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### **The Radical Right in France**

Nonna Mayer

The Oxford Handbook of the Radical Right

*Edited by Jens Rydgren*

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### **Abstract and Keywords**

After providing a quick summary of the long history of the French radical right, from the reaction to the revolution of 1789 to the creation of the Front National in 1972, this chapter focuses on the changes brought about by Marine Le Pen since she took over her father's party in 2011. Her "de-demonization" strategy has indeed improved the image of the movement and attracted new voters. But the nativist anti-immigrant message is the same as Jean-Marie Le Pen's. And the Front National still suffers from political isolation; while it has sometimes won the first round of elections, it has yet to achieve a majority in the second round. After its semi-defeat in the 2017 elections, the very opportunity of the de-demonization strategy is being questioned inside the party.

Keywords: Marine Le Pen, French radical right, Front National, anti-immigrants, anti-immigration, right-wing movements, France

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AMIDST the so-called third wave of extreme right parties that arose in Western Europe in the mid-1980s, the oldest and the most successful is the French Front National (FN, National Front), co-founded by Jean-Marie Le Pen in 1972. It was described as “the prototype of the New Radical Right,” an illustration of a “winning formula” that combined “an appeal to vigorous state authority and paternalism in the family with an endorsement of free market capitalism in the economy” (Kitschelt 1995, 91), and it became a model for many similar movements. New populist radical right parties have appeared since, such as the UK Independence Party (UKIP) under Nigel Farage, the Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV, Party for Freedom) under Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, the True Finns under Timo Soini, et cetera. If at one point they had stolen the spotlight from Jean-Marie Le Pen’s party, that is no longer true since his youngest daughter, Marine le Pen, took over in 2011. She has launched a campaign of *dédiabolisation*, or de-demonization (Dézé 2015), that is meant to renew the movement, turn it into a mainstream party, and allow it to rise to power.<sup>1</sup> After a long procedural feud with her father, she finally expelled him from the party on August 20, 2015, turning a page in the history of the FN. This chapter compares the “old” and “new” FN. After an introductory section summarizing the history of the radical right in France, I will describe the creation of the Front National by Jean-Marie Le Pen and the changes brought about by his daughter. A concluding section shows that the party has arrived at a turning point: it is no longer exactly like the father’s party, but it is still far from becoming part of the mainstream and from achieving office.

## From the Counterrevolution to the Front National

The cultural matrix of the Front National goes way back into the past, to the Revolution of 1789 and the countermovements it stirred up (Winock 2015; Goodliffe 2012). The first (p. 434) component is traditionalism. “Ultras” was the name given to the Catholic reactionary right, which defended the monarchy and the “ancien régime” against republicanism and political liberalism. Joseph de Maistre and Louis de Bonald were their intellectual guides.

The second component is nationalism. Sparked by the Prussian defeat of France in 1871, nationalism moved from the left to the right of the political spectrum, and turned anti-parliamentary, militarist, anti-Semitic, and often violent. It gave birth to organizations such as the Ligue des Patriotes (Patriots’ League), founded by the nationalist poet Paul Déroulède in 1882, and the Ligue Nationale Antisémite de France, founded in 1889 by the journalist Edouard Drumont, the author of *Jewish France* (1886). It inspired the 1886–1889 Boulangist movement (Hutton 1976). Led by a former minister of defense, General Georges Boulanger, nicknamed “General Revenge,” the movement had a meteoric electoral rise, especially in the working-class districts of Paris. But when its leader refused to stage a coup d’état, it collapsed as quickly as it had appeared.

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The third component is anti-Semitism, which reached a climax with the Dreyfus affair in 1894. Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish officer, was convicted of treason for providing intelligence to the German enemy, and he was sentenced to life imprisonment. But later it became apparent that the charges had been falsified. The affair divided France, opposing those who believed in Dreyfus's innocence, including the Ligue des Droits de l'Homme (founded in 1898) and Emile Zola (author of an open letter to the president of the Republic, "J'accuse"),<sup>2</sup> to those who saw him as a traitor, starting with the Ligue de la Patrie Française.

The years after World War I saw the development of veterans' mass movements, such as the Croix de Feu of Lieutenant Colonel François de la Rocque, and the nationalist leagues had their golden age. The most active and influential movement, founded in 1898 in the aftermath of the Dreyfus affair by Henri Vaugois and Maurice Pujo, was Action Française and its youth movement, Camelots du Roi (Weber 1962). It was guided by the doctrine of "integral nationalism" forged by Charles Maurras, which had as its goal the defense of France against its enemies—Jews, Protestants, Masons, and *métèques* (an insulting term for foreigners)—and which called for the restoration of the monarchy and the authority of the Catholic Church as the best means to ensure social order (Davies 2002). After the German defeat of France in 1940 and the death of the Third Republic, Action Française rallied behind Marshal Philippe Pétain and his project of national revolution, welcomed by Charles Maurras as a "divine surprise."

When the war was over, the French extreme right was totally discredited by the fact that many of its members had collaborated with the German occupation and the Vichy regime. Its electoral influence was nonexistent, and its attempts to make a comeback were short-lived. It supported the Poujadist movement in the 1950s, which drew as much as 11.6 percent of the vote in the legislative elections of January 2, 1956, sending some fifty deputies to the National Assembly.<sup>3</sup> But they were swept away two years later by the Algerian crisis and the return to office of General Charles de Gaulle. The decolonization process briefly remobilized the far right in the defense of "French Algeria." But only 5.2 percent of the electorate voted no in the April 8, 1962, referendum on the Evian (p. 435) agreements giving independence to Algeria, and the candidate of the "national right," Jean-Louis Tixier-Vignancour, failed to get more than 9.2 percent of the vote in the first round of the 1965 presidential election. Altogether, his party, the Alliance Républicaine pour les Libertés et le Progrès (ARLP, Republican Alliance for Liberty and Progress), and the other extreme right movements drew just 0.5 percent of the vote in the legislative elections of 1967 and 0.08 percent in 1968, in the wake of the student protests that brought together practically all right-wing groups against the "leftist" peril.

