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▶ **To cite this version:**

Gilles Ivaldi. The Successful Welfare-Chauvinist Party? The Front National in the 2012 elections in France. ESA's Research Network on Political Sociology (RN32) Mid-term conference, European Sociological Association (ESA), Nov 2012, Milano, Italy. halshs-00765428

HAL Id: halshs-00765428
https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00765428

Submitted on 14 Dec 2012

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The Successful Welfare-Chauvinist Party?
The Front National in the 2012 elections in France

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Paper to be delivered to the panel on 'The Populist Radical Right in the Context of the Economic and Socio-Political Crisis: Comparative Perspectives and Country Studies', European Sociological Association's Research Network on Political Sociology (RN32) Mid-term conference, University of Milan, 30 November-1 December, 2012

After shallow electoral waters in 2007, the Front national (FN) has made an impressive come back in the 2012 French presidential election winning 17.9 per cent of the first-round vote. Such performance was bolstered by the economic and political context: in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, France had entered a period of economic instability, rising unemployment and deep social pessimism. This paper looks at how the FN has striven to adapt to the social demand for protection and redistribution in the French public. Under the leadership of Marine Le Pen, the party has undergone significant changes in its economic policies and evolved towards Kitschelt's original model of 'welfare-chauvinism' combining exclusionism, authoritarianism and statist redistributive economic policies. This paper examines the magnitude of this strategic programmatic shift by the FN, and to which extent the formulation of a renewed economic agenda has enabled the party to evolve towards an electorally more beneficial position in the 2012 presidential race. Possible implications for the competitive shape of the French party system are discussed in the conclusion.

1. The electoral revival of the FN in 2012

Following its first national breakthrough in the 1984 European elections, the FN has established itself as a key player in the French party system, enjoying continuing electoral growth in national elections, as well as in second-order local and European ballots. The party reached its electoral peak in the critical presidential election of April 2002, where Jean-Marie Le Pen received 16.9 per cent of the first round vote and progressed to the second round run-off against incumbent right-wing president Chirac.

Table 1. FN electoral results since 1984

Year	*Election*	*% valid*	*Year*	*Election*	*% valid*
1984	European	11.0	2002	Presidential	16.9
1986	Legislative	9.6	2002	Presidential[(1)]	17.8
1986	Regional	9.6	2002	Legislative	11.3
1988	Presidential	14.4	2004	Regional	14.7
1988	Legislative	9.7	2004	European	9.8
1989	European	11.7	2007	Presidential	10.4
1992	Regional	13.7	2007	Legislative	4.3
1993	Legislative	12.4	2009	European	6.3
1994	European	10.5	2010	Regional	11.4
1995	Presidential	15.0	2011	Cantonal[(2)]	15.1
1997	Legislative	14.9	2012	Presidential	17.9
1998	Regional	15.0	2012	Legislative	13.6
1999	European	5.7			

[(1)] Second-round runoff; [(2)] Local elections contested in half of the cantons (N=2,026)

On the moderate right, the realization that the far right could effectively challenge the traditional two-bloc polity accelerated the process of party aggregation (Haegel 2004). It also paved the way to Nicolas Sarkozy's bid of shifting the UMP further to the right to poach on FN territory with promises of more restrictive immigration policies and tougher stance on crime (Marthaler 2008). The pattern of party competition that emerged from the 2007 elections proved Sarkozy right as he was able to reclaim a sizeable proportion of voters who had previously deserted to the far right. As a consequence, the FN saw its vote drop down to 10.4 and 4.3 per cent in the presidential and legislative ballots respectively (Perrineau 2009). This electoral debacle was followed with a period of shallow electoral waters in the 2008 and 2009 local and European ballots.

The party resurfaced in the 2010 regional and, most significantly in the 2011 cantonal elections, where it benefited both from political dissatisfaction with Sarkozy's presidency and from the popularity of its new leader. The cantonal elections took place in a context marked by fears of new waves of immigration arising from the Arab Spring, combined with growing anxieties about the economic downturn in the aftermath of the 2008 international financial meltdown.

Following the loss of its triple-A credit rating in January, the government had also been forced to put forward a second package of painful debt reduction measures –including a raise in VAT–, increasing the financial pressure on voters already severely hit by the recession. The UMP government implemented measures that eliminated tax credits and froze most government spending in an effort to reduce the budget deficit and commit to fiscal discipline. Sarkozy entered the presidential race in February with the lowest popularity ratings ever achieved by an incumbent president in France putting well in evidence the exceptional wave of political discontent after a decade of right-wing dominance over national government. In the lead up to the presidential election, the country was faced with a further deterioration of the economic situation, an increase in the price of vital commodities and worsening unemployment. In March 2012, annual inflation was 2.6 per cent in total, with the energy, tobacco and food components having the highest annual rates [1].

Despite a timid reflationary effort by the government in 2009, voters saw their living standards decline and their purchasing power deteriorate in the final years of Sarkozy's presidential term. Household purchasing power was expected to decline by 0.5 per cent as an annual average during 2012. When adjusted by consumption unit, the decrease in purchasing power was set to reach its highest level since 1984 [2]. Lastly, the country was facing its highest level of unemployment since the late 1990s, with the unemployment rate standing at 10.0 per cent of the active population in the first quarter of 2012, following an upward trend since 2008 (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1. INSEE Quarterly unemployment rate(1) since 2003

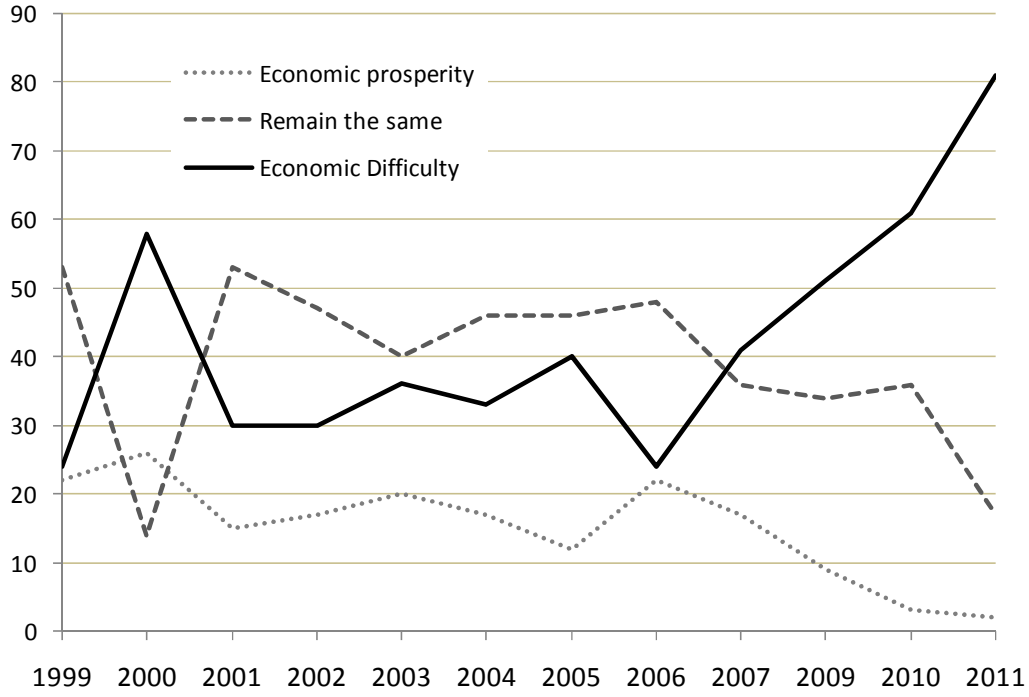


(1) ILO definition, seasonally adjusted, average over quarter
Source: http://www.insee.fr/fr/themes/info-rapide.asp?id=14

