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Chapter 9

The *Front National* split: party system change and electoral prospects

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Introduction

The question of electoral change in France has received a great deal of attention in the past fifteen years, as evidenced by the volume of literature on French parties and elections. The rise of the *Front National* (FN) and its ability to establish itself as a serious competitor against mainstream parties of the Moderate Right are clearly central to this question. The success of the extreme right has largely contributed to altering the balance of forces within the party system: whilst electorally irrelevant throughout the 70s and the beginning of the 80s,[1] Le Pen's party has enjoyed high levels of electoral support over the past decade with an average 15 per cent of the national vote cast in the successive elections of 1995, 1997 and 1998.

Table 1. The National Front in Elections (1983-2002).

Year	Election	%	Note
1983	Municipal by-election	16.7	Jean-Pierre Stirbois, Dreux.
1984	European	11.4	10 MEPs elected.
1986	Legislative	9.8	35 MPs.
1986	Regional	9.6	131 councillors.
1988	Presidential	14.4	First round, Le Pen.
1988	Legislative	9.7	1 MP, Yann Piat.
1989	Municipal	2.1	804 councillors.
1989	European	11.7	10 MEPs.
1989	Legislative by-election	61.3	Dreux, Marie-France Stirbois.
1992	Regional	13.6	241 councillors.
1993	Legislative	12.4	0 MP.
1994	Cantonal	10.3	4 general councillors
1994	European	10.5	11 MEPs.
1995	Presidential	15.0	First round, Le Pen.
1995	Municipal	14.2	1,249 municipal councillors
1997	Legislative	15.1	FN + other minor extreme right candidates
1998	Regional	15.1	275 councillors.
1999	European	9.1	FN=5.8 %; MNR=3.3 %
2001	Cantonal	10.2	FN=7.1 %; MNR=3.1 %
2001	Municipal	—	FN=12.2 %; MNR=11.3 %
2002	Presidential	19.2	First round, Le Pen=16.9 %; Mégret=2.3 %
		—	Second round, Le Pen=17.8 %
2002	Legislative	12.4	First round, FN=11.1 %; MNR=1.1 %; other minor extreme right candidates=0.2 %

Source: Ministry of Interior

In contrast to the interest aroused by the electoral dynamics of the Extreme Right, there have been fewer attempts to formalise the various dimensions of party system change at a time of growing electoral volatility and increasing level of fragmentation within the system. The extent to which the French party system has moved away from the long-lasting dual format as a consequence of Extreme Right success, particularly with regard to the resilience of the traditional cleavage structure of French politics, remains a debated issue (Cole, 1998; Hanley, 1999; Guyomarch, 1995).

This chapter will first look back at the pre-1999 period to assess the role played by the FN in challenging the traditional bipolar format of French politics. It will then move on to analyse the historical and political factors underlying the split, the electoral performances of the two parties that emerged from this critical breakdown and the key features of party ideology within the Extreme Right pole. Thirdly it will address the electoral prospects of the FN and MNR in the light of their results in the presidential and legislative elections of Spring 2002.

Extreme Right politics and party system change in the mid 90s

A glance at the results of elections over the past fifteen years reveals the amplitude of changes which have been taken place in the balance of power between the main competitors in the French polity, and the crucial role played by the rise of the FN in the weakening of traditionally two-bloc politics.

Over the 1988-98 period, one key feature of mass mobilisation on the Extreme Right has been the FN's ability to secure its electoral support between elections. Voting for the FN became more permanent and less volatile. In the 1986 and 1988 legislative elections, the FN achieved political relevance in about 90 per cent of the 555 metropolitan constituencies and gained around 10 per cent of the vote on both occasions. The 90s were to witness the growth and stabilisation of the far right electorate. In 1993, the extreme right attracted 12.4 per cent of the legislative vote but failed to gain parliamentary representation. In the first round of the 1997 general election, the FN candidates surpassed the 10 per cent threshold in over 80 per cent of the constituencies with a total vote cast of 15 per cent. No less than 132 FN candidates went forward to the second round to confront candidates of the Left and the moderate Right. In the 1998 local election, the FN won 275 seats in the regional councils under the proportional electoral rule and achieved 15 per cent in nearly half of the 96 metropolitan departments.[2]

With regard to party organisation, the strengths of the FN were well in evidence by the end of the 90s (Birenbaum, 1992; Ivaldi, 1998). Individual membership rose from an estimated 15,000 in 1986 to 40,000. The decade witnessed the development of the basic structures and reinforcement of the entire party apparatus at both local and national levels. This internal development was associated with the founding of a large number of flanking organisations, newspapers and clubs, whose main purpose was political lobbying within specific fields of concern or particular social and professional sectors (Buzzi, 1994; Ivaldi, 2001).