A third attempt came in 1971–1972 at the initiative of the nationalist-revolutionary activists of Ordre Nouveau (ON, New Order), successor to Occident.<sup>4</sup> Inspired by the electoral success of the Italian neofascist party MSI (Movimento Sociale Italiano, Italian Social Movement), they planned a National Front that would bring together the many components of the extreme right in order to field candidates for the 1973 legislative elections. The principle was adopted at ON's congress in June 1972, and the constitutive

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congress of the Front National pour l'Unité Française (FNUF, National Front for French Unity) was held on October 5, 1972. It started as a heterogeneous gathering, bringing together those nostalgic for Vichy with anti-Gaullists, Poujadists with neofascists, intellectuals with activists, under the leadership of Jean-Marie Le Pen. The ex-paratrooper Le Pen, a former president of the nationalist student association of Paris (the Corpo), was elected a deputy in 1956 on the Union et Fraternité Française ticket headed by Pierre Poujade, also founder of the Front National des Combattants (National Veterans Front) and campaign manager for the pro-French Algeria candidate Jean-Louis Tixier-Vignancour in 1965. Le Pen had an ideal profile: a man of action who was involved in all the battles of the extreme right, yet politically respectable. The first electoral test for the new party, the 1973 parliamentary elections, was a failure. Its candidates drew less than 0.5 percent of the vote. Torn by internal dissension, in harsh competition with its rival Parti des Forces Nouvelles (PFN, Party of New Forces) and its brilliant leader Pascal Gauchon, the FN remained in political oblivion for ten years. In the 1979 European elections, the two organizations could not reach an agreement for a joint slate of candidates. In the 1981 presidential election, their leaders could not manage to muster the five hundred signatures of elected representatives necessary to run for the presidency. In the parliamentary elections that followed, the Front National candidates drew less than 0.2 percent of the vote. The book *L'extrême droite en France*, published in the fall of 1983, pronounced its funeral oration: "Scattered into a myriad of tiny islets, powerless coterie, shadow circles, it is no more but a relic of the past" (Petitfils 1983, 123).

## The Le Pen Phenomenon

The picture started to change after the victory of the Socialist left in the elections of 1981. Some of the Front National candidates made surprisingly good showings in the 1982 cantonal elections. In the 1983 municipal elections, the slate headed by Le Pen in the Twentieth Arrondissement of Paris drew 11.3 percent of the vote, while in Dreux (p. 436) (Eure-et-Loir), the slate headed by the Gaullist party, the Rassemblement pour la République (RPR, Rally for the Republic), which included nine FN candidates, almost defeated the slate headed by the Socialist mayor, Françoise Gaspard. That election was invalidated after several irregularities were detected, and the by-election that took place thereafter marked the actual rebirth of the French extreme right (Stirbois 1988; Gaspard 1995; Albertini and Doucet 2013). In the first round, on September 4, 1983, the slate led by the secretary general of the Front National, Jean-Pierre Stirbois, gave his party its best showing since its creation, 16.7 percent of the vote. Then, in order to defeat the left in the second round, a joint slate of candidates representing the RPR and the FN was created, and it won the election with more than 55 percent of the votes, allowing the election of ten FN town councilors. Allying itself with the moderate right, a move widely debated in the media and strongly opposed by the left, provided the Front National with the political legitimacy and the visibility it longed for. In the following weeks, it made

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progress in several other special elections. The 1984 European Parliament election confirmed that Le Pen's party had gained a national audience: more than two million voters supported Le Pen's slate, called Front d'Opposition Nationale pour l'Europe des Patries, which won 11.2 percent of the vote and ten seats in the European Parliament.

### The Electoral Rebirth of the Radical Right

The 1984 European Parliament election marked the beginning of the FN's electoral takeoff. In the legislative elections of 1986, its candidates drew 9.7 percent of the votes, and thanks to reform of the electoral rules, thirty-five National Front deputies were elected. Between 1988 and 1998 the FN saw its share of the vote rise, settling around 15 percent, first in the presidential race of 1988 (when the FN received a 14.9 percent share), then in the legislative elections of 1997, and after that in the regional elections of 1998. In the presidential election of 2002 not only did Le Pen surpass his 1995 vote tally, with 16.9 percent, but he qualified for the second round, coming in ahead of the Socialist candidate, Prime Minister Lionel Jospin.

Roughly the same combination of economic, ideological, and political factors explains the electoral comeback of radical right-wing parties in Europe in the mid-1980s (Betz 1994; Kitschelt 1995; Carter 2005; Norris 2005). They thrived on economic recession and unemployment, growing popular disaffection with politics and established parties, fears kindled by European unification, and the uncertainties of post-communism. At a deeper level, they were driven by a "silent counterrevolution," promoting the traditional values of family, religion, and hard work in reaction to the post-materialist, permissive values of the sixties (Ignazi 1992). But in each country the evolution of the extreme right has its idiosyncrasies (Art 2011).

Several factors played a decisive part in France. The first one was decolonization in Algeria. The Evian agreements of 1962 that granted independence to the former French colony put an end to seven years of war, but opposition to decolonization spurred an (p. 437) unprecedented wave of terrorist attacks by the Organisation Armée Secrète (OAS, Secret Army Organization) and the exodus of one million French settlers from Algeria, for fear of reprisals. Widespread anti-Arab feelings stem from that period. The second factor was the electoral dynamics of the Union de la Gauche (Union of the Left), which led to the presidential victory of François Mitterrand on May 10, 1981. The intense political polarization of this election distracted most French people from the economic recession of the time, as well as temporarily staving off the political disenchantment and party dealignment that most Western democracies were experiencing at this time (Lawson and Merkl 1988). The election of a Socialist president and the nomination of four Communist ministers in the government of Pierre Mauroy radicalized many right-wing voters; two years later, the return of the left to more orthodox social and economic policies alienated some of its supporters, enlarging the audience for the Front National beyond its traditional boundaries.