1 http://www.insee.fr/fr/indicateurs/ind29/20120412/IR_03_12.pdf
2 http://www.insee.fr/fr/themes/theme.asp?theme=17&sous_theme=3&page=vueensemble.htm

By 2012, fears had not dissipated. France had entered a period of economic instability and deep social pessimism. With respect to the latter, trends in public perceptions of economic prosperity, as revealed in Gallup's end of the year barometers, showed a marked increase in pessimism, with a record high negative net score contracting to -79 in December 2011, making France the most pessimistic of all 51 countries included in the survey worldwide (see Figure 2 below). According to the yearly barometer polls by the Department of Health, highly negative perceptions of the French society as 'unfair' were stable at a high average of 72 % of the population since the early 2000s, reaching 75 per cent in November 2011. The same surveys showed that feelings of growing socio-economic inequalities had become pervasive to nearly nine out of ten (89 per cent) respondents in 2011 (DREES 2011:13-4).

Figure 2. Trends in public perceptions of economic prosperity in France: 1999-2011



Source: GIA Annual Global End of the Year Barometer on Hope and Despair conducted by affiliates of WIN-Gallup International Association (www.gallup.com.pk)

In the first round of the presidential election, Marine Le Pen mounted a successful campaign, achieving her party's best ever performance with 17.9 per cent of the vote and just under 6.5 million votes. In the legislative elections that followed, the FN received 13.6 per cent nationally and won two seats of MPs allowing the far right to return to parliament after nearly fifteen years of absence.

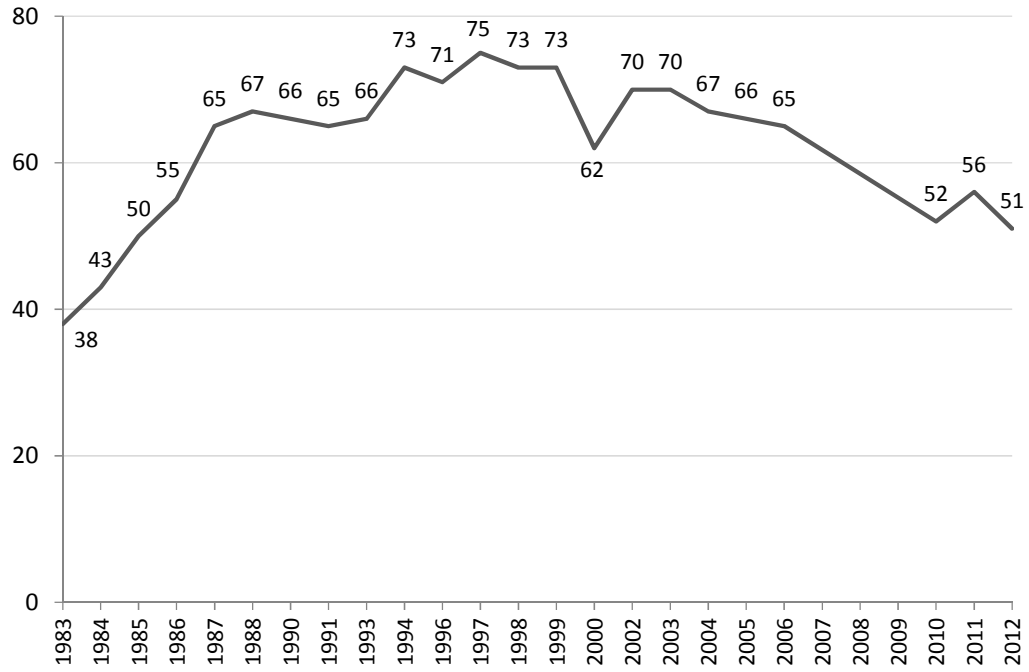
More generally, the economic and political conditions were auspicious to a recomplexification of the French party system. Five years earlier, the presidential race had undergone a significant centripetal shift, with the dominant parties of the moderate left (PS), the center (UDF) and the mainstream right (UMP) securing over 75 per cent of the first-round vote. Fringe parties on the extremes of the political spectrum had lost a substantial proportion of their previous electoral support. Compared with the pattern of high fractionalization and polarization that had emerged from the 2002 presidential contest, the 2007 presidential election was characterized by a trend towards the re-bipolarization of inter-party competition, which was reinforced further in the legislatives due to both the organizational efforts by parties of the mainstream and the strong institutional incentives of the two-ballot majoritarian system (Grunberg and Haegel 2007).

The outcome of the 2012 presidential race reflected the widespread uncertainty provoked by the deteriorating economic conditions. Growing anxiety and frustrations among the electorate benefited protest parties on both sides of the political axis, revealing the breadth and depth of political discontent directed at Sarkozy's presidency. The rise of anti-system actors on both extremes of the spectrum, concomitant with the waning of the centrist vote, changed the contours of the party system and resulted into a centrifugal shift in the balance of forces, resembling the more polarized pattern of competition that had occurred in the 2002 presidential election.

Past this clear protest element, however, the popularity of the FN at the polls in 2012 reflected the party's ability to meet some of the political challenges that had arisen from the 2007 electoral defeat and, to some extent, from Le Pen's 'Pyrrhic victory' in the 2002 presidential run-off. By far the most significant is of course the change in party leadership after nearly four decades of unlimited rule by Jean-Marie Le Pen. In January 2011, Marine Le Pen was elected party leader with 67.7 per cent of the members' vote in the XIVth party congress in Tours. The significance of the new FN presidency is evidently both 'gendered' and generational, but it has also important implications for the institutionalization of the party and its now demonstrable capability to survive the retirement of its charismatic founding leader.

Marine Le Pen's election to party leadership in January 2011 was associated with a claim of strategic and programmatic modernization, which in part had already been forced into her father's presidential campaign in 2007. The focus of her 2012 presidential bid was entirely on altering public perceptions of the FN as a 'far right' party. Essentially this strategy of political normalisation –in the party's own vocabulary "de-demonization"– has rested on behavioural changes rather than extensive policy renewal. Efforts were put into presenting the FN in a more affable style by avoiding the incendiary methods that were customary in Jean-Marie Le Pen's outspoken statements, banning in particular the anti-Semitic and revisionist political lexicon. This dynamic process has contributed a significant deal to the electoral resuscitation of the FN in the 2012 presidential race. Trends in public opinion show that levels of public acceptability for the party have indeed increased in the recent years, with views of the FN as a threat to democracy becoming progressively less widespread in the French public (see Figure below).

Figure 3 - Public perception of the Front national as a 'threat to democracy' (1983-2012)



Source: TNS-SOFRES surveys.

Simultaneously, stronger emphasis has been placed on articulating credible and responsible micro and macro-economic policies. Ten years earlier, the paucity of tangible policy proposals had been devastating to the FN leader's appeal in the second round of the 2002 presidential election. Important efforts were first made in the 2007 presidential bid to formulate a more credible economic agenda. Under Marine Le Pen's leadership, the FN has redefined further its 'primary goal' as a political organization, shifting from its traditional function as 'nuisance' party within the system, pursuing predominantly vote-maximization, towards office-seeking strategies. The preparation for the 2012 presidential manifesto aimed to build the FN's credentials on the wide range of economic and debt reduction issues that were likely to dominate the presidential agenda.