Like other right-wing populist parties in Austria, Belgium or Norway, the social basis of the FN's electorate has become less heterogeneous over the years and, by the mid 90s, developed into a predominantly male, blue-collar worker and petty-bourgeoisie support, with low education (Betz and Immerfall, 1998; Kitschelt, 1995). In addition, anti-partyism, criticism of the 'political class' and recurrent attacks on both the Left and Moderate Right coalition have enabled Le Pen's party to generate increasing support from young voters less socially and politically integrated to mainstream politics (see Table 2 below).

Table 2. Change in the socio-demographic structure of the FN Electorate (1984-1997)

(row percentages)	Eur. 1984	Leg 1986	Pres 1988	Leg 1988	Euro 1989	Leg 1993	Euro 1994	Pres 1995	Legi 1997
Gender									
Male	14	11	18	12	14	14	12	19	18
Female	8	9	11	7	10	13	9	12	12
Age									
18-24 years	10	14	15	16	9	18	10	18	16
25-34 years	11	10	17	9	18	10	15	18	19
35-49 years	12	11	17	8	12	13	10	15	15
50-64 years	12	9	11	10	15	13	12	17	15
65 years+	10	6	12	10	12	13	7	9	12
Occupation									
Farmer, fisherman	10	17	13	3	3	13	4	16	4
Shopkeeper, craftsman	17	16	27	6	18	15	12	14	26
Professional / Manager	14	6	19	10	11	6	6	7	4
Routine non-manual	15	11	13	8	9	13	9	16	14
Routine manual	8	11	19	19	15	18	21	30	24
Not working*	9	8	12	9	13	12	9	11	15
Education									
No education / Primary	8	8	15	7	13	13	7	14	17
Secondary school	12	15	13	12	14	16	16	17	14
Technical	17	12	18	12	11	14	16	21	19
University	11	7	12	10	9	8	5	9	10
All	11	10	14.5	10	12	13	10.5	15.5	15

Source: Perrineau (1997: 102). * 'Not working' refers to: retired people, students and housewives who have never worked outside of the home.

Particularly striking was the ability of the unitary FN to set foot on working class soil and bring together two sectors of the working population –namely blue-collar workers and owners of small businesses– which were traditionally opposed on the left-right continuum in France. Changes in the FN social structure were discernible as early as 1988: in the first round of the presidential election, Le Pen won 19 per cent of the working class vote and secured 27 per cent among shopkeepers, traders and craftsmen, a group traditionally inclined to support the Extreme Right. By 1995, the comparable figures were 30 and 14 per cent. Looking more closely at the class structure of the FN in the general election of Spring 1997 shows the importance of the contribution by both the lower-class and petty-bourgeoisie voters to the

electoral dynamics of the extreme right: together the latter groups accounted for nearly half (46 per cent) of the whole FN electorate in 1997.[3]

On that occasion, the FN candidates received 26 and 18 per cent of the vote among unskilled and skilled manual workers respectively.[4] In the subsequent 1998 regional election, the lists presented by the Extreme Right won 17 per cent of the vote cast among small business owners and 27 per cent among blue collar workers.[5]

By attracting significant shares of the vote among secular blue-collar workers and the traditional Catholic conservative petty bourgeoisie, the party has managed to broaden its electoral appeal to disillusioned voters characteristic of the two sides of the political spectrum (Perrineau, 1995; Mayer, 1999; Evans, 2000). The increase in electoral support from the working class has led to a significant shift in party ideology in the aftermath of the 1995 presidential election, with the FN clearly placing more emphasis on securing social benefits for the lower social strata and protecting France from the threat embodied by economic globalisation. While stressing the need for economic intervention on the part of the state, the party has continued to seek electoral support from the petty-bourgeois component of the conservative Right by rejecting state collectivism and promoting liberal policies that would include tax reduction for small business owners.