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Besides a favorable opportunity structure, the FN managed to mobilize specific political resources. One was Le Pen's charisma and his rhetorical skills. A poll conducted just after Le Pen's first, controversial appearance on France's leading television political program, *L'Heure de Vérité*, on February 13, 1984, indicated that the number of those who planned to vote for the FN in the coming European elections had doubled between the beginning and the end of the show, and in the following days the party's membership exploded. The second resource was their ideas: the FN put forward issues neglected by the mainstream parties, mainly law-and-order issues and immigration. The first electoral platform of the Front National in 1973, called "Défendre les Français," was a violent attack against the Gaullist party, which the FN accused of selling out to the Communists and of being corrupt and lax. It called for the birth of a new right wing, "social, national and popular," that would champion stricter control of immigration, restoration of law and order, less state intervention, and the defense of traditional values such as the nation, the family, education, and manual labor (Chiroux, 1974, 212-216). A common feature of the party's platforms, from the first one in 1973 to those after the party achieved some measure of electoral success, starting with "Les Français d'abord" (Le Pen 1984), can be summed up by the concept of national populism (Taguieff 1984, 1989). The constant preoccupation of the FN is the defense of French national identity against its enemies both interior and exterior, mainly immigrants and especially Arabs and Muslims, and the forces of "cosmopolitanism" and "globalization." Another is to give back to the people the power confiscated by the elites and the political establishment. In order to do so, the Front National recommended "national preference" policies, reserving jobs, welfare benefits, education, and housing for French citizens. What changed after 1988, under the new deputy leader, Bruno Mégret, and other intellectuals influenced by the circles of the New Right such as Yvan Blot or Jean-Yves Le Gallou, was the style of the programs, reformulated in more "politically correct" terms and thus acceptable to a larger audience. They highlighted the cultural differences between groups instead of the supposed inferiority of some, and they avoided blatantly racist formulations. "Words are weapons," Bruno Mégret liked to say. His idea was to polarize the political debate and replace the traditional left/right cleavage by a new one, opposing the FN to the "Gang of Four," (p. 438) a nickname for the four main parties—the Communist Party, Socialist Party, UDF and RPR—that was evocative of their supposed collusion.

The third type of resource was organizational. Bruno Mégret turned the activist group of the early FN into a structured organization of more than forty thousand members, with party schools, a press (*National Hebdo*, *Présent*, *Le Choc du Mois*, *Minute*), a political communication unit, and a network of circles spreading the party's influence in all sectors of society: youth groups (Front National de la Jeunesse), women, veterans, businesspeople (Entreprise Moderne et Liberté), farmers (Cercle National des Agriculteurs), and others (Birenbaum 1992). Last, the party was helped in its quest for political legitimacy by its opponents' strategies. The 1983 electoral alliance with the UDF and the RPR in Dreux pulled the FN out of the political ghetto where it had been confined. Even though the official line of the mainstream right changed after Le Pen characterized the gas chambers of the Holocaust as a "detail" of history in 1987, a policy

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of local alliances continued, from the 1986 regional elections to the 1998 regional elections, where in four regions the UDF presidents of the regional council owed their seat to the support of the FN councilors. As for the left, it helped Le Pen gain access to the media. François Mitterrand, in June 1982, exhorted the public television networks to “respect their obligation of pluralism” and invite the FN to participate in their programs.<sup>5</sup> Then the electoral law was changed just before the 1986 legislative elections, switching from majority to proportional rule; this system, which was more favorable to small parties, limited the losses of the Socialist Party but also allowed the Front National, with its 9 percent share of the vote, to have thirty-five deputies elected to the National Assembly (Mayer 2017b). In 1988 Jacques Chirac would restore the old majority system, and in the 1988 legislative election, with the same proportion of votes, only one FN deputy was elected.

## The Post-1998 Party Decline

However, the FN’s electoral performance masked the fact that the party was in deep crisis because of a growing rivalry between Le Pen and Bruno Mégret, his deputy leader since 1988. Now, nearly ten years later, Mégret was a rising star, overshadowing the party founder. With his wife, Mégret won the municipal by-election in Vitrolles, giving a fourth large city to the FN in February 1997. In the elections for the central committee at the party’s congress in Strasbourg one month later, he came in first with over three thousand votes, way ahead of his rival, secretary general Bruno Gollnisch, and received a standing ovation.

Mégret and Le Pen openly disagreed on a political strategy for the FN. Mégret was in favor of an alliance with the mainstream right, while Le Pen preferred a strategy of confrontation. The final straw was Le Pen’s decision that in case he was declared ineligible to run as candidate in the European Parliament elections of 1999, he would have his wife, Jany, lead the FN list, instead of Mégret. Mégret challenged the decision in December 1998 and called for a parallel national council. He and his allies (nicknamed the “felons”) were immediately excluded, and Mégret left the FN, taking with him more than half of (p. 439) the party officials and elected representatives. The split led to the creation of a new movement, the Front National–Mouvement National (FN-MN), which in October 1998 was renamed Mouvement National Républicain (MNR, National Republican Movement) after a court ruled that Bruno Mégret could not use the name Front National. Even though Mégret’s movement was short-lived, the split was a severe blow for Le Pen’s party. At the next party congress, in 2000, the number of members had fallen to twelve thousand (from forty-two thousand in 1997), and the number of voters plummeted. In the European elections of June 1999 the FN drew 5.7 percent of the vote, a drop of almost 5 points compared to the previous elections.