Lastly, the 2012 elections have seen important changes in the competitive strategies by the FN, which may act to destabilize existing electoral alignments and reshape the French party system in the years to come. Since the early 1990s, the parties of the mainstream right have established a strict political demarcation –the so-called *cordon sanitaire*– with the extreme right. Locally, the electoral consolidation of the FN has been addressed by more episodic tactics of Republican Front (*Front républicain*), that is the *ad hoc* alliance of all parties across the spectrum wherever the FN candidate would be in a position to win the decisive round. In reaction, the FN pushed a 'neither left, nor right' approach of repositioning the party as a third competitive bloc. In practice, this anti-system line translated predominantly into an 'anti-right' position, which was epitomised in the 1997 legislative elections, where the FN caused severe electoral losses for the UDF/RPR coalition in the second-round.

In the 2012 presidential election, Marine Le Pen did not significantly deviate from the 'neither left nor right' strategy. Her strong first-round performance was built on the continuation of the populist posture that has allowed the FN to channel attitudes of political alienation and disaffection into the polls for the past three decades. More importantly, the FN leader refused to endorse either of the two run-off candidates and sent a strong signal inviting her first-round supporters to join her in casting a 'blank vote'.

The perpetuation of the anti-systemic line in the presidential ballot contrasted however with the more conciliatory approach adopted by the party in the June legislatives. In the latter, the party envisaged to lend its support to mainstream candidates, while Marine Le Pen called explicitly upon UMP candidates to 'break the sanitary cordon' and seek alliances with the FN. One central aim of the Marine Blue Rally (*Rassemblement Bleu Marine*) electoral umbrella was precisely to foster talks with local leaders of the UMP. In the course of the campaign, a number of right-wing hardliners –mostly representatives of the People's Right (*Droite Populaire*) within the UMP– expressed their disagreement with the uncompromising line sustained by both the party leadership and president Sarkozy, and called publicly for tactical pacts with the FN in the constituencies. To a large extent, the strategic turn by the far right proved unsuccessful both electorally and politically, but the attenuation in the oppositional strategy by the FN is likely to alter patterns of party competition on the right in the future.

2. Rotation of the FN in the competitive space

In his well-know interpretation for radical right success, Kitschelt (1995) provided the concept of the 'new radical right' based both on the party's electoral constituency and its programmatic appeal. The emergence of the right-wing radicalism is not only contingent upon changes in social structure and the economy, but also depends on the way in which political actors react strategically to those changes by positioning themselves in the competitive space.

Central to Kitschelt's argument is the concept of a 'winning formula' consisting of authoritarianism, particularism and economic liberalism, which would draw a typical cross-class alliance of voters threatened by advance capitalism modernization. Under this hypothesis, the new radical right's constituency is made up of small-business owners, manual workers and what is described as the 'residual' population of people inactive in the labour market i.e. retirees and housewives. Beside his new radical right 'master case', Kitschelt considers two alternative 'populist anti-statist' and 'welfare chauvinist' strategies, the latter being associated with a strong working-class electorate.

The issue of the location of the radical right on the economic dimension is certainly one of the most debated (Ignazi 2003, Mudde 2007, Meguid 2008). As pointed out by Rydgren (2007), "the new radical right is right-wing primarily in the sociocultural sense of the term, the picture is more ambiguous as far as economic policies are concerned" (p.243). The uncertainty regarding the whereabouts of those parties on the economic axis often stems from the fact that they present a variable mix of ideological elements embedded in a strong instrumental populist appeal. As argued by Mudde (2004), populism is a weak or 'thin' ideology that acquires substance in relation to other more completely formed ideologies which, in the case of the radical right, concerns primarily the cultural rather than economic dimension of party competition.

The process of ideological revision on the economic axis by the FN was well under way in the early 1990s. The consolidation of a strong working-class constituency traditionally leaning towards the left (Perrineau 1995) incited the party to moderate –rather than entirely shed– its former neo-liberal agenda of the mid-1980s to address the increased preferences for redistribution among its popular support. Strategic adjustments were made therefore to the combination of market-liberal capitalism that was characteristic of the party's appeal in the mid-1980s. The new positioning of the FN on the economic axis materialized in the 1993 legislative elections, and entailed mainly a muted appeal to free-market economics.

Let us recall that a similar trajectory has been identified in a number of radical right parties across Europe (De Lange 2007). As argued by Betz (2002), radical right parties have progressively put less emphasis on economic liberalism to prioritize xenophobic exclusion during the 1990s, which in turn has allowed them to substantially increase their working class support. McGann and Kitschelt (2005) have described the parties' balancing acts of downplaying their traditional neoliberal agenda as a 'weak' form of the 'winning formula' popularised by Kitschelt in his original study, hypothesizing it to be sufficient for those parties to secure their initial appeal to a cross-class alliance of small business owners, labour market inactives and blue-collar workers. A number of cross-national studies have provided empirical evidence for such a successful diversification of the radical right constituency, showing in particular that the disparate social groups attracted by the radical right often share different if not conflicting economic views (Ivarsflaten 2005).

Central to the policy move that occurred in the 1990s was the endorsement by the FN of anti-globalization and protectionist economic policies antagonistic with the free-trade and *laissez-faire* agenda pursued by the party during the 1980s. The vilification of globalization –or more correctly of the ideology referred to by the party as 'globalism' (*mondialisme*)– touched on a wide range of international issues, mixing protest against global market capitalism with attacks on immigration, the rejection of the European Union and the vilipending of American cultural dominance. The advocating by the FN of a highly protectionist model in the international sphere contributed a significant deal to the party's travelling a centripetal direction on the market-state axis in the 1990s, while preserving some of its more traditional right-wing economic policies in the domestic realm.

From the mid-1990s onwards, the more 'centrist' positioning of the FN on the economic dimension certainly resulted into a greater degree of inconsistency stemming from the juxtaposition of contradictory policy goals. This was the case in the 2002 presidential election manifesto in which anti-globalization and social-protectionist policies were embedded in the 'neither left nor right' ideological mix that had emerged in the 1997 party congress (Ivaldi 2003). Ambiguity in the party's platform was epitomized by Le Pen's claim to be '*socialement de gauche, économiquement de droite*', which hardly concealed irreconcilable policy priorities and a lack of credibility on the economy in general. In this sense, the situation of the FN in the 2002 presidential election was consistent with the findings of the recent cross-national examination of radical right party manifestos by Rovny (2012) showing that 'radical right parties emphasize and take clear ideological stances on the authoritarian fringe of the non-economic dimension, while deliberately avoiding precise economic placement' (p.19). The centripetal move by the FN on the economic dimension manifested a blurring of its economic positions rather than a 'true' centrist or moderate approach to economic issues.

In contrast, economic issues were prioritized in the 2007 campaign where the party strove essentially to formulate a set of more credible policy stances and achievable goals with measurable financial viability evaluation criteria. In the area of fiscal policies in particular, the FN converged towards the mainstream by emphasizing less extreme and demagogic positions. Enhancing sectoral expertise and incumbency profile topped the agenda of the party's summer university in Avignon in September 2006, and was central to the efforts by the FN to set up preparatory thematic committees (*Commissions d'Action présidentielle,* CAP) to tap a wide range of non-proprietary socio-economic issues.