Another important explanation for the party's ability to step over the traditional ideological boundaries of French politics lies in the development among Extreme Right supporters of a set of ethnocentrist, authoritarian and anti-system values which echoes the hard stance taken by the FN on social issues such as law-and-order or immigration, and tends to differentiate the Extreme Right electorate from those of both the Left and the UDF-RPR. However, according to recent research by Andersen and Evans in response to Grunberg and Schweisguth's *tripartition* argument, there is insufficient evidence to sustain the hypothesis of the emergence of the Extreme Right as a third distinctive political bloc *sui generis* (Grunberg and Schweisguth, 1997; Andersen and Evans, 2001 and this volume, chapter ????).

In terms of party system dynamics, however, there is a need for considering another two important dimensions correlative to the established change in the social support for the Extreme Right in French elections. Looking first at changes in patterns of party cooperation and competition, and the tactical manoeuvring which was developed as a response to the alteration in the balance of power between the Moerate Rght their new challenger, it is true to say that the early '90s witnessed the end of the 'conciliatory'phase: the development of formal links between the mainstream Rght and the Front National became much less likely, as it was evident from electoral outcomes that Le Pen' party was the only beneficiary of such a strategy. It would be difficult to argue that contacts between the UDF / RPR alliance and the FN have never taken place subsequently, but overall it was clearly stated that the construction of a Right-wing pole would not embrace the Extreme Right.

After a period of uncertainty and flirtation with the UDF /RPR in the late 1980s, the FN was pushed back towards the Extreme Right fringe of the political spectrum and condemned to political isolation. In the face of this strong commitment from the ruling parties of the Right, the FN shifted its own position during the mid-'90s from one which favoured a broader Right-wing alternative to the existing UDF/RPR coalition to one of fierce hostility towards the mainstream parties of the right and President Chirac.[6]

Secondly, if we are to address the morphology of the party system which took shape during the pre-1999 period, it is essential to outline the impact of the institutional setting on the dynamics of French politics. The emphasis is on the tension between proportionalist voting behaviours in the electorate on the one hand, [7] and constraints inherent in the two-ballot system on the other. Pressures for change coming from parties outside the mainstream have met with strong resistance from the majoritarian dynamics of the system (Ysmal, 1998). In France, the number of parliamentary parties is largely influenced by the mechanical process of translating votes into seats (Charlot, 1993).

Analysis of vote transfers between the two rounds of legislative elections points out the substantial effect of the bipolar constraints imposed by the second ballot, the impossibility of minor parties gaining sufficient support to win parliamentary representation, and the tendency for the electoral system to manufacture parliamentary majorities for parties that have not necessarily received majority support from the voters. The analysis of seats / votes ratios shows how the electoral system benefits well-entrenched parties by cancelling the effects of party fragmentation at parliamentary level.[8]

The constraints of the majoritarian rule have significantly limited the reshaping of the party system particularly when taking account of the FN's inability to gain parliamentary representation despite polling substantial shares of the vote in successive elections. Under the department-list system that was introduced in the 1986 legislative election (Highest-Average formula with a 5 per cent threshold), the FN first-ballot score in the first round of the 1997 election would have brought the party large gains in the Assembly and an estimated total of 77 legislative seats. With an expected number of only 223 MPs, the mainstream right would not have secured enough seats to form a government on its own. [9]

To summarise: that the state of the French party system between 1993 and 1998 was one of transition and instability is beyond doubt. In many ways the combination of electoral realignment, party fragmentation and party aggregation around electoral poles is a good indicator of the waning of the traditional bipolar party system which became apparent in the mid-‘90s and gained momentum in the period thereafter. In terms of electoral dynamics, a tendency towards a two-and-a-half pattern – as usually defined by scholars – certainly existed: in 1997-98 party competition was tripolar with the Front National being the third competitive actor isolated as a distinctive pole of French politics and capable of weighing on the outcome of both the legislative and the regional contests (Jaffré, 1997).[10]

And yet, however significant changes in patterns of electoral mobilisation were, they did not produce a truly tripolar system, particularly if the shape of the party system is to be assessed at parliamentary level. One first reason, as mentioned above, is the absence of a clear structural group underlying the support for the third bloc represented by the FN and the necessity of taking into account the protest, issue-oriented and political disenchantment components of voting for the Extreme Right. Another important reason for this is of course to be found in the distorting effect of the majoritarian system and the constraints it placed on the overall process of electoral dealignment in France.