The April 21, 2002, presidential election came as a surprise. In what was perceived as an “earthquake,” Le Pen qualified for the second round, and his 16.9 percent share of the vote was considered outstanding. Yet he came in ahead of the Socialist candidate by a

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very small margin, 194,000 votes. Recalculated in proportion to the number of registered voters, his real percentage of the vote was hardly higher than in the 1995 presidential election (11.7 percent versus 11.6). What made the difference was the polarization of the campaign around the issue of law and order, as well as an unusual amount of strategic voting, especially among right-wing voters (Blais 2004, 294–295).<sup>6</sup> And Le Pen's success was short-lived. In the subsequent 2002 legislative elections, the FN's percentage of the vote dropped to 11.3 percent, in the 2007 presidential election to 10.4 percent, and to 4.3 percent in the following legislative elections. Most observers predicted at the time the imminent political death of the party and of its leader. They were wrong.

### The Succession

Long before he even thought about who would succeed him as head of the party, Le Pen secured a position in the party for his youngest daughter, Marine Le Pen. Because she was a young lawyer with a strong temperament, and above all a Le Pen, he saw her as a precious political asset, ignoring the reluctance of the party's old guard. At the Congress of Strasbourg in 1997, before the split, he nominated her for a spot on the central committee.<sup>7</sup> In 1998 he placed her at the head of the party's new legal department. That same year she took over Generation Le Pen, a group created to modernize and rejuvenate the party. In 2000 she was elected to the party's central committee, and he appointed her as a member of the party leadership. In the presidential campaign of 2002 she was part of the FN's communications team called "Ideas-Images," and she herself started appearing in the media, quickly overshadowing the deputy leader, Bruno Gollnisch, and the secretary general, Carl Lang. At the 2003 party congress, although she came in just thirty-fourth in the elections for the central committee, her father appointed her a vice president. In the 2007 party congress she came in second, just after Bruno Gollnisch, and her father appointed her vice executive president. Meanwhile, she represented the FN in several national and local elections. She was elected regional councilor in Nord-Pas de Calais in 1998, in Ile de France in 2004, in Nord Pas de Calais again in 2010, and then in the new region Nord-Pas de Calais-Picardie in 2015, and she represented the party in the (p. 440) European Parliament starting in 2004. After 2007 she also paid particular attention to underprivileged constituencies in the region Nord Pas de Calais, more specifically the small former mining town of Hénin-Beaumont, where she was elected town councilor in 2008. With the help of the regional councilor Steeve Briois,<sup>8</sup> she was going to make the town the new "laboratory" of the FN, a role that Dreux had played for the FN in the 1980s.

At the party congress in January 2011, the only other candidate for party leader besides Marine Le Pen was Bruno Gollnisch, who proposed that he chair the party and she run as a candidate in the 2012 presidential election. His plea was in vain, however: she was elected president of the FN with 67.6 percent of the party members' votes.

# The “New Clothes” of the Front National

Marine Le Pen had a threefold strategy. First, she wanted to rebuild what was left of the party after the 1998 split. It was the theme of her investiture speech: “The party I shall chair will be a party renewed, open and effective. My assigned goal from now on is to make of it with you the most powerful, efficient and operative instrument possible in our strategy of the conquest of power.”<sup>9</sup> Her second priority was to expand and diversify its shrinking electoral audience, winning over reluctant upper-middle-class voters. Her third priority, the one that received the greatest attention in the media, was to “de-demonize” the party—to get rid of the labels of racism, anti-Semitism, and extremism attached to it by its opponents, and to show the FN was “a party like any other.”

### The “De-Demonization” Strategy

De-demonization has been a part of the FN’s strategy ever since the party’s creation in 1972. Le Pen systematically filed lawsuits against those who dared call his party “racist” or “extreme right.” In 1989 he launched a large-scale “theoretical counteroffensive” against the way his opponents “demonized” him and his movement.<sup>10</sup> But Marine Le Pen, who had insisted on the importance of such a strategy long before she took over the party (Le Pen 2006), made it the centerpiece of her normalization enterprise. Unlike her father, she got immediate, massive support in the media when she announced the birth of the “new” FN (Dézé 2015). Also unlike her father’s approach, at the heart of hers was the banning of anti-Semitism within the FN. Her companion Louis Aliot, one of the vice presidents of the movement, expressed it openly: “De-demonization is only concerned with anti-Semitism. While handing out leaflets in the street, the only glass ceiling I saw wasn’t immigration, nor Islam . . . Others are worse than we are on these issues. It is anti-Semitism that prevents people from voting for us. It’s the only thing. . . . As soon as you (p. 441) break this ideological stranglehold, you free the rest. That’s all there is. Marine Le Pen agrees with that. She did not understand why and how her father and the others did not see it was the stranglehold.”<sup>11</sup> Indeed, she had opposed her father on that issue more than once in the past: she condemned his repeated comments about the gas chambers, saying explicitly that she considered the Shoah to be “the height of barbarism,”<sup>12</sup> and she took a two-month leave from the FN’s bureau in January 2005, after his comments characterizing the Nazi occupation of France as “not so inhuman” in an interview with the extreme right journal *Rivarol*. When in April 2014 Jean-Marie Le Pen said of the singer Patrick Bruel, who is of Jewish ancestry and who refused to perform in a town with a FN mayor, “On fera une fournée la prochaine fois,” or “Next time we’ll do a batch,” using the word for “batch,” *fournée*, that evokes the word for “oven,” *four*, she removed her father’s blog from the FN’s website. And when her father referred to the gas chambers as a “minor detail,” both on television and in an interview for the same publication, *Rivarol*, on April 9, 2015, and defended Pétain and the collaborationists of the Vichy regime, she had had enough. It marked the beginning of a merciless war between father and daughter, in which the de-demonization sought by Marine Le Pen was a key point of contention, each of her father’s deliberate verbal excesses destroying further his daughter’s patient efforts to change the image of the FN. On May 4, the party’s executive bureau suspended Jean-Marie Le Pen and called for an extraordinary general assembly of the members by mail, to modify the party’s statutes. On July 2, a Nanterre court invalidated the suspension, and later that month the party itself rescinded the suspension, on the grounds that a physical congress was required for such a step. On August 20, Jean-Marie Le Pen was definitively excluded from his party.<sup>13</sup>

Marine Le Pen’s strategy is to present the party line in a more acceptable way. It is in the name of democracy and republican values that she stigmatizes radical Islamism, presented as a threat to women’s rights, to gays, and to Jews. It is a way to draw in voters, and especially Jews, for as one author wrote, “What better proof of ‘normalization’ than a high score (or close to the national average) for the FN among voters of Jewish

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faith?" (Fourquet 2015, 384). She has also targeted "French Islam." She started in 2007 when she was managing her father's presidential campaign, with a controversial poster showing a young Maghrebi woman in low-cut jeans blaming both left and right for having destroyed the social fabric: "Ils ont tout cassé." In the regional elections of 2014, the FN tried to mobilize votes in the outskirts of Paris, with leaflets claiming "Muslim perhaps, but French first," while a poster with the headline "Choose your suburb" pictured on one side a young woman wearing a Phrygian cap with the three colors of the French flag painted on her cheeks, and on the other side the same young woman wearing a niqab.