Already the 2007 presidential platform incorporated important alterations to the economic approach by the party, heralding the more substantial 'Keynesian' swing that was to occur five years later. The FN pushed for instance measures of temporary nationalizations in strategic sectors ('francization'), more generous government spending on a wide range of social welfare programs, and demand-oriented economic stimulation wage policies directed at low-income families.

The policy shift to the left was clearly accentuated in the 2012 presidential election and was central to Marine Le Pen's campaign for party leadership nomination in 2010. As such this ideological reorientation was fiercely opposed by her rival candidate Bruno Gollnisch who pledged to safeguard the FN's defining small-government economic platform. Le Pen's inauguration speech as new party leader in January 2011 set the tone for the new economic approach by its unambiguous endorsement of state interventionism. A glance at the 2012 presidential and legislative manifestos reveals the magnitude of the changes that occurred in the FN programmatic standings on the economy, with the party taking up a strong Colbertist program of state regulation, government spending, temporary nationalizations, tax raises and public services expansion, while markedly shifting its positions towards social and fiscal policies emphasizing income redistribution. Unlike the anti-globalization shift of the 1990s, this reorientation concerned predominantly economic policies in the domestic arena, with a strong focus on the increasingly salient issue of 'purchasing power'.

A systematic longitudinal assessment of the FN's placement on economic issues, as revealed in the party's manifestos since the mid-1980s, concludes that the party has significantly shifted its positions on the economic axis in 2012, to occupy a centre-left position on that specific dimension of competition (Ivaldi 2013 forthcoming). The latter study shows that policy shifts have occurred together with a decrease in variance and a stronger emphasis on 'centrist' economic policies (in positional terms, see Wagner 2012) as opposed to the more 'extremist' stances taken by the FN in previous elections. Both elements can clearly be regarded as a product of the party's willingness to achieve governmental credibility, although there continued to be a strong differentiation from the mainstream on the key issue of leaving the Euro.

Although the FN has adopted a less 'opaque' and overall more cohesive ideological profile on the economy, one final observation should address the ambivalence in the residual 'neo-liberal' elements at the periphery of the party's ideology. The adoption of a new leftist redistributive economic platform has undeniably resulted in a significant reduction in programmatic indeterminacy, but it should be noted however that the FN has preserved fragments of its former market liberal agenda. This is true in particular of the stigmatization of social welfare 'dependency' (*assistanat*), which was reminiscent of the party's original policy preferences for welfare retrenchment and scapegoating of the vast class of 'welfare scroungers' living on generous state subsidies. In 2012, a harsh critic of benefit fraud was put

to the forefront of the FN agenda of budgetary rigor and reduction in government spending, with a claim that a more efficient fight against social security 'cheaters' and those undeserving assistance would provide an additional 25 Bn Euros in revenue to the French state.

Residual rightist attitudes concerning social policy and the welfare state reveal the ambivalence of economic egalitarianism in the far right's ideology and some of the contradictory promises made by the FN to various sectional groups. Derks (2006) argues that right-wing populist actors address a form of 'economic populism' combining egalitarianism with anti-welfarism in order to reconcile their discourse with the economic preferences of lower status voters. According to de Koster et al (2012), "the combination of egalitarianism and a critical view pertaining to the welfare state proves relevant for explaining voting for new-rightist populist parties" (p.11).

The Keynesian shift that has underpinned the transformation of the FN has important implications for the understanding of the party's performance in the 2012 elections, and, more generally, for its position within the constellation of radical right parties in Western Europe. It has certainly taken the FN closer to fitting the 'welfare chauvinist' profile identified by Kitschelt as a strategy combining economically leftist positions with authoritarian and exclusivist political views (1995: 22-4). This strategy, which McGann and Kitschelt later argued might be more appropriately labelled 'chauvinist welfarism' (2005:150), best typifies the rotation towards the left-authoritarian position in the two-dimensional competitive space by the FN.

Let us recall that Kitschelt argued originally that "the racist-authoritarian strategy may explicitly move to the defence of income redistribution and of the 'little people' in the street against the large corporations and trusts" (1995:22). It is significant that Marine Le Pen continuously emphasized such differences between 'little' and 'big' people across all economic sectors, while virulently attacking big businesses and international corporations. During the 2012 campaign, the FN leader's 'plebeian' appeal to all those at 'the bottom of society' (*la France d'en-bas*) attempted to mobilize the so-called 'invisible constituency' that felt abandoned, forgotten or simply ignored by the dominant parties of the mainstream.

The location of the FN on the cultural axis of competition perpetuated the party's authoritarian and populist agenda, which would be consistent with the aforementioned characterization of the welfare chauvinist strategic displacement. Despite a few minor cosmetic changes, the so-called 'de-demonization' strategy has not yet translated into any substantial ideological revision. The FN has retained the vast majority of its core radical illiberal policies on immigration, crime or traditionally value-laden issues such as abortion or gay rights, which have been cornerstone to the party's programmatic development since the 1980s (Ivaldi 2012a). Moreover the party has persisted in its critique of the pluralist political principles that underpin liberal democracy. Anti-pluralism together with the opposition to fundamental universal and egalitarian values are recognisable features of the populist radical right party family (Mudde 2007, Betz & Johnson 2004, Rydgren 2004).

Lastly, it is important to note that the FN has not deviated from its fundamental exclusionist and identity-based policies combining 'nativism' and cultural protectionism with the chauvinistic defence of the socio-economic interests of French citizens. Mudde (2007) defines nativism as "an ideology, which holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group ('the nation') and that nonnative elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the nation-state" (p.19). This was well in evidence in the FN's campaign against the so-called threats of 'islamization' and 'green fascism' in French society, which despite a tactical manipulation of France's long established tradition of secularity (*laïcité*) showed no major alteration to the mainstays of the FN's ethno-pluralist doctrine. Simultaneously, the party continued to advocate its core 'national preference' scheme whereby French citizens should enjoy priority access to welfare provisions or jobs, over foreigners portrayed as undeserving beneficiaries of social protection. Central to the 2012 campaign by the FN was in particular the emphasis on state medical assistance to migrants (*Aide Médicale d'Etat*) and their entitlement to a minimum retirement allowance (*Allocation de solidarité aux personnes âgées*), which mirrored the party's strong criticism of the government's pension reform and, more generally, social welfare retrenchments.

Finally, the 2012 campaign did not significantly depart from the party's traditional national-protectionist anti-globalization and Eurosceptic agenda. Hostility to the European integration process is hardly novel to the programmatic appeal by the party which has long been opposing federalism in favour of the 'Europe of nations'. Eurosceptic policies were emphasized in the 2002 presidential election, where the FN explicitly formulated its autarkic position, calling for France to renegotiate all existing European treaties and to hold a national referendum on abandoning the Euro.

Criticism of the European Union was temporarily curbed during the 2007 campaign – essentially as part of the aforementioned attempt to improve the economic credibility of the party–, but was promptly brought back to the forefront of the party's narratives in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. In 2010, the FN returned to its core Eurosceptic stance and unveiled a planned exit from the Euro, which became cornerstone to its economic and budgetary policies, and a pillar of Marine Le Pen's presidential platform. As the Eurozone crisis unfolded, the FN leader strongly opposed bailout plans by the European Union, echoing the development of a new form of sovereign-debt chauvinism which has become ubiquitous among many parties of the European radical right.