The 1999 split of the FN: intra-party conflict, party ideology and electoral competition

Despite electoral success, the FN has suffered severely from the factionalism endemic on the Extreme Right since the end of the Second World War. Together with more than half of the top-level party elites and a sizeable segment of grassroots members, Bruno Mégret, General Delegate of the party, left the FN in January 1999 to form a rival group, the *Mouvement National* (MN) subsequently renamed *Mouvement National Républicain* (MNR).

This organisational schism was largely determined by historical, tactical and personality factors. Since its foundation in the early '70s, the FDN has been weakened by internal fights between factions and relatively unsuccessful in its attempt to bring together various opposing strains of the French Extreme Right family. In 1999 the quarrel between Le Pen and Mégret was mostly about party strategy and whether the FN should begin a process of seeking electoral alliances with the mainstream Right at both the local and national level. Whilst Le Pen strongly favoured the continuation of the 'neither left nor right' strategy initiated during the 1995 presidential campaign by the youth section and old guard within the party, Mégret and his followers advocated a more flexible approach supportive of cooperation with the RPR-UDF-DL electoral pole (Ivaldi, 1999a).

To a large extent, the parties that emerged from the 1999 split are identical to the two major groups of power-holders which traditionally competed for influence within the former FN. Most of Le Pen's companions in today's renewed FN belong to a well-identified faction, namely the old orthodox guard composed of the historical 'founding fathers' of the party, the neo-fascist activists who joined the FN in the late '70s, the traditionalist Catholics led by Bernard Antony, and some 'pure at heart' drawn from among the ranks of the youth organisation (FNJ), such as Carl Lang and Samuel Maréchal, who rose to prominence within the national staff through a long process of internal promotion.

The group of elites that left the party with Mégret represents another very specific strand of opinion. Most of the group came to the FN in the mid '80s following Le Pen's attempt to integrate the party into Moderate Right's political space by establishing links with the national-conservative fringe of the New Right. The MNR leadership consists predominantly of those who, like Bruno Mégret, Yvan Blot, François Bachelot and Jean-Yves Le Gallou, joined the party in 1985-86 in anticipation of the general election. In 1999, the endeavour of the former General Delegate of the FN was also supported by some of the cadres of the new generation (Philippe Colombani, Franck Timmermans, Philippe Olivier, Damien Bariller) who were eager to challenge the uncompromising party line and autocratic hegemony of Le Pen.

By 1997, important changes occurred in the balance of power within the FN national leadership. In the face of its political isolation, many in the party perceived the dangers of the hard line imposed by Le Pen. At grassroots level, an increasing number of federation secretaries and local party representatives joined Mégret in his plea for an electoral cartel with the mainstream Right in the forthcoming general and regional elections. By winning a significant share of the votes to the Central Committee, the *mégrétistes* emerged as an extremely influential grouping at the 10th party congress in Strasbourg in April 1997. Mégret and Le Gallou came first and second respectively ahead of Bruno Gollnisch, a result which was soon to represent a major threat to Le Pen's uncontested power.[11] The FN departmental conferences that took place in January 1999 largely confirmed the predominance of Mégret and his followers within the party apparatus, with a total of 58 federal secretaries and 141

regional councillors supporting the Delegate General in his attempt to convene a party congress. The *mégrétistes* were also found in the majority in 14 out of the 22 regional councils.

As suggested above, the dispute between Le Pen and Mégret was not a fight over the ideological stance of the movement, the FN being indeed largely indebted to the contribution made by Mégret and the previous members of the conservative New Right for some of the most popular themes of the FN political agenda. As evidenced by the MNR manifesto *La Charte des Valeurs* ('The Values Charter') publicised at the constitutive congress of the party in Marignane in January 1999, the schism had no clear implications for the ideological direction of the two resultant parties. Nor did the subsequent party literature published in 2000-01 by Mégret's movement differ significantly from the 1997 electoral platform *Le grand changement* ('The Great Change') of the former Front national (Ivaldi and Swyngedouw, 2001).

