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Nonna Mayer

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Reply to John W. P. Veugelers

Nonna Mayer CNRS-
CEVIPOF, Paris

It is always instructive to learn what others see in your book, especially in the eyes of an expert of the European extreme Right such as Jack Veugelers. He reads *Ces Français qui votent FN* as a study in “the social basis of party politics,” relying on survey data and showing “a predilection for multivariate analysis” which he obviously does not share. Although he admits that my approach sheds light on problems such as the double nature of the FN’s constituency, the decisive influence of gender, or the relation between the votes for Le Pen’s party and the local presence of immigrants,¹ he expresses some doubts about “the scope and precision” as well as “the reliability” of the book’s methodology. I should have gone “beyond data on the social background of voters” and given more attention to “the party’s organizational activity ... partisan identification and voter flows.” The chapter he prefers is the last one, where “Mayer suddenly expands her framework to include the leadership, organization and the legitimacy of far Right parties” and “lends importance to both collective memories ... and the way in which other parties have responded to the far Right.” On the whole, because they are not “integrated within a comprehensive view of the phenomenon,” my findings fail to answer the “big questions” one should ask about the FN, such as the reasons for its electoral breakthrough and endurance, its connections with the former nationalist Rights or its impact on the French party system and regime. I only partly agree with these remarks, and therefore gladly accept *FPC&S*’s proposal to answer them.

My study is not, as Veugelers seems to think, a mere empirical description of the FN’s social bases; it is integrated in a theoretical frame. To be understood, the “not so simple act of voting”² must be placed in what the authors of *The American Voter* (1960) called the “funnel of causality,” taking into account all the factors that shape voter choice from childhood to election day. Issues, parties and leaders matter as much in the process, if not more, than the social characteristics of the voters. And to understand the choice for a party like the Front National, that three-quarters of the French voters, including its own, place at the extreme Right on the left-right scale, one must take into account the current debate over its nature. Two conflicting hypotheses, not mentioned in Veugelers’s presentation, structure the book. The first one, argued by

authors such as Von Beyme, Merkl and Weinberg or Falter, places the FN and similar European parties developing in Europe in continuity with fascism and nazism, and explains electoral support for such parties by the classical factors associated with right-wing extremism: authoritarianism and ethnocentrism, social isolation, lack of education and “simplism,” socioeconomic deprivation.³ Extremism is thus seen as a “normal pathological condition of our societies,”⁴ likely to reappear periodically. The second line of explanation, on the contrary, stresses the differences between these parties and pre-war fascisms, seeing them as a “new” and enduring Right *sui generis*, symmetrical with the “new” Left, both children of political and ideological changes brought about by the transition from industrial to post-industrial society.⁵

The first six chapters of the book explore the right-wing extremism hypothesis and focus indeed on the characteristics of potential FN voters, measuring to what extent their position on the left-right scale, authoritarianism, simplism, lack of social and religious ties, working class status, and being a man, are predictors of a vote for the FN. But the next five chapters link this vote to what makes the FN different from the previous French extreme Rights, namely value and issue change, party strategies, and leadership and more generally the factors on the “supply” side of politics. They show that Le Pen’s charisma, the growing visibility of his party, and the way it stresses the immigration issue also influence votes, even more than the social characteristics of the voters or their authoritarianism.

Now what about the data? Most of the studies devoted to the FN’s voters are based on commercial opinion polls, drawn from small samples (N=1000), which are not reliable for the study of such a small group of voters. For not only are the scores of Le Pen and his party, even at their peak, relatively low, but a large part of their supporters still refuse to declare such a vote because of the moral reprobation attached to it. In the 1997 national elections, for instance, FN candidates drew just over 15 percent of valid votes, but the average proportion of self-declared FN voters was approximately 7 percent. This leaves us, once we take into account the voters who did not go to the polls or refused to answer (one third of the sample on average), with some 50 FN voters in the total sample.⁶ By contrast, the three CEVIPOF surveys I used in my book, conducted with samples of three to four thousand voters, after the presidential elections of 1988 and 1995 and between the two rounds of the 1997 parliamentary elections, are infinitely more reliable.