Anti-globalization themes were at the centre of Marine Le Pen's presidential bid in 2012. The combination of leftist and protectionist economic policies was subsumed in the concept of 'alter-nationalism' put forward by Le Pen in her book *Pour que vive la France* (2012), which was a clear reference to the anti-globalization protest groups that are found on the left of the political spectrum in France. While advocating strong protectionist policies, the FN continued its nationalist appeal against the 'evil' forces of '*mondialisme*' (globalism) embodied pell-mell by the European Union, financial markets, multinational corporations, immigration and, ultimately, France's political 'establishment'. Harsh criticism of free-market and 'ultra-liberal' economics were pervasive to the presidential marketing of the FN, embracing part of the anti-capitalist agenda typical of the extreme left, and was resumed by the concept of a 'patriotic shield' (Speech in Bordeaux, 22 January 2012).

3. A winning strategy? The constituency of economic hardship

Turning our attention from the supply side of the equation to the demand side, one final issue is the extent to which the recent transformative strategies by the FN have been electorally rewarding. In his original essay, Kitschelt predicted the failure of parties with a welfare-chauvinist appeal, arguing that "there is no 'structural location' in advanced capitalism in which [those parties] can entrench themselves" (1995:23). His anticipation was based upon the fact that the electoral constituency for authoritarian and welfare chauvinist strategies relied too heavily on the narrow confines of the working-class while significantly under-representing other main socioeconomic groups, in particular small business and middle-class support.

Whichever criteria are used to gauge the electoral performance of the FN in the 2012 elections, they would seem to contradict *prima facie* Kitschelt's hypothesis that welfare chauvinist parties should not be electorally successful. This is true in terms of the party's share of the vote. Marine Le Pen achieved the party's best ever voting showing for president, outperforming the result of her father in 2002. In the legislatives, the FN won its first two seats in over fifteen years, another significant realization considering the party's long-established status as 'pariah' in French politics. Beyond the electoral arithmetic, it can also be argued that Sarkozy and the UMP tacking further to starboard on immigration issues in 2012 reflected the policy influence that the FN was able to exert on the political agenda during the presidential campaign. Lastly, and perhaps more importantly, significant changes have occurred in the socio-demographic make-up of the FN electorate, which point to the –at least partial– accomplishment of Le Pen's primary objective of expanding support for her party beyond its traditional boundaries.

According to Kitschelt, welfare chauvinism "is particularly likely among social groups whose economic well-being is critically dependent on fiscally viable social policies that furnish satisfactorily public pensions, medical benefits, and unemployment insurance. Quite clearly, citizens with lower incomes –blue-collar workers, lower clerks, pensioners– and few assets" (1995:22). Similarly, Banting (2000) suggests that popular support for welfare chauvinist policies is found in the "most vulnerable sections of the dominant culture – such as young, less educated, blue-collar workers" (p.22). The electoral support assembled by Marine Le Pen in the first round of the presidential election bears a strong resemblance to the typical welfare chauvinist constituency, most crucially in terms of the over-representation of young blue-collar, low income and less educated voters, but also because of the structuring electoral impact of unemployment, economic deprivation and social exclusion.

Socio-economic anger in this crisis-ridden electorate was key to the FN vote in 2012, especially in depressed industrial regions of France's northern rust-belt affected the most by economic insecurity, the decline of French industry and closing factories. Investigating the spatial distribution of the far right vote both at constituency and at departmental level shows a substantial effect of unemployment on voting for the FN in the presidential election, both in terms of direction and strength of associations between the proportion of jobless people and electoral support for Marine Le Pen (Ivaldi 2012b). In Le Pen's fiefdom of the former coal-mining town of Hénin-Beaumont, where unemployment was as high as 15.3 per cent, voters gave the FN candidate no less than 30.1 per cent of the first-round vote. This is also corroborated by the results from various national opinion polls showing higher levels of support for the FN in the economically depressed sectors of the French electorate, among the unemployed most evidently but also among those in the more precarious jobs and in situations

of under-employment who were the most likely to experience financial difficulties. According to one opinion poll, Marine Le Pen won up to 32 per cent of the presidential vote among those who declared that they had difficulties living acceptably on their current household income (IFOP 22 April 2012).

Unfavorable labor market trends and worsening household finances have aggravated further the adverse impact of the economic crisis among groups the most susceptible structurally to income losses, poverty or financial distress, in particular young people, the long-term unemployed, lone parents and all those on temporary employment contracts. It is significant that the FN was able to make significant electoral inroads among those more diverse social groups referred to as the 'near poor' or 'working poor'. A poll conducted by OpinionWay across a large sample of presidential voters showed for instance that Marine Le Pen won 24 per cent of the vote among those on non-permanent contracts (CDD), 26 per cent among the unemployed, another 27 per cent among social housing tenants, and no less than 38 per cent among those employed on short-term interim contracts (OpinionWay, *Le Figaro*, 22 April 2012).

Changes were even more perceptible among female voters traditionally more adverse to the far right. The gender gap that was a characteristic feature of the electoral base of the FN since the mid-1980s was significantly reduced in 2012: in the first round of the presidential, Marine Le Pen won 19 and 17 per cent of the male and female vote respectively (SOFRES-TriElec). That women turned in greater proportion to the far right is consistent of course with the softening of the party's political profile and, above all, the personality of its new leader both in terms of age and gender. It also points toward the more profound transformation that has occurred in France's employment structure because of the dramatic increase in female participation in the labor market. That women are significantly over-represented among the 'underemployed' (INSEE), in single parent households or in the new 'service proletariat' might help further elucidate the narrowing of the traditional 'radical right gender gap' in the 2012 election. The recent literature on new social class boundaries in contemporary post-industrial economies has highlighted important reconfigurations of class and the ongoing development of a new form of unskilled proletariat in the service sector (Oesch 2006), whose objective economic conditions and subjective political preferences might become increasingly similar to those of the old industrial working class.

An analogous conclusion applies to the growth in support for the FN among younger people. Since 2002, the far right's appeal to the younger cohorts had significantly diminished. In 2012, Marine Le Pen achieved her best scores among the under 35 years (23 per cent). This performance reflected somewhat the impact of the severe rise in unemployment on the subgroups suffering the most obvious effects of the recession, most notably young adults and low-skilled voters. Youth unemployment has been structurally high in France, but it deteriorated further to reach 22.5 per cent of the under 25 years in the second quarter of 2012 (INSEE).

Increases in annual household expenditures on vital commodities, together with the rise in property and rental costs, have been other important factors constraining household budgets in France. They have pushed income-related issues to the forefront of party competition both in 2007 and 2012 although unemployment issues were paramount to all sectors of the electorate in the latter election. The emergence of 'purchasing power' as one the issues topping the populist agenda of the 2012 presidential election is an indication of the growing salience of the new 'politics of revenues'. According to the SOFRES-TriElec poll, 'improving

purchasing power' was reported as one of the most important issues by over a third (34 per cent) of Le Pen presidential voters, which was the highest salience observed across all electorates. This was hardly a surprise considering the intense demagogic campaigns on the prices of vital commodities, electricity or gasoline conducted by the FN since the 2010 regional elections.