### A Rising Tide

Since Marine Le Pen took the lead, the FN's electoral success has been spectacular, in sharp contrast with its previous poor performances. Its support is on the rise again, growing from 10.4 percent of the vote in the presidential race of 2007 to 15 percent in the (p. 442) 2011 cantonal elections, 17.9 percent in the 2012 presidential election, nearly 25 percent in the 2015 European elections, a little over 25 percent in the 2015 departmental elections, and 27.7 percent in the first round of the regional elections also in 2015. In the second round of the 2015 regional election FN candidates garnered 6.8 million votes—beating Marine Le Pen's achievement in the 2012 presidential election, when she received 6.4 million votes, and that of her father in the 2002 presidential election, when he got 4.8 million. And since the European Parliament elections of 2014 the FN has come out ahead of the Socialist left and the Sarkozyist right (Les Républicains, formerly UMP). One year ahead of the 2017 presidential election, opinion polls showed that Marine Le Pen would come in first among those planning to vote in the first round regardless of whom she would be facing, with the only exception being Alain Juppé, prime minister from 1995 to 1997 under President Jacques Chirac.<sup>14</sup> This suggested that no matter whom she faced, she would qualify for the second round.

The number of elected representatives of the FN has soared. In the municipal elections of 2014, the FN slate of candidates often drew more than 30 percent of the vote, allowing the party to win eleven towns and elect 1,546 town councilors, a record number. In the 2015 European Parliament elections, the FN beat out the Socialist left and the Sarkozyist right in electing twenty-three deputies, becoming the largest French group in the Parliament at Strasbourg. In the departmental elections the same year, the FN presented paired candidates<sup>15</sup> in 93 percent of constituencies, more than any other party. And they drew almost 25 percent of the vote, far ahead of the pairs presented by the Union de la Droite (20.8 percent) and the Parti Socialiste (13.9 percent). In the 2015 regional elections, they elected 358 regional councilors, three times more than in the previous elections. At the national level, they gained parliamentary representation in 2012, with two deputies and, for the first time, two senators.

Such unusual successes, as well as the change in leadership, make the party more attractive, and since 2012 it has been rallying new recruits, rejuvenating and feminizing its troops (Crépon 2012, Crépon and Lebourg 2015). It is always difficult to accurately

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estimate party membership. But because of the legal actions that marked the recent history of the movement, there are official court documents establishing the number of FN members who paid their membership dues for the congress: 42,000 in December 1998 (before the split of the “mégretistes”) and 51,551 in July 2015. It is still far from the 83,000 the party claims on its website, but 10,000 more than at a time when the party was at its earlier apex. In parallel, the FN is developing networks to extend its influence beyond the party circles and bring in new ideas and a new identity. At the time of the 2012 presidential election, Marine Le Pen created the right-wing coalition Rassemblement Bleu Marine. More recently numerous thematic groups have been set up to appeal to different publics: Racine (teachers), Marianne (students), Audace (young professionals), Cardinal (managers), Nouvelle Écologie (those interested in alternative energy), Clic (a group for people involved in and interested in the arts), and so on. The most recent achievement is the creation of a FN students’ association at Sciences Po Paris in March 2016; that group, provocatively, was called Jean Moulin, after the hero of the French Resistance. It was followed by another students’ group at Sciences Po Bordeaux, named (p. 443) more classically after the poet Charles Péguy. The party is looking for academics and higher-ranking civil servants to form a party elite that tomorrow could be able to govern, on the model of Florian Philippot, the party’s vice president for strategy and communication, who comes from the prestigious Ecole Nationale d’Administration (ENA).

Meanwhile, the image of the FN has improved. Marine Le Pen’s approval rating on the monthly TNS Sofres/*Le Figaro* Political Barometer has risen from 14 percent before her election to 29 percent four months after, with occasional peaks at 32–33 percent. By contrast, her father on average was below the threshold of 20 percent, with the exception of a short-lived peak at 31 percent at the time of the 1995 presidential election. The same goes for the image of the party, which now varies between a 20 and 25 percent approval rating; under her father, the party had an average approval rating around 10 percent.<sup>16</sup> And the view that the FN and its leader are “a danger for democracy,” which was shared by some three-quarters of the French between 1994 and 2004, is now held by closer to 50 percent.<sup>17</sup>

### A Glass Ceiling?

In spite of the increasing audience of the FN after 2011, there are limits to its political progression and to the process of de-demonization.

