

Rebranding Populism

The Transformation of the Front National in France

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Overview

- Strategic transformation of the FN
- Electoral support
- Prospects

Incentives for party change

- 2002: ceiling effect, democratic legitimacy, policy credibility
- 2007: electoral defeat; right-wing competition
- Challenges:
 - Leadership
 - Strategy
 - Credibility

Institutionalization

- From niche to mainstream
- Final stage: institutionalization (Harmel & Svasand)
 - De-radicalization of policies
 - Pragmatic leadership
 - Accommodative strategies
 - Office-seeking

Dimensions of party change

- 4 main dimensions (Krouwel 2012):
 - Genetic
 - Organizational
 - Ideological
 - Electoral

Political culture continuity

- Absence of political aggiornamento (e.g. MSI)
- No formal condemnation of racism or holocaust denial
- Far right DNA still perceptible:
 - Mandela
 - Taubira
 - Dieudonné

Organizational aspects

- No symbolic 'founding event' (e.g. congress)
- No internal schism
- Limited elite replacement (Philippot, Collard, Maréchal-Le Pen)
- Old party's grassroots + new inexperienced candidates locally
- Loosening of the links with more radical groups

Party strategy

- Substance vs. Packaging (Harmel et al 1995)
- Modernization and softening of the party's image ('de-demonization')
- Policy credibility–office seeking
- Accommodative strategies
- Mégret in 1997/98 prior to split

Party ideology

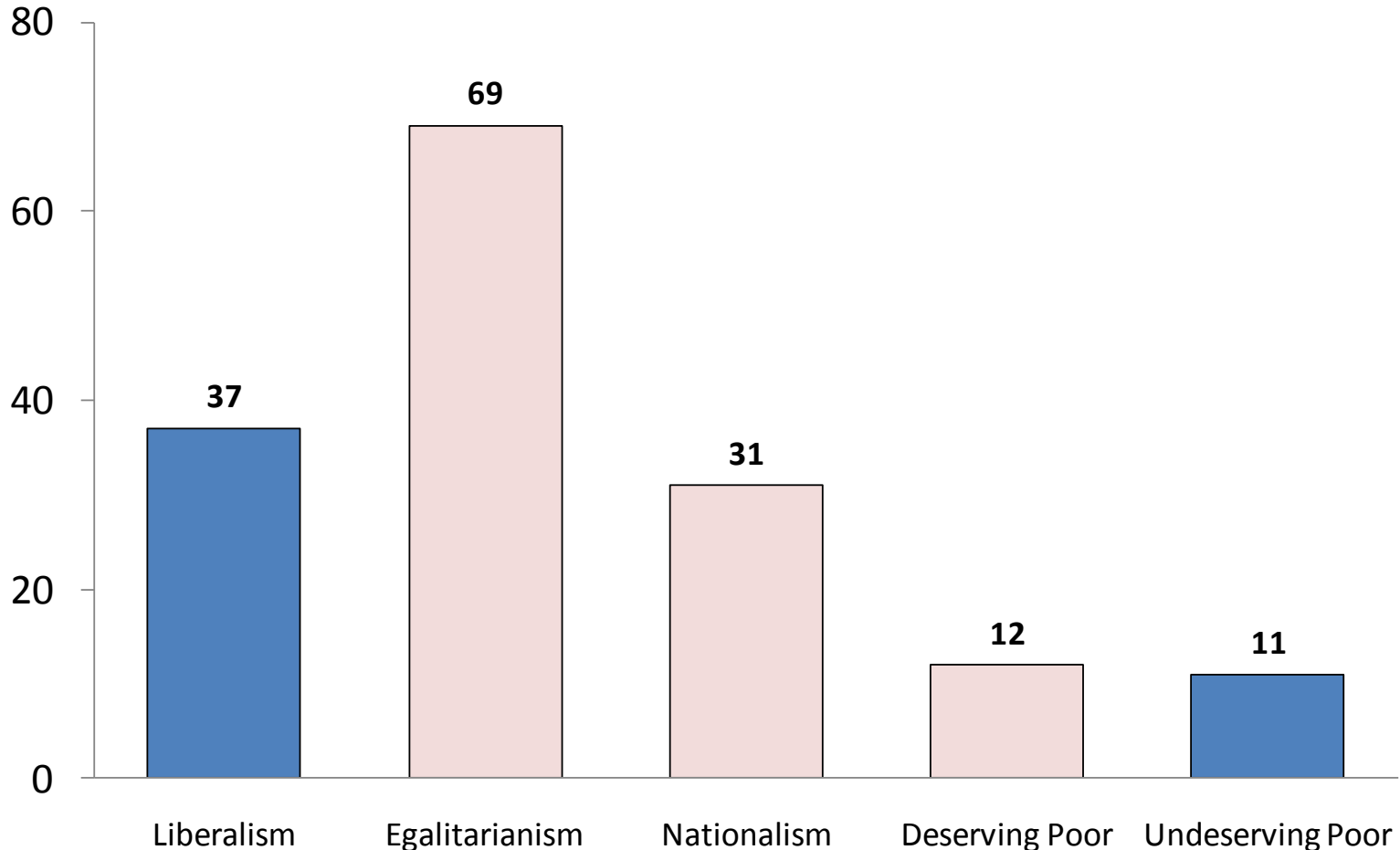
- De-emphasizing of social conservative policies
- A new 'republican' agenda of laïcité / Islam
- No substantial alterations to core radical policies (Ivaldi 2012)
 - Immigration (ethno-pluralist policies)
 - Law and order (authoritarianism, death penalty)
 - Europe (Euro-reject)

A new economic agenda

- Shift to the left on the economy (Ivaldi 2013)
 - State intervention, public spending
 - Redistribution and welfare expansion
 - Public services and nationalizations
- Increase in salience
- ‘De-culturalization’

Economic positions

Figure 3. Socio-economic themes in the 2012 presidential manifesto*



* number of economic policy pledges in each category.

Competitive position

- Left-Authoritarianism
 - Economic redistribution (left on eco. Axis)
 - Authoritarian policies (right on cult. Axis)
 - Appeal to the 'little people' (populism)
- Conjuncture (crisis) or durable shift?
- Still policy flexibility (municipal agenda 2014)

The 2012 presidential election

- Electoral revival of the FN: 17.9%
- Return to party system complexity and polarization
- Economic crisis, unemployment
- Social pessimism
- Discontent with the Sarkozy Presidency

Crisis-ridden electoral constituency

- Strong working class support, lower salariat and the 'new service proletariat'
- Economic hardship: precariousness, underemployment, unemployment
- Voters with lower skills, assets and education
- Social disintegration, peri-urban peripheries
- Globalization 'losers'

New inroads

- Diversification of the radical right constituency
- Women (in the lower social strata, single parents, underemployed)
- Young voters < 35 yrs (unemployment)
- Public sector employees

FN voter preferences and attitudes

- Ethnocentrism+++, Anti-establishment++, Anti-Europe+
- Heterogeneous economic preferences
 - ‘Centrist’ (equidistant from left-right) on economic issues
 - Shift from market to state, albeit limited
 - Economic nationalism++
 - Undeserving poor++

Conclusion and Prospects

- Early stage of the modernization process
- Popularity+, change in public attitudes
- Propitious context in 2014
- Challenges:
 - ‘Iron law’ of the Two-Ballot Majority system
 - Possible cost of ‘de-radicalization’
 - Policy distance with proximal parties of the right
 - Change in public policy mood: liberal, anti-tax