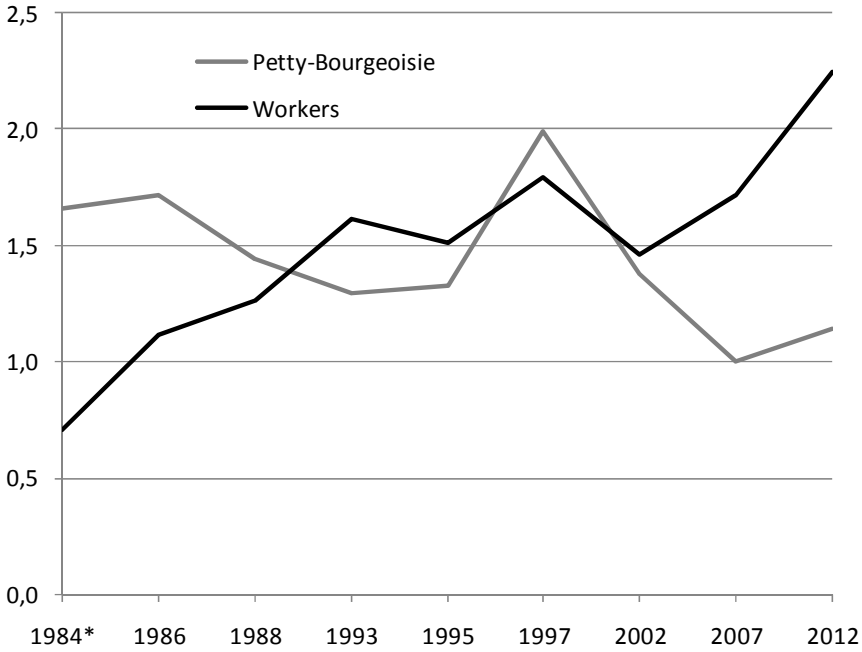
Turning to the social class make-up of the FN electorate, the party expanded its support among manual low-skilled workers as well as non manual routine employees in the lower salariat, whilst being still less popular among the upper social strata with higher education and economic assets. In 2012, the far right continued to suffer a palpable deficit in credibility among those categories. According to polling figures, Marine Le Pen totalled less than 10 per cent of the vote in the upper service class and professionals in the first round of the presidential election. This trend was reflected also in the persistence of a deep educational divide, with group odds-ratios of about 4 on average in voters with low educational grades relative to those with university degrees.

This intensification of the FN's working-class appeal, which was observable in both the 2007 and 2012 elections, amplified the trend towards the 'proletarization' of the political support for the far right, a process of electoral dealignment that has been identified in other European countries (Oesch 2008). In France, this phenomenon –which has been characterized both as '*gaucho-lepénisme*' ideologically (Perrineau 1995) and '*ouvriéro-lepénisme*' with respect to the party's changing sociology (Mayer 2002)– began to develop in the late 1980s and continued across all major elections. As demonstrated by Gougou (2007), this dealignment process had a strong generational component and formed part of a gradual and more general decline in support for parties of the left among younger cohorts of blue-collar voters over time.

In 2012, Marine Le Pen achieved her best scores in the latter occupational group with 33 per cent of the blue-collar vote, outperforming both the socialist and neo-communist candidates. Additionally, the FN candidate won 23 per cent among routine non manual employees (TNS-SOFRES 22 April 2012). This reflected the growing appeal of the far right to the new 'proletariat' in the routine service sector in which women are in the majority, often suffering a disadvantaged class position. More importantly, there was a relative drop in support on the part of the more traditional petty-bourgeois component of the far right electorate. Let us recall that the over-representation of both the petty-bourgeoisie and the working-class singularized Kitschelt's prototypical new radical right based on the party's authoritarian and capitalist appeal.

Figure 4 compares the odds of voting for the FN among blue-collar workers and the self-employed relative to all other social groups since the breakthrough election of 1984. Trends in odds ratios show a continuous increase in the working class likelihoods of voting for the far right since the late 1980s. This culminated in the 2012 presidential election where blue-collar workers were two times more likely to cast a ballot for Le Pen rather than the other occupational categories. In contrast, there has been a relative waning in the propensity for the petty-bourgeoisie to support the FN in the most recent elections, with odds ratios down to the vicinity of one in both the 2007 and 2012 presidential contests.

Figure 4. Odds ratios[(1)] of voting for the FN in blue-collar workers and the self-employed since 1984

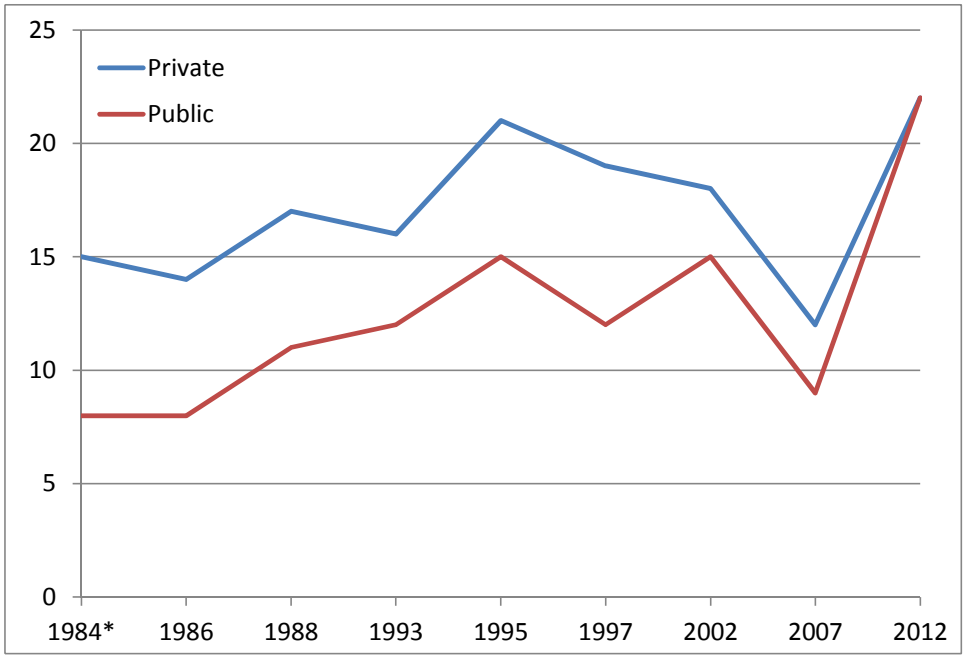


(1) Group-wise odds ratios for each category calculated relative to the total vote for the FN
*1984=European Election.
Source : SOFRES post-election surveys 1984-1997 ; Panel Electoral Français 2007 & 2012 ; TNS-SOFRES TriElec 2012.

Overall, the above trends show a significant transformation in the dynamics of the electoral support for the FN among those two categories over time. Whilst Kitschelt's master case winning formula was more visible throughout the 1990s, the electoral clientele of the far right has progressively transformed itself into a more typical welfare chauvinist constituency in 2007 and 2012. In the latter election in particular, the leftward programmatic shift by the FN on the economic dimension might have alienated part of its former support among shopkeepers, small entrepreneurs or craftsmen, whose distinctive policy preferences continued to be unambiguously located on the right of the economic spectrum. In addition, Sarkozy's liberalizing agenda of welfare retrenchment, public sector cuts and privatization has increased the level of attractiveness for the mainstream right among petty-bourgeois voters, which allowed in particular for the swing that occurred within the right bloc of French politics in the 2007 presidential election (Mayer 2007).