Marine Le Pen’s political style and her crusade against Islamic fundamentalism certainly have more appeal to groups of voters that her father repelled, such as Jews, gays, practicing Catholics, and women. Among Jewish voters, support for Jean-Marie Le Pen and Bruno Mégret combined in the 2002 presidential election was 6 percent (vs. 19.2 percent of the general population who supported one or the other); in 2012, Marine Le Pen’s support among Jews rose to 13.5 percent (vs. 17.9 percent for the general population).<sup>18</sup> Among Catholics, the repeated warnings of the French Church,

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condemning FN's ideas as contrary to the universalist message of the Evangelists, seemed a rampart against such a vote. Yet in the first round of the 2015 regional elections almost one-third of Catholics voted for FN candidates, compared to a little over a quarter in the departmental elections nine months before.<sup>19</sup> According to a recent survey, support for the FN has been rising among gay couples also.<sup>20</sup> Even in the public sector, a traditional stronghold of the left, the FN is progressing, especially at the lower levels of the civil service hierarchy.<sup>21</sup> Last, and even more important because they represent some 53 percent of the French registered electorate, women in 2012 were as likely to vote for Marine Le Pen as men were, which had not been the case before. One of the earliest and best-established findings about electoral support for populist radical right parties in Europe is that they attract more men than women, a trend that has been labeled the "radical right gender gap" (Givens 2004; see also Chapter 10 in this book, by Hilde Coffé), but this may no longer be true in France. In the 2012 presidential election, unlike her father, Marine Le Pen got almost the same level of support among female and male voters. After controlling for the other sociodemographic and attitudinal variables that explain electoral support for the FN, there was no difference whatsoever. A "Marine Le Pen effect" was particularly (p. 444) noticeable among women in low-skilled, low-paid, non-manual-labor jobs. For the first time, the probability of a Le Pen vote was higher among those working in sales and services, who are predominantly female, than among blue-collar workers, who are mostly male (Mayer 2015a). These elections took place in a specific political context: the first post-recession national elections, dominated by the rejection of Nicolas Sarkozy, the "president of the rich." Yet the gender gap reappeared in the subsequent midterm elections for the European Parliament as well as in the municipal, departmental, and regional elections (Barisione and Mayer 2015; Mayer 2017a). The numbers of those who say they intend to vote for Marine Le Pen in the 2017 presidential election are again practically the same among male and female voters.<sup>22</sup> It is a little early to be sure that Marine Le Pen has completely overcome women's reluctance to vote for her, but a postelectoral survey indeed confirms the trend (Amengay, Durovic, and Mayer 2017).

There are other barriers to the FN's progression. The first one is the left-right cleavage. Voters on the left are more resistant to the FN's calls. As was also true when the party was under her father's control, the farther right a person is on the traditional left-right scale, the higher the probability that she will vote for her—support for Marine Le Pen in the first round of the 2015 regional elections varied between 11 percent among voters located at the far left to almost 65 percent at the other end. The "Leftist Lepenists," as Pascal Perrineau called them (Perrineau 1995, 2017)—that is to say, FN voters who locate themselves on the left (between 0 and 4 on a 0-10 scale), represented 5 percent of Marine Le Pen voters in 2015 (Mayer 2017a).

Another barrier is education. Education teaches one to think rationally, to accept complexity and diversity. And it conditions employment and social status. In post-industrial societies, the educational divide has taken on a growing importance, opposing educated workers who are more likely to benefit from globalization to the less educated workers who are more vulnerable to globalization and who reject it. It is among the

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“globalization losers” that the radical right parties have developed the fastest (Kriesi et al. 2008; Bornschier and Kriesi, 2013), and in particular unskilled manual and non-manual workers. The educated upper and middle classes resist. In the first round of the 2015 regional elections, the FN lists drew a record 52 percent of the vote among manual workers, versus 20 and 23 percent among the upper and middle service classes (Mayer 2017a). These were midterm elections, with a turnout just under 50 percent. If one recalculates the FN vote on the basis of all registered voters, these figures should be divided roughly by two. But still, the contrast persists between the better-educated and the less well-educated, between the upper middle class and the working class.

The limitations of the de-demonization strategy are even more visible when one looks at voters’ motivations. Marine Le Pen’s goal was to show that her party had shed its racist and xenophobic overtones. The reality is more complex. Both before and after she took over the party, FN supporters stand out because of their ethnocentric and authoritarian vision of the world (Adorno et al. 1950). They strongly reject foreigners, immigrants, and minorities, and call for tougher law-and-order policies. Such an attitude is usually more frequent on the right than on the left of the ideological spectrum, but it reaches a peak among both Jean-Marie and Marine Le Pen voters. Since the end of the 1960s, (p. 445) French society on the whole has become more open and permissive because of rising education levels, generational turnover, and the spread of post-materialist values. But FN voters are persistently more intolerant than other voters, and the gap has even widened since Marine Le Pen took over. In the first round of the 2007 presidential election, 71 percent of those who voted for her father wanted to restore the death penalty, a proportion 30 percentage points above the sample’s average, and 89 percent found the number of immigrants excessive, a 33 percentage point difference. In the 2015 regional elections, the proportions were respectively 60 and 91 percent among FN voters, but the differences were respectively 33 and 43 percentage points above the average. And in spite of Marine Le Pen’s wish to diversify her party’s platform, the main motivation of her voters is the rejection of immigrants and consequently the rejection of a European Union accused of letting them flow in (Mayer 2013).

The strength of the old patterns is even more obvious if one looks at the party members and followers. In the 2015 departmental elections 104 FN candidates were eventually prosecuted for blatantly racist, homophobic, and anti-Semitic comments.<sup>23</sup> Many new recruits, who had taken for granted the changes brought about by Marine Le Pen, expressed their disappointment publicly and left the party. Pooled data from the annual Barometer on Racism and Anti-Semitism of the Commission Nationale Consultative des Droits de l’Homme (CNCDH) allows us to explore prejudice among sympathizers of the FN—those who say the FN is the party they feel the closest to—between 2009 and 2014. While they are less committed than actual party members, they are more engaged than simple voters. They are like a magnifying glass of the party’s transformations. The results are clear-cut: compared to sympathizers of other parties, whatever the question, whatever the period, the interviewees close to the FN gave the most negative answer and were the most inclined to reject people of another color, religion, or culture. For instance, on a global scale of ethnocentrism, 87 percent belong to the upper quartile, the most

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prejudiced (vs. 48 percent of the interviewees close to the other right-wing parties, and 18 percent among those close to the left-wing ones). They are twice as likely as sympathizers of other parties to have a high score on the anti-Semitism scale. They support the most flagrant forms of racism, such as belief in a hierarchy of human races (36 percent, vs. the sample average of 11 percent). And a record 82 percent claim to be “somewhat” or at least “a little” racist (vs. 25 percent among sympathizers of all other parties, and 16 percent among left-wing sympathizers (Mayer 2015b).