Electorally, the split on the Extreme Right resulted in fierce competition between the remaining FN and the newly formed MNR in the 1999 European election fought at a national level under proportional representation. Mégret's party performed badly: by polling a mere 3.3 per cent of the vote, the MNR failed notably to pass the five-per cent threshold of representation for the European Parliament. The FN won 5.8 per cent of the total vote and five seats.[12] The whole of the extreme right was clearly weakened by its internal division but had also to compete at the time with the anti-European list headed by the very popular conservative leader of the 1992 anti-Maastricht cartel and former Minister of Interior, Charles Pasqua. The latter received 13.05 per cent and captured 13 seats in the election attracting a significant proportion of previous FN and RPR voters.[13]

In March 2001, the FN and MNR fielded candidates in the joint municipal and cantonal ballots which were seen as key elections for both parties of the extreme right. In the precedent local elections, the unitary FN had managed to establish a solid electoral base in most parts of France through a significant number of well-entrenched party activists and elected representatives in municipal and regional councils. In 1995, the FN had presented lists in 48 per cent of all metropolitan communes with more than 5,000 inhabitants; in 2001, the far right as a whole stood in less than a third (31 per cent) of those municipalities and the two parties competed against each other in 77 cities. Both parties were heavily handicapped both by the difficulty inherent in finding the requisite number of participants to build lists in a large number of municipalities, and also by the additional constraints imposed by the new legislation on parity, which for the first time required political parties to put forward an equal proportion of men and women on their lists.

In 1995, the former FN had received 14.2 per cent of the vote in the first round of the municipal election compared with 11.3 and 12.2 per cent for the MNR and new Front national respectively in the 2001 ballot. On the latter occasion, the two parties kept control of three out of the four cities they had won six years before in the Southern part of France –Orange (FN), Marignane and Vitrolles. More importantly, they also managed to secure most of the Extreme Right electoral support in the concomitant cantonal election by winning a total of 10.2 per cent of the vote (FN 7.1; MNR 3.1 per cent) as opposed to 10.3 per cent for the FN in the previous election of March 1994. Of particular note is that the FN succeeded in presenting its own candidates in nearly all of the 1,900 cantons up for renewal in 2001, whilst the MNR only had a national coverage of about 78 per cent in this respect.

There is little doubt however that divisions within the Extreme Right camp have had a major impact on the parties' ability to weigh significantly on the electoral outcome, and particularly in municipal contests. In most cases the FN and the MNR were not able to overcome the institutional hurdle to stand in the second round of the city council elections. In 1995 the FN had fielded candidates in 108 of the largest urban areas in France (those with more than 30,000 inhabitants); by 2001 the comparable figure for the whole of the Extreme Right dropped to 41 with an average loss of 2.2 per cent between the two rounds. In a significant number of municipalities, the electoral decline of the FN and MNR clearly benefited the mainstream Right, as was the case in cities such as Blois, Chartres, Evreux, Nîmes, Strasbourg and Toulon for instance.

The 2002 presidential and legislative elections: electoral strength of the Extreme Right and party system continuation

With respect to the electoral strength of the far right and the format of the French party system, the 2002 elections have displayed similar trends to those observed in the preceding electoral cycle of 1995-98. Despite the relative decrease in electoral support for the FN at the legislative ballot, the 2002 elections have been a testament to the electoral health of the Extreme Right camp in France. In the first round of the presidential election, the Front National has reached its electoral apex by polling 16.9 per cent of the total vote, which allowed its leader to stand in the second round against the outgoing President Jacques Chirac. Together with Mégret's score of 2.3 per cent, the combined total for the far right added up to 19.2 per cent.

In 35 out of the 96 metropolitan departments, Le Pen came ahead of the candidates of the mainstream Left and Right, and achieved a 20 per cent threshold in over 28 per cent of the 555 metropolitan constituencies. In the second round of the presidential ballot, Le Pen secured 17.8 per cent of the vote (around 5.5 million votes), far less than the 30 per cent he predicted for himself in the aftermath of the April 21st political earthquake but still a significant score in the context of popular mobilisation against the Extreme Right . On the 5th of May 2002, the FN's candidate attracted more than 20 per cent of the valid vote cast in over a third (37 per cent) of the constituencies in metropolitan France.