In contrast, the new 'statist' agenda enabled the party to enhance its attractiveness to voters employed in the public sector. Until then, civil servants were remarkably under-represented in the electoral base of the FN, whereas those in the private sector exhibited a stronger tendency to support the far right. As illustrated in Figure 5 below, differences were particularly marked in the 1980s at a time when the FN had not yet deviated from its program of small government, advocating in particular drastic cuts in numbers of public sector employees and the dismantling of France's public bureaucracy. In 2012, Marine Le Pen won a similar 22 per cent share of the vote across both categories. To a large extent, her performance among public sector employees can be regarded as a result of the FN's active campaign against the large-scale RGPP reform program launched by the Fillon government in 2007 to achieve structural reductions in public expenditures as well as in numbers of civil servants.

Figure 5. FN scores among wage earners in the public and private sectors since 1984



*1984=European Election.
Source : SOFRES post-election surveys 1984-1997 ; Panel Electoral Français 2002, 2007 ; IFOP 2012

Also consistent with the departure from the typical 'new radical right' constituency, the difference in electoral support for the FN between pensioners and the economically active population has grown larger, the former being significantly under-represented in 2012. The exact size of this gap varies across pollsters but there is some evidence that the electoral appeal of the far right to those in retirement has diminished in 2012. Looking at the two polls by IFOP and OpinionWay specifically distinguishing between those two categories shows that Marine Le Pen attracted a significantly lower proportion of retirees in the first round of the presidential election: according to those surveys, an average 10.5 per cent of pensioners did cast their vote for the far right leader, as opposed to about 22.5 per cent among working-age voters. That pensioners were less inclined to support the FN is of course corroborated by the distribution of the far right vote across age bands, with a significant drop among the 65 years+. Similar differences were discernible in previous elections, yet of a lower magnitude.

The widening of the 'activity' divide can be accounted for by a variety of factors –most evidently of course religion and economic assets. There is also a strong evidence that older voters would lend much less support to Le Pen's plan to shed the Euro and return to the national currency. The drop in support for the FN among retirees is also consistent with the welfare chauvinist hypothesis. As one 'residual' category of voters, pensioners lie at the heart of the typical radical right constituency in which they should be "proportionally represented or somewhat overrepresented" (Kitschelt 1995:21). The decline in the pensioners' support for the FN would confirm therefore that the party has further distanced itself from the new radical right master case.

In strict socio-economic terms, however, this observation is partially blurred by the differential distribution of income and assets that can be found in the heterogeneous group of pensioners. In the latter, policy preferences are strongly influenced by former occupations – recall for example that 65 per cent of French pensioners originated in the lower social strata

i.e. manual workers, farmers or routine non manual employees. In this sense, the failure by Marine Le Pen to attract more of those voters could be a short-term rather than a truly structural phenomenon. In particular, the expansion of a new class of 'poor retirees', whose pension will remain under the poverty threshold, might create a more favourable structure of opportunity for the demand-oriented economics of the FN in the future.

Whilst the consolidation of the far right vote in the working-class is well established, empirical evidence for a surge in support for the FN among middle-class voters is more patchy, combining clear problems of definition with a substantial amount of variation in the aggregate figures provided by pollsters for 2012. Such discrepancies certainly warrant that further inquiries be made to investigate the significance of the transformation that might have taken place in the electoral support for the FN. Yet, based on available polling results, there was little empirical evidence of a significant swing among middle class voters or any substantial alteration in the yield ratio within this electorate in the 2012 elections. With the notable exception of IPSOS –whose published data seemed to have a marked 'middle-class' bias both in terms of occupation and education–, most polling figures showed that the far right was less able to recruit among the lower service class, which in the French classificatory scheme are mainly embedded in the 'intermediary occupations' (*professions intermédiaires*). On average, the support for the FN among those voters was four to five percentage points below the national score of the party. That these voters remained less susceptible to the appeal by the FN lends support to the 'welfare chauvinist' hypotheses which postulate that middle class support should be under-represented.

Combined with the impact of the economic downturn and turmoil in the financial markets, the unfolding of the Eurozone crisis brought international economic issues to the forefront of the French presidential agenda. The argument that processes of denationalization have contributed to the electoral rise of the radical right has been outlined by previous research. Scholars have pointed out that those parties appeal predominantly to 'modernization losers', emphasizing in particular the relationship between globalization and the electoral success of the radical right among those left behind in post-industrialized societies (Betz 1994). To a large degree, the electoral coalition formed by 'modernization losers' resembles that identified by Kitschelt as typical of the authoritarian welfare-chauvinist appeal i.e. blue collars and the lower salariat, the unemployed and more generally voters depending on welfare provisions.

More recently, further attention has been paid to the impact of economic globalization on the shape of party competition. Kriesi et al (2006) have argued for instance that globalization has led to the formation of a new line of conflict in Western European party systems, which opposes those who are likely to benefit from international competition to those most directly threatened by it. The authors assume that "the new groups of winners and losers of globalization constitute political potentials, which can be articulated by political organizations" (p.922). Beyond economic globalization, this new line of conflict between 'integration' and 'demarcation' encompasses a wider array of economic, cultural and institutional processes of 'denationalization' whereby the traditional boundaries of the nation-states are unbundled. This is true for instance of European integration whose supranational construction forms an integral part of the process of opening up national borders, which is fiercely resisted by the radical right, and against which the FN in particular has been able to mobilize electorally.

The attempt by the FN to exploit this new line of cleavage opposing national to global interests was well in evidence in the 'alter-nationalist' stance taken in the lead up to the 2012 presidential election. As suggested above, Marine Le Pen specifically targeted the silent constituency, the 'little people' in French society and all the 'invisible' citizens who felt the most threatened by the advance of deindustrialization, globalization and a sense of loss of cultural identity. At the attitudinal level, the far right presidential constituency exhibited strong negative perceptions of economic globalization, with no less than eight out of ten FN voters saying that it had an "extremely negative" impact. These representations were inserted into a more general set of ethnocentrist, authoritarian and exclusionist attitudes (Mayer 2012).

This was corroborated by the geographic variation in the relative level of electoral support for the FN across the country. Following a trend initiated in the early 2000s, Marine Le Pen received her best scores in rural and peri-urban areas, further away from the more bourgeois metropolitan centers. Synthesizing public opinion and demographic data, Fourquet (2012) found that the spatial spread of the FN's electoral strengths corresponded with the distribution of vast sectors of socially demoted working class and lower middle-class voters in areas characterized by higher unemployment and criminality, public service retrenchment and the cost of commuting to work daily, where attitudinal demands for authoritarian welfare-chauvinist policies were significantly higher than in large cities.

Fears of economic globalization among FN voters only highlight broader ideological orientations with regards to the cultural dimension of political competition, which encompass anti-immigration, protectionist and, above all, Eurosceptic attitudes. Not surprisingly, opinion poll surveys found that the far right electorate had the highest level of Euroscepticism: over a half (54 per cent) of them said for instance that "they would be relieved if the European Union was dissolved", as opposed to less than a quarter (24 per cent) of those supporting Mélenchon (TNS-SOFRES/TriElec). In 2012, Le Pen drew predominantly from the broad electoral coalition of the 'No' that had formed in the French referendum over the European Constitutional Treaty (ECT) in 2005. According to polls, the FN leader won 30 per cent of the vote among those who had rejected the ECT, and up to 51 per cent among the naysayers who placed themselves on the right of the political spectrum (IFOP-Fiducial, 22 April 2012). At the cantonal level, there was a significant correlation between the 2012 presidential vote for the FN and the 'No' vote in 2005 (r=.58 at p<.05 N=3,883 cantons).