While the party’s image has definitely improved, it still faces two important limitations. In France a large majority still sees the FN as an extremist and dangerous movement. In the last European elections, the FN scored an 8.8 on the classical eleven-point left-right scale (going from the far left at 0 to the far right at 10)—highest among all radical right parties in Western Europe (Barisione and Mayer 2015). In April 2016, 78 percent of a sample of the adult population living in France said they considered the FN as an “extreme right party,” the same proportion as in 2015. Sixty percent see it as a “xenophobic party.” And since 2015 some 60 percent see it as “a danger for democracy,” a rise of ten points compared to 2014.<sup>24</sup> (p. 446)

The second persistent weak point of the FN is its lack of political credibility. In the same 2016 survey, corroborated by many others, only 27 percent of respondents think the FN capable of governing the country, a drop of 4 percentage points from 2015. And Marine le Pen is not considered to have the stature of a future president of the republic.<sup>25</sup> Even within the party, several officials, despite being close to Marine Le Pen, express privately their doubts about the present capacity of the FN to govern France. One of them admitted in September 2014: “You imagine Marine at the Elysée Palace tomorrow? There are not enough ministers! Who is her chief of staff? Who is ambassador in Washington? Even if there is just a dissolution [of the National Assembly] and we could have 150 deputies, whom do we get?”<sup>26</sup>

And if the party has considerably filled out its platform, giving more importance in particular to economic issues (Ivaldi 2015), in the opinion of most French people it remains a niche party (Meguid 2005, 2008; Meyer and Miller 2015), specialized on one or two issues, mainly immigration and, to a lesser degree, law and order.

## Conclusion

One year before the 2017 French presidential election, the situation was at first glance promising for the FN. The economic situation was difficult, with a lingering high level of unemployment, especially among the young. A series of unprecedented terrorist attacks in 2015 fed fear of Islamic fundamentalism. The increasing flow of migrants and refugees from the Middle East and Africa favored a drift toward nationalism and a reflex toward closure. And the disaffection felt toward the political class in general had reached historical heights, with 89 percent of the population sharing the feeling that the political

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class does not care about what people like them think, 67 percent of the opinion that democracy does not function well, and 65 percent saying they trust neither the left nor the right to govern the country.<sup>27</sup> At that stage, surveys of people who intended to vote indicated that Marine Le Pen should easily beat her 2012 vote tally by some ten percentage points. But although the FN has won an increasing number of votes since 2011, it still has not rallied a majority behind it to govern, not even at the local level. In a French system dominated by the electoral two-round system, it gets excellent showings in the first round but fails to make alliances in the second round. In the 2015 regional elections, in spite of a national vote tally near 28 percent in the first round and the mobilization of an extra 800,000 voters in the second, it did not win one single region, deprived of its victory by the tactical withdrawal of the Socialist candidates in the two regions it could have conquered, Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur and Nord-Pas de Calais-Picardie.

The 2017 series of elections are a perfect illustration of these predicaments. In the first round of the presidential election, Marine Le Pen came ahead the Socialist and LR candidates, qualifying for the second round. In the second round, she attracted a record 10.9 million voters, more than a third of the electorate. Nevertheless, her score was below the 40 percent she expected on the faith of opinion polls. During the debate with (p. 447) her rival Emmanuel Macron, between the two rounds, she ruined in two hours the benefit of seven years of de-demonization strategy, appearing at the same time aggressive and incompetent. In the following legislative elections, instead of the electoral landslide she promised, her party only got eight MPs elected, not even enough to form a group at the Assemblée nationale. The image of the FN and of its leader is deteriorating<sup>28</sup>. And with the departure of its vice-president Florian Philippot to create a new party, The Patriots, the party is going through its worse crisis since the scission triggered by Bruno Mégret in 1998–1999.

The Front National is at a turning point, its political mutation unfinished. For the old guard of the party, starting with its founder, Jean-Marie Le Pen, the de-demonization strategy has gone too far and the FN has betrayed its principles.<sup>29</sup> For the mainstream parties and their voters, de-demonization has not gone far enough, for the FN is not yet a party like the others. Marine Le Pen faces a strategic dilemma. Going further—changing the name of the party, openly repudiating its doctrine of “national preference” (which has already been renamed “citizen priority”), and becoming mainstream—could eventually lead to a new split in the party, while making it less attractive to voters initially drawn to its anti-system attitude. Not going further forbids her to reap the political dividends of her electoral dynamic. At the eve of a “refoundation” congress scheduled for March 2018, her party appears more than ever shattered by doubts and divisions.

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### Notes:

(1.) See the video of her speech at the party congress in Tours, January 15–16, 2011, on YouTube, available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fhxPleoKIWU>.

(2.) *L’Aurore*, January 13, 1998.

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(3.) Pierre Poujade founded a short lived (1953–1958) xenophobic and anti-Semitic tax protest movement defending small shopkeepers and artisans, the Union de Défense des Commerçants et Artisans (Hoffmann 1956).

(4.) Established in 1964 and dissolved in 1968.

(5.) Letter from François Mitterrand, June 22, 1982, answering a May 24 letter from the National Front's leader complaining that his party's congress had been totally neglected by the media, quoted in Faux, Legrand, and Perez 1994, 15–24.

(6.) Reverse strategic voters are those who do not vote for the candidate they really prefer in the first round, to send a signal of discontent. Blais estimates the proportion of reverse strategic votes among Le Pen voters in the first round at 3.6 percent, mostly supporters of Jacques Chirac who were sure he would win in the next round but who supported Le Pen's ideas on immigration and law and order.

(7.) She was not elected, but among the twenty members he could nominate.

