the economy. According to Marine Le Pen: "There are certain domains which are so vital to the well-being of citizens that they must at all costs be kept out of the private sector and the law of supply and demand." "The government, therefore, should be entrusted with health care, education, transportation, banking and energy" (Shorto, 2011). To appeal to female homemakers, she proposed paying homemakers a salary, raising incentives for women to stay at home to start a family.

Marine Le Pen received a late boost to her campaign when a Muslim extremist by the name of Mohamed Merah killed seven people, including three Jewish school children in March 2012, about one month before the presidential elections. At this point, Le Pen proclaimed: "How many Mohamed Merahs in the boats, the aeroplanes, that arrive each day in France?" "With me, Merah would not have received French citizenship" ("Are 18% of French people racist?" 2012). She charged that the other parties wanted to bring about the Islamization of France by introducing Sharia law and serving halal meat in public schools. Le Pen further proclaimed that she did not want to stop immigration to France, but that she wanted to control it. "I am not saying that nobody should enter our country. On the contrary, in the old days immigrants entered France and blended in. They adopted the French language and traditions. Whereas now entire communities set themselves up within France, governed by their own codes and traditions" (Shorto, 2011).

When the French electorate went to the polls in April 2012, the National Front exceeded expectations. Marine Le Pen received 17.9 percent of the vote with 6.4 million voters casting a ballot for her (Schofield, 2012). Even though she did not make it into the second round, her voters would decide the elections. In an unprecedented move, Ms. Le Pen refused to endorse a candidate, either incumbent conservative President Sarkozy or socialist challenger Francois Hollande, for the run-off election. Polls show that only 47 percent of Ms. Le Pen's supporters voted for President Sarkozy while 27 percent of them backed Mr. Hollande.

26 percent of all National Front voters decided not to vote in the run-off elections in May, which Mr. Hollande won by about four percentage points (Rogers, 2012).

The election of 2012 proved to be a watershed for the National Front. For the first time since its inception in 1972, the party was able to increase its base of support. The National Front successfully moved beyond its traditional support groups of males between the ages of 18 and 50, blue collar workers, and voters with a lower level of education. Marine Le Pen's greatest success was to overcome her party's gender gap with female voters. While in 2007 only about one-third of National Front voters were female, by 2012 half of all National Front supporters were women (Jeanbart, 2012). According to French public opinion polling firm Opinion Way, when further breaking down the female National Front voter, one finds that the National Front especially made inroads with women less than 50 years of age who worked in the private sector. (Jeanbart, 2012). When looking at the young (18-24) blue collar working class vote, we see that Ms. Le Pen won this age group barely eking out a one point win over Mr. Hollande (Chrisafis, 2012). At the same time Ms. Le Pen failed to make inroads into the higher educated voting groups and older voters over 60. Among the highly educated her vote total only increased by 2 percent compared to the 2007 vote and among older voters the increase was 4 percent over the same time period (Jeanbart, 2012). The table at the end of the article shows the increase in support for the National Front over the past five years. It clearly demonstrates that the increase in voter support for the National Front comes mainly from female voters, where Miss Le Pen has been able to double her vote total.

4. The Marinisation of France

After the election, Marine Le Pen began to address the issue of attracting support from the more educated young voters which had eluded her. Her strategy became two-fold. First, for the 2014 European and local elections, she adopted a new strategy for recruiting candidates to run for office. Instead of relying on older often discredited rightists associated with her father, she turned to young, well-educated and articulate candidates. This has resulted in 55 percent of all French university students proclaiming in a recent survey that they would consider voting for the French National Front (Turning Right, p. 17).

Second and even more relevant is the fact that young voters in France do not cite economic reasons as the number one reason for supporting Miss Le Pen. For these voters, immigration from Muslim countries is the decisive issue (Turning Right, pp. 16-18). Many political observers have traditionally stated that the extreme right only prospers during times of economic crisis. While this might have been valid in the past, today it is too simplistic to state that only economic downturns will lead to an increase in extreme right voting. There is more to it. For example extreme right parties have flourished in the most prosperous parts of Europe such as Austria, Sweden and the Netherlands while they have languished in economically devastated countries such as Spain and Portugal. A more important issue has risen to the forefront in many countries. In the case of France, this issue is Muslim migration and integration.