The legislative elections of June indicated some limits to the influence of the FN and a substantial drop in the electoral support for Le Pen's party when compared with the outcome of the 1997 election. In the first round, the FN candidates won only 11.12 per cent of the vote (as opposed to 14.9 per cent in 1997), the MNR polling a mere 1.1 per cent. Unlike 1997, the Front National could only progress to the second round in 37 metropolitan constituencies (against 132 in 1997) and captured no seats. Of the party top-level elite, only five national leaders were in a position to stand in the second round: Marine Le Pen, Marie-France Stirbois, Jean-Claude Martinez, Bruno Gollnisch and Jacques Bompard. With a total of 42.4 per cent of the vote, the Mayor of the city of Orange achieved the best result of all FN candidates in the June legislative election yet failed to translate this performance into the only potential parliamentary seat for the party.

There were of course a variety of short-term factors that could account for the ebb and flow of the Extreme Right at the 2002 elections, the discussion of which is beyond the scope of this chapter. In terms of the party system dimension, however, four main aspects are noteworthy: these relate to party ideology, patterns of issue-voting, the socio-demographic structure of the Extreme Right electorate and patterns of party cooperation.

1/ Ideologically, the electoral platform of the FN and MNR in the 2002 elections was very similar to the programme publicised by the Front National at the 1997 ballot or the party manifesto launched at the constitutive congress of Mégret's movement in early 1999. Both parties have continued to use the anti-immigrant feeling as a campaign issue, this xenophobic line being linked with strong authoritarian views on criminality and insecurity, and associated with the traditional anti-system component. Consistent with the ideological shift of 1995-97, the FN placed an even greater emphasis on its socio-economic message to promote the synthesis of the traditional neo-liberal and anti-tax elements of the 1980s with renewed protectionist welfare state strategies and the populist claim to represent *les petites gens* ('The common people').

2/ Looking at the main issues for the FN electorate reveals a triptych very similar to that recurrently at stake in the history of the Extreme Right at the polls since the breakthrough of the 1984 European election. In 2002, Le Pen's first round voters expressed once again as motivating factors for their vote worries about insecurity (74 per cent), immigration (60 per cent) and unemployment (31 per cent). Essential to the understanding of the electoral dynamics of the FN in the presidential ballot is that the 'criminality' issue topped the political, public and media agenda, with nearly 6 out of 10 voters (58 per cent) ranking 'insecurity' first on their personal scale of concern, far ahead of 'unemployment' (38 per cent) and 'poverty' (31 per cent) (Source: IPSOS – Vizzavi-*Le Figaro*-France 2, 12 April 2002).

3/ The analysis of the vote transfer matrix indicates a high degree of stability since 1995, and indicates that the party still possesses a stable core of voters: in 2002, the FN managed to retain the support of the vast majority of its electorate. At the first round of the 2002 presidential election, no less than 90 per cent of Le Pen's 1995 electorate voted either for him again or, in a much smaller proportion, for Bruno Mégret (Source: IPSOS – Vizzavi-*Le Figaro*-France 2, 12 April 2002).

The socio-demographic structure of the 2002 Extreme Right electorate shows a lesser degree of heterogeneity and a sociological pattern similar to that observed since the 1988 presidential election. The FN's electorate remains predominantly male, younger and of low education. Looking at occupation in terms of social class, it is important to note the electoral dynamics of the FN and its continuing ability to draw growing support from working-class and voters, which reinforces the more traditional petty-bourgeoisie element of the Extreme Right electorate. Again in 2002, the Front National has managed to gather together those two socially and ideologically opposed groupings: in the first round of the presidential election, Le Pen won 19 per cent of the vote among shopkeepers, craftsmen and small entrepreneurs, together with 30 per cent of the working-class vote. In the second round, the FN leader secured 31 per cent of the valid vote cast among workers and 29 per cent in the self-employed (Sources: IPSOS-Vizzavi-*Le Figaro*-France 2, 21 April and 5 May 2002).