Veugelers objects though, rightly, that I thus leave aside other important elections, those prior to 1988, which allowed the FN’s electoral breakthrough, and the parliamentary national elections of 1986, 1988 and 1993. However, I am less interested in the electoral take-off of Le Pen’s party, which has already been thoroughly studied by authors such as Camus, Birenbaum or Perrineau,⁷ than in its electoral anchorage, which took place precisely during the period studied. Moreover, the three elections considered are particularly significant because they are turning points. First the FN progressed among middle-class

voters, then among working-class voters. According to SOFRES regular post-electoral surveys since 1984, the 1988 presidential election marks the peak of Le Pen's appeal to shopkeepers and artisans.⁸ His score rose to 27 percent, compared with 17 percent in the 1984 European elections and fell again to 14 percent in the 1995 presidential election. Conversely, his influence on the working-class increased gradually, reaching a record 30 percent in the presidential election of 1995 (compared with 16 percent in 1988 and 8 percent in 1984), a phenomenon that Pascal Perrineau has labeled "gaucho-lepénisme" because the working-class was the traditional constituency of the Left, and that I prefer to call "ouvriéro-lepénisme" because the majority of these FN blue-collar voters are not, or never were, left-wingers.⁹ By 1997 each of the two groups gave the same amount of votes to the FN candidates (26 percent among shopkeepers and 24 percent among the workers).

Veugelers also objects that I move back and forth between presidential and parliamentary elections, which are "not directly comparable." Of course these are elections of different nature: the presidential one is more personalized and far more mobilizing. He is also right to recall that in the 1988 presidential election Le Pen drew four and one-half million votes while in the following parliamentary elections the party candidates got only two and one-half million. But that should not mean that one cannot compare them. Gradually, the level of parliamentary voting for the FN has caught up with the presidential voting for Le Pen, reaching the threshold of 15 percent for the first time in the 1997 parliamentary elections. It is interesting to check if the same factors that predict the Le Pen vote of 1988 and 1995 also predict the 1997 FN vote. The answer is yes, partly. A logistic regression using exactly the same variables for the three surveys shows that the basic ingredients of right-wing extremism do not change. Regardless of the election, the lack of ties with the existing parties, affinities with the FN, the level of authoritarianism-ethnocentrism, gender, and the lack of education are the best predictors of such a vote. However, there are also changes that reveal a shift among the party base. Since 1995, social class, religious practice, and political alienation have also become statistically significant predictors: support for the FN has risen among voters who belong to the working class, are detached from Catholicism, and criticize the way democracy functions. The trend continues in 1997. As a matter of fact, there are more differences between the two presidential elections than between the 1995 presidential and the 1997 parliamentary elections. What could be different, though, in a presidential race, is the impact of Le Pen's personality. In 1995, a question about the feeling of sympathy for him, measured on a thermometer graded from zero to one hundred, shows that although he is the most disliked of French party leaders (45 percent give him a zero), he attracts more sympathizers than voters, and that sympathy is more predictive than any other variable, even proximity with the FN.

Veugelers then asserts that "in two areas—the effect of education and the nature of voter beliefs—Mayer's interpretations do not fit with her findings."

He first questions the existence of a “linear” relationship between education and support for the FN. Before Lipset, Samuel Stouffer’s book *Communism, Conformity and Civil Liberties*¹⁰ showed the immunizing effect of education against prejudice and intolerance. In the same line of thought, I show that in the three elections studied, the more educated the voter, the less likely he or she is to vote for the FN and its simplistic anti-immigrant platform, regardless of sex, class, religion or age. Today in France, the dividing line runs between those who have the *baccalauréat* or a higher degree and those who do not. In the latter group, FN’s scores are roughly twice as high. But the relation is far from linear. Among the least educated, those who went to technical school are more likely to agree with the FN’s ethnocentric ideas. This finding can be explained by the nature of the education they receive, oriented primarily towards learning a specific skill, and less mind-opening than general studies. It could, especially among the younger voters, also reflect their frustrations, for the degrees they will earn are less highly regarded and less likely to give them job opportunities in a society where without the “bac” there is no future. In addition, there is another distinct group of voters, the minority who place themselves on the very far