5. Muslims in France

In 2013, the Muslim population in France reached about 6.5 million or about 10 percent of the population (Kern, 2013, p.1). This means that France has the largest Muslim population within the European Union. About five million Muslims live in suburban slums in cities such as Paris, Marseille and Strasbourg. Many are unemployed and live off the French welfare state (Kern, 2012, p.1). Unemployment among Muslims is about four times as high as among the native French. For example a full two-thirds of all Imams in France are on welfare, while often preaching ideas, which are contrary to French democratic and secular values. Many of these slums, or banlieues, have become no-go zones where French police is not tolerated and non-Muslims are not welcome. Recently, after days of Muslim on Muslim fighting in one of the no-go zones in the French city of Toulouse, a local official proclaimed: "it looks like as if we are in Bosnia and Afghanistan, not Toulouse." These zones are crime-infested and the application of Sharia law instead of French law is common (Kern, 2012, p. 1). Today, half of all inmates in French prisons are Muslims (Kern, 2013, p. 5).

One of the last acts of the Sarkozy presidency was an attempt to curtail mass immigration to France. Beginning in January of 2012, it became harder to become a French citizen. Under the new rules, all applicants have to take and pass a test on French history and culture and show proficiency in French language skills. In addition all new citizens have to pledge allegiance to French values (Kern, 2012, p. 1). While this was an important step in curtailing the Islamization of France, Socialist candidate Hollande right away undermined it by offering amnesty to 400,000 illegal Muslims immigrants in France.

He further pledged that he would change French electoral law allowing Muslims without citizenship to vote in local elections. In addition he publicly supported the building of 150 new mosques in France and one mega-mosque in Paris (Kern, 2012, p. 3).

In the May 2012 presidential election, it was the Muslim vote that proved to be decisive. Socialist candidate Hollande won 93 percent of the Muslim vote, about 1.7 million votes, in an election he won by 1.1 million votes (Kern, 2012, p. 3).

Clearly President Hollande owes his narrow victory to the Muslim vote and he has therefore had to pander to Muslim interests. In December 2013, a panel created by French Prime Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault to facilitate the integration of Muslims into French society, recommended draconian measure to increase the profile of Islam in France. These include teaching Arabic in French schools, allowing head scarfs in school, changing street names from French to Arabic, and overhauling the history curriculum to increase the prominence of Arab history (Kern, 2013, p. 9). Not surprisingly a political firestorm resulted and even President Hollande had to back away from the recommendations.

6. Public Opinion in France

Recent surveys show that the French public does not support any of President Hollande's policies on Muslim integration and is more in tune with Marine Le Pen's views on immigration. Sixty percent of the French public believes that Islam has become too influential in France and 43 percent consider Muslims a threat to national security (Kern, 2012, pp. 6-7). Sixty-eight percent of the French believe that Muslims refuse to integrate into French society and a full 63 percent support the ban on the burqa (body-covering outfit) and niqab (veil) (Kern, 2012, pp. 6-7). Finally, 82 percent of the French public believes that no new mosques should be built in France (Kern, 2012, pp. 6-7) and 74 percent claims that Islam is intolerant and incompatible with French values (Kern, 2013, p. 3).

Both major parties in France today are ignoring the will of the people when it comes to the issue of the Islamization of France. The Socialist Party seems to be doing so for political reasons, knowing that it cannot win elections in France without Muslim support. The conservative UMP on the other seems to be afraid of being accused as bigoted and racist by European elites favoring Muslim integration. Only the National Front is willing to support the will of the people on this specific issue, which has resulted in a dramatic increase in support for the party.

7. Towards Victory in 2013/2014

Beginning in late fall 2012 the National Front began to see a steady increase in support. Continuing economic decline, further Muslim mass migration coupled with the unpopularity of newly elected President Hollande and his policies led to the National Front soaring in the polls. By early 2014, the National Front had become the frontrunner for the May 2014 European elections. A poll by the prestigious Institut Français d'Opinion Publique (IFOP) in the fall of 2013, had the National Front at 24 percent ahead of both the governing Socialist Party and the opposition conservative UMP (Willsher, 2013). A poll taken in January 2014 by IPSOS, had the National Front increasing its support to 29 percent (Popularité: Marine Le Pen baisse dans les sondages, 2014). By February 2014 support for the National Front had increased to 34 percent (Llana, 2014). When French voters finally went to the polls in the European Parliamentary elections held in May of 2014, the National Front won close to 25 percent of the vote, making it the largest party in France. As a comparison, the National Front had received 6.34 percent of the vote in the 2009 European parliamentary elections (Willsher, 2013).