4/ Lastly, looking at patterns of party system competition, it was evident from the 2002 elections that both the FN and MNR continued to suffer from their lack of coalition potential and political isolation within the system. Despite efforts to establish links with the Moderate Right at the local level —which in the case of Le Pen's party represented incontestably a U-turn from the anti-Right strategy initiated in 1995–, neither the FN nor the MNR veritably managed to escape from the fringe of the system and remained, as far as inter-party cooperation is concerned, as a third distinctive political bloc separate from both the Left and the mainstream parties of the Right.

The new balance of forces between the FN and MNR

The balance of forces between the two main competitors of the Extreme Right has undergone considerable change. A first nationwide test for Mégret's party, the 2002 electoral contests demonstrated the lack of political opportunity for a French equivalent to the process of transformation of the Italian post-fascist MSI into a mainstream conservative right-wing party by Gianfranco Fini. While it was fairly obvious that the personality factor would favour predominantly Le Pen in the first round of the presidential election, there were outstanding questions concerning the MNR's ability to benefit electorally from its entrenchment at the local level.

The presidential and legislative contests both contributed to illustrate the bitter setback of the MNR in challenging Le Pen's monopoly over far right politics in France. The share of the Extreme Right vote secured by the MNR in the presidential and legislative election represented only 11.9 and 8.9 per cent of the total vote for the far right respectively, as opposed to 36.2 per cent in the June 1999 European election. At the 2002 presidential ballot, Mégret secured his best scores almost exclusively in his three departmental strongholds of Bouches-du-Rhône, Bas-Rhin and Haut-Rhin, where he won over 4 per cent of the vote. Only in Vitrolles did the MNR leader surpass the 10 per cent threshold (with 11.5 % of the valid vote cast in the XIIth constituency of Bouches-du-Rhône) without being able however to move forward to the second round.

Faced with fierce competition on both its 'left' and right flanks by the newly-formed UMP and the FN, the MNR experienced difficulties in making itself heard during the legislative campaign and suffered from the absence of a specific political space between the radical anti-system stance of the FN and the hard-line on criminality taken by the mainstream Right pole and the newly appointed Ministry of Interior, Nicolas Sarkozy. A similar picture emerged from the legislative election: the party's best results were concentrated in a tiny number of constituencies, with only 14 cases of MNR candidates polling over 4 per cent of the vote. The figureheads of the party failed to progress to the second round: Jean-Yves Le Gallou received only 4.1 per cent of the vote in Gennevilliers, Damien Bariller won less than 4 per cent in Gardanne and Bruno Mégret attracted a mere 18.6 per cent of the vote in Vitrolles (as opposed to 35.5 per cent in the first round of the 1997 legislative election).

The severe electoral setback of the MNR at the 2002 elections raises doubts about the future of *mégrétisme* as a distinctive political current within the party system, located somewhere between the mainstream Right and a more radical option embodied by the FN. Not only does the MNR suffer from the dramatic drop in its electoral support and the likelihood of a proportion of its members and sympathisers returning to a more successful FN but also the party has to take the financial consequences of its electoral failure and the cost of two expensive national campaigns in the absence of future State funding.

Prospects

The 2002 elections have illustrated the continuance of electoral support for the Extreme Right in France, with a range varying from a minimum of 12 per cent (legislative) up to a maximum of nearly 20 per cent of the vote (presidential). It is true to say that the trauma caused by Le Pen in the second round of the presidential ballot and the spectacular demonstration against the FN by all political parties of the Left, associations, Churches and trade unions have temporarily set some limits to the potential for electoral progress by the far right. These limits were well in evidence in the outcome of the legislative contest. However there is little doubt that there will continue to be a political space for the Front National within the French party system.

One first reason for this is to be found in the capacity of Le Pen's ideology to infiltrate the beliefs of a significant proportion of the French voters. A trend analysis of opinion polls over the 1984-2002 period of time shows a fairly stable public support for the FN's themes and ideas, between 20 to 25 per cent of the whole population (Source: SOFRES-*Le Monde*-RTL, 23-24 May 2002). Opinions never translate mechanically into effective votes on the day of the election, yet there remains a 'reservoir' of potential voters for the Extreme Right, which goes beyond its actual electoral strength.