Conclusion: the future of French populism

For many years, the FN has epitomised the West-European variant of Kitschelt's 'new radical radical right'. One claim in this paper is that the party has undergone a significant policy paradigm change under the new leadership of Marine Le Pen. While retaining its classic authoritarian policies on the cultural axis –preserving in particular its exclusionist and chauvinistic appeals–, the FN has endorsed a Keynesian agenda of economic redistribution and state intervention, which manifested a unique trajectory towards the archetypal competitive 'authoritarian welfare-chauvinist' party described by Kitschelt as one possible alternative to the radical right's winning formula.

Whereas the more 'centrist' economic position taken by the FN in the mid-1990s was essentially the result of the party's adopting strong 'anti-globalization' and protectionist stances in the international domain, the leftwards shift on the economy in 2012 concerned predominantly the domestic realm, thereby altering the core economic policy preferences of

the far right. This more consistent framework of economic policy also reduced the level of ideological heterogeneity or 'blurring' of economic issues, which were previously distinctive traits of the FN's economic program.

In the 2012 elections, such programmatic amalgamation allowed the FN to assemble a sizeable electoral constituency among the lower social strata in the electorate, which were the most susceptible to the impact of unemployment, economic deprivation or social disintegration. In their cross-national study, Flecker et al (2007) identify intensive subjective feelings of injustice, sense of economic powerlessness or the devaluation of skills as key factors of support for the radical right. Economic fears and anxieties were pervasive to the crisis-ridden electorate of the FN in the presidential ballot. With respect to the electoral potential for authoritarian welfare-chauvinist parties, Kitschelt argued that a significant rise of those parties could only be provoked by a severe aggravation of the economy, resulting into a major increase in unemployment across large sectors of the workforce (1995:23). Considering the expansion that occurred in the socio-demographic make-up of the far right electorate – more women, younger voters or public sector employees–, there is some support for the hypothesis that welfare chauvinist strategies can be successful in the arena of party competition. It remains to be established however to what extent this conclusion is dependent upon the specific socio-economic conditions that have developed in France in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, and whether the FN would be in a position to sustain its level of electoral attractiveness in a less adverse economic context.

Under current economic conditions, the French far right has bright electoral prospects. There are serious concerns about the combined impact of unemployment, rises in indirect taxes, low or stagnant wage growth and the multiplication of austerity measures by the socialist government. The latter may see its room for economic and budgetary manoeuver increasingly constrained by the degradation in public finances, while the share of households experiencing financial difficulties can be expected to increase further. The abyssal plunge in popularity for both the president and his prime minister after only six months in office reflects impatience in the public, and growing anxieties over the ability of the left to effectively tackle unemployment or the cost of living.

As other social groups are likely to be affected by the economic crisis, rising political dissatisfaction could pave the way to future electoral victories by the FN. The economic downturn, together with the flaws in the capitalist model that were revealed by the financial crisis of 2008, have created widespread economic insecurity and political disillusionment. The recent budgetary austerity plan imposed by the government, the harshest since 1983, might antagonize further the middle-class base of French society, resulting into its destabilization and ideological polarization. The socialist program of reduction in government expenditures and increase in taxes on individual households, which has become crucial to the defence of the country's participation in the Euro, might also have a negative impact on a wider range of occupational groups beyond the lower social strata.

The exceptionally high level of pessimism that exists in French society today is somewhat symptomatic of the waning of the 'new wage earner middle-class' dream that has been a traditional pillar of economic growth in France. Economic stagnation, welfare state retrenchment and increasing social differentiation have had a significant effect on the faith of middle-class voters in the future of their social status and that of their children. Fears of impoverishment have been reinforced by the increasingly negative perceptions of a continuous decline in standards of living, a deterioration in their income and escalating

uncertainties over the future of the country's retirement system. As suggested recently by Azmanova (2011), the polarization of life chances resulting from differential exposure to both the economic opportunities and the hazards of globalization is likely to transform the logic of ideological conflict and political competition in European countries. A downward social trajectory could take endangered middle-class voters closer to the actual conditions and political preferences of the old working class, and could consequently widen the FN electoral support in future elections.

At the level of party competition, highly divisive issues such as gay marriage, immigration, law-and-order or voting rights for non European foreigners will probably feature on the political agenda of the socialist government during Hollande's presidency. The politicization of those issues could potentially lead to the polarization of the authoritarian sector of the UMP electorate whose ideological proximity with the FN is greater on the cultural dimension. The threat of a significant swing to the FN on the part of right-wing voters and/or middle-level elites has undeniably escalated following the disastrous outcome of the UMP leadership election of November 2012, which revealed the depth of the internal ideological fracture between hard-line right-wingers lurching to the FN and those leaning towards the centre of the political spectrum.

In addition, the rejuvenation of the far right and the attenuation in the FN's oppositional strategy might have important implications for the future of party competition on the right. The 2012 legislative election has confirmed the convergence that continues to exist in the Southern regions of the country, where there has been traditionally higher ideological, sociological and organizational permeability between extreme and mainstream actors of the right. It has also demonstrated the endurance of specific patterns of party competition at the sub-national level, based upon well-entrenched *notables* who are often self-sufficient electorally and enjoy therefore greater independence from the more centralized national parties (Ivaldi 2007). Lastly, and most importantly, the 2012 legislatives have confirmed the decision made by the UMP in the 2011 cantonal ballot to abandon the 'republican front' strategy, which will increase the likelihood of the FN winning parliamentary seats in highly fragmented three-way legislative runoffs in the future.

To conclude, whilst there are a number of economic and political factors that are likely to foster votes for the far right, there continue however to be important impediments to the realization of Marine Le Pen's ambition of replacing the UMP as the dominant party of the right. The first obstacle addresses the conservation by the so-called 'new FN' of its core radical and illiberal policies, which was alluded to in the previous sections. The modernization process initiated by Marine Le Pen, albeit of crucial importance, is very much still in its infancy and has not yet resulted in a genuine process of ideological 'de-radicalization'. The bulk of the party's cultural policies –e.g. death penalty, national preference, family reunion or mass repatriation of immigrants– still fall outside the region of political acceptability, and therefore will continue to alienate the more moderate sectors of the electorate while precluding alliances with the mainstream right at the national level.

More importantly, the FN might have to address the issue of its repositioning on the economic dimension. Whilst electorally beneficial in the current context of economic crisis, the leftward move on the redistributive axis of competition combined with the rejection of the Euro has increased further the ideological distance with the mainstream right, making a broad national coalition less likely. The policy gap is likely to widen even more as the UMP leadership election campaign has revealed a shift further to the right of the economic spectrum.

Lastly, the FN will have to confront the persistent lack of credibility of its economic policies. Despite the many efforts by its new leadership to improve its credentials on that specific dimension, the FN economic and financial program has met with strong skepticism in the French electorate, with about seven out of ten voters saying that the FN economics were simply not realistic. Simultaneously, a large majority rejected the FN's adventurous plan to leave the Euro and return to the Franc, which was central to Le Pen's campaign and cornerstone to the whole new redistributive strategies by the party.

Given the strong institutional constraints that exist in France's bipolar majoritarian system, the FN will to some degree be forced into political co-operation with the other parties of the right. Yet collaborative strategies at the national level can only be achieved if the FN agrees on revising some of its most extreme policies on immigration, crime and most importantly the EU. Then there would be a risk that the party could lose its appeal to disenfranchised protest voters, or could experience yet another schism by its most radical factions.

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