(8.) Born in Hénin-Beaumont from a working-class background, he joined the party at the age of twenty and bore the colors of the FN in all local elections since 1995. He finally was elected mayor on March 30, 2014.

(9.) Video of FN congress in Tours, January 16, 2011, available online at <http://www.frontnational.com/videos/congres-du-fn-a-tours-discours-d'investiture-de-marine-le-pen>.

(10.) *Le Monde*, September 2, 1989.

(11.) Interviewed on December 6, 2013, by Valérie Igounet (Igounet 2014, 420).

(12.) Interview in *Le Point*, February 3, 2011.

(13.) Jean-Marie Le Pen appealed the decision; the judgment was scheduled for October 5, 2016.

(14.) Internet survey by TNS Sofres One Point for LCI, RTL, *Le Figaro*, April 15–16, 2016, of a sample of one thousand registered voters. If the candidate of Les Républicains was Nicolas Sarkozy, the survey estimated, he should draw 24 percent of the vote, Marine Le Pen 29 percent, and François Hollande 16 percent. If the candidate of the right was Alain Juppé, the survey estimated he would draw 36 percent, Marine Le Pen 26 percent, and Hollande 13 percent.

(15.) The electoral system was changed to establish gender parity: the parties must present a pair of candidates, one woman and one man, in alphabetical order.

(16.) Poll data available online at [http://www.tns-sofres.com/dataviz?type=2&code\\_nom=lepenmarine](http://www.tns-sofres.com/dataviz?type=2&code_nom=lepenmarine) and [http://www.tns-sofres.com/dataviz?type=2&code\\_nom=lepen](http://www.tns-sofres.com/dataviz?type=2&code_nom=lepen). Proportion answering “yes” to the question “Would you tell me

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if you wish her/him to play an important role in the months and years to come?" For parties the question is slightly different: "Do you have a very good, somewhat good, somewhat bad, or very bad opinion of the following party: Front National?" That survey is available online at [http://www.tns-sofres.com/dataviz?type=3&code\\_nom=fn](http://www.tns-sofres.com/dataviz?type=3&code_nom=fn).

(17.) Survey available online at <http://www.tns-sofres.com/sites/default/files/2016.02.05-baro-fn.pdf>.

(18.) The estimation comes from the pooling of electoral surveys conducted by the polling institute IFOP between 2012 and 2014, giving a sample of 510 interviewees declaring themselves of Jewish faith (Fourquet 2015, 377–384).

(19.) Survey by IFOP for *Le Pèlerin Magazine*, December 6, 2015, available online at <http://www.pelerin.com/A-la-une/Elections-regionales-2015/Pour-qui-ont-vote-les-catholiques-au-premier-tour-des-Regionales>.

(20.) See François Kraus, "Gays, bis et lesbiennes: Des minorités sexuelles ancrées à gauche," *Sciences Po/CEVIPOF*, no. 8, January 2012, available online at <http://www.cevipof.com/rtefiles/File/AtlasEl3/NoteKRAUS.pdf>; Sylvain Brouard, "Les bénéficiaires du mariage pour tous votent-ils plus à gauche?," *Sciences Po/CEVIPOF*, no. 9, February 2016, available online at [http://www.enef.fr/app/download/13205334525/LA\\_NOTE\\_%239\\_vague2.pdf?t=1455010923](http://www.enef.fr/app/download/13205334525/LA_NOTE_%239_vague2.pdf?t=1455010923).

(21.) Luc Rouban, "Les fonctionnaires et le Front national," *Sciences Po/CEVIPOF*, no. 3, December 2015, available online at <http://www.maire-info.com/upload/files/etudecevipof.pdf>.

(22.) TNS Sofres-OnePoint survey for *Le Figaro*, LCI, and RTL, April 2016.

(23.) See the compilation by the journal *Libération*: [http://www.liberatio10n.fr/france/2015/02/27/islamophobie-homophobie-la-compilation-des-derapages-fn\\_1210335](http://www.liberatio10n.fr/france/2015/02/27/islamophobie-homophobie-la-compilation-des-derapages-fn_1210335) and by the magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur*: <http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/politique/elections-departementales-2015/20150310.OBS4235/racisme-antisemitisme-homophobie-le-vrai-visage-des-candidats-fn.htm>.

(24.) Survey Ipsos Steria, for *Le Monde*, *Sciences Po/FJJ*, "Fractures françaises," available online at <http://www.ipsos.fr/decrypter-societe/2016-04-27-fractures-francaises-2016-repli-et-defiance-au-plus-haut>.

(25.) Ibid. Also, the annual Baromètre d'image du FN for *Le Monde*/RTL, from January 2016: <http://www.tns-sofres.com/publications/barometre-2016-dimage-du-front-national>.

(26.) Quoted in "FN: des doutes sur la capacité à gouverner au sein même du parti," RTL, September 9, 2014.

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(27.) Baromètre de la confiance politique, CEVIPOF/Opinion Way, wave 7, January 2016, available online at <http://www.cevipof.com/fr/le-barometre-de-la-confiance-politique-du-cevipof/resultats-1/vague7>.

(28.) According to an IFOP survey for the Journal du Dimanche (JDD), conducted in September 2017, 66 percent of the respondents see her as “sectarian,” 56 percent “not attached to democratic values,” 59 percent consider “she does not understand the people’s problems,” 65 percent she is “incompetent,” 68 percent that she has “no solution to pull the country out of recession.” Last, 73 percent think “she does not have a presidential stature,” 7 percentage points above the proportion found in March 2017, available online at [http://www.ifop.com/media/poll/3841-1-study\\_file.pdf](http://www.ifop.com/media/poll/3841-1-study_file.pdf).

(29.) For instance, on May 1, 2016, her father called the de-demonization strategy “a naive, stupid, or treacherous calculation.” He said this at a ceremony honoring Joan of Arc, furious that his daughter had decided to replace the traditional march with a banquet with the party officials that year (*20 Minutes*, May 2, 2016).

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