In terms of party organisation and intra-camp competition, two additional factors must be taken into account. The dispute between the two main factions led by Le Pen and Mégret, and the consequent split of the FN in early 1999, had weakened the whole Extreme Right and reduced its ability to weigh significantly on the outcome of elections. In 2002, the FN has provided proof of its ability to take over the whole far right camp at the expense of the MNR, and should be in a position to benefit from this situation of political hegemony in the near future. With Mégret and his followers departing from the FN in early 1999, Le Pen's party had also significantly reduced intra-party factionalism and ensured a greater level of homogeneity among top-level elites. One interesting observation in 2002 was the public announcement of Gollnisch's appointment at the head of the Front National in the event of Le Pen retiring from the presidency, together with the key role played by Marine Le Pen in the legislative campaign and the media.

Lastly, the forthcoming electoral cycle of 2004 will be more propitious to the Extreme Right, with a set of two successive 'second-order' elections (regional, European) to be fought under proportional representation and providing traditionally a great incentive to protest voting by those dissatisfied with the incumbent government. In the 2002 legislative ballot, the logics of the majoritarian system and the electoral dynamics initiated by the unified Moderate Right seem to have discouraged a greater proportion of voters from 'wasting' their vote on the FN candidates. The landslide victory of the UMP has raised high expectations, particularly with regards to tax-cuts and a tough stance on crime –both proprietary issues of the Extreme Right. Should the new government fail to meet those expectations, then it is clear that Le Pen's party would be the main beneficiary of a new wave of popular discontent.

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1 Although founded as early as 1972, the FN remained electorally irrelevant until the mid-‘80s. The impact of the party on French politics was negligible until its first success in the 1983 municipal by-election in Dreux where the Extreme Right list headed by Jean-Pierre Stirbois won 16.7 per cent of the vote. This performance at the local level was followed by the impressive national breakthrough of the Extreme Right in the subsequent 1984 European election, with Le Pen’s party polling over 11 per cent of the votes.

2 For a detailed analysis of the electoral evolution of the FN, see Perrineau (1997) and more generally Le Gall (1998).

3 Social class is measured here by the commonly used class schema based on occupation and divided in four main categories: professionals and managers, petty-bourgeoisie, clerical and routine non-manual workers, and manual skilled and unskilled workers.

4 Source: SOFRES post-election survey, CEVIPOF-CIDSP-CRAPS, 26-31 May 1997, N=3,010. Our calculation.

5 Source: SOFRES post-election survey, 25 March-23 April 1998, N=2,000.

6 In the second ballot of the 1997 election, the FN candidates stood in 76 three-way contests in which they were opposed to the UDF / RPR. In 1998, the Front National presented its own lists in all metropolitan departments. Although the FN managed to use its blackmail potential in four regional council elections, Le Pen's party notably failed to dislodge and reshape the right-wing pole entirely by forming right / far-right coalitions at regional level. On this, see Ivaldi (1998).

7 See Parodi (1997) on this dynamic.

8 Performing an index of disproportionality for each of the legislative elections which took place in France since 1978 illustrates the distorsive effect of the electoral system. Deviations between the percentages of seats and the percentages of votes received by the different

parties, as registered by the Lsq index, were much larger in 1993 and 1997 with respective levels of disproportionality of 23.4 and 17.5 per cent as opposed to 7.3 per cent in the 1978 election.

9 It is worth noting that, assuming that many voters perceive distortions caused by the electoral system, the prevailing logics of the two-ballot majority system did not discourage a significant group of voters from defecting to FN candidates with poor chances of gaining parliamentary representation over the 1993-98 period.

10 See in particular Blondel (1968) on the definition of a two-and-a-half party system.

11 On that occasion, Mégret received 3,758 votes, Jean-Yves Le Gallou 3,439, Bruno Gollnisch 3,398, Roger Holleindre 3,381, Franck Timmermans 3,362, Jacques Bompard 3,328, Yvan Blot 3,316, Marie-France Stirbois 3,288, Carl Lang 3,287 et Damien Bariller 3,166.

12 : Elected MEPs were Charles de Gaulle, Bruno Gollnisch, Carl Lang, Jean-Marie Le Pen and Jean-Claude Martinez.

13 According to various surveys conducted on the day of the election, the list led by Pasqua attracted between 10 (CSA) and 17 per cent (IFOP) of those who had voted for FN candidates in the first round of the 1997 general election – see Ivaldi (1999b).