For the first time ever, the National Front had been leading in pre-election polls preceding a major election in France. In addition the National Front scored a spectacular win in a local council by-election in Brignoles district, in the Var region of southern France. In the first round of voting, the National Front gained 40.4 percent, well ahead of the UMP and Socialists (Ramdani, 2013). Its candidate Laurent Lopez ended up winning the seat in a run-off election with 54 percent of the vote (Ramdani, 2013).

A final issue currently working in favor of the National Front is the ongoing corruption and scandals in the ruling Socialist Party. In 2013, the Socialist Budget Minister Jérôme Cahuzac, who had been tasked to eliminate the problem of massive tax evasion, was himself implicated in tax fraud. For two weeks he denied having a secret bank account in Switzerland for the last 20 years with about one million dollars in it, to avoid paying taxes in France. He finally admitted to it and subsequently had to resign and is now facing criminal charges.

Then in early 2014, President Hollande himself became involved in a personal scandal. President Hollande had never been married, but had been in a long-term relationship with former Socialist Party leader and 2007 Socialist presidential candidate Segolene Royal. He fathered four children with her but ended the relationship in 2005, having an affair with journalist Valerie Trierweiler. Though never married she became his companion and moved with him to the presidential palace, becoming France's First Lady in 2012. In early 2014, news arrived that Hollande had cheated on her with a French actress, Julie Gayet. After hearing of the ongoing two year affair, Miss Trierweiler suffered a nervous breakdown and had to be admitted to a local hospital. Mr. Hollande subsequently acknowledged the affair and has officially ended his relationship with Miss Trierweiler.

8. Conclusion

The rise of extreme right parties is not just a French phenomenon, but a European wide one. In 2013, for the first time in history, major extreme right parties across Europe began to collaborate for the upcoming 2014 European elections. Two of the most visible and popular extreme right leaders, Marine Le Pen and Geert Wilders, the leader of the Freedom Party in the Netherlands, met in the spring of 2013 and agreed to establish an extreme right parliamentary group in the European parliament after the 2014 European parliamentary elections. They were joined by four more extreme right parties, Austria's Freedom Party, Sweden's Democrats, Italy's Northern League and VlaamsBelang out of Belgium. Besides opposition to the European Union and the Euro, a fear of the Islamization of Europe seems to be the bond that holds these parties together.

What does the future hold for the National Front in France? Will the Marinisation of France continue? Recent polls show that the party is continuing to increase its support levels, with 34 percent of the public now supporting the ideas of the party (Llana, 2014). More important, the number of people who perceive the National Front as "a danger to democracy" dipped below the 50 percent mark for the first time, today standing at 47 percent (France 24, 2013). Another sign of the French National Front becoming a mainstream party are endorsements from French actors and athletes. In an interview with the Swiss paper Le Matin, Alan Delon, one of the most famous and revered French actors openly endorsed the National Front by saying: "For years Le Pen father and daughter have fought, but they've fought somewhat alone. Now, for the first time, they're not alone. The French are with them" (Willsher, 2013). Marine Le Pen has clearly succeeded in turning the National Front into a mainstream alternative to the conservative parties in France. Thereby she has not only assured the long-term survival of the party, but might just become the first female president of France.

Table1: Evolution of the National Front vote (2007-2012)

	Presidential Election 2007	Regional Election 2010	Local Election 2011	Presidential Election 2012
Average vote for National Front	10,4%	11%	15%	18%
Men	14%	13%	20%	19%
Women	8%	9%	9%	18%
60+	7%	8%	10%	11%
High Level of Education	5%	6%	9%	7%

Source: Jeanbart, Bruno. (October 11, 2012). Has the French National Front entered the mainstream? Retrieved from <http://extremisproject.org/2012/10/is-the-french-front-national-becoming-a-mainstream-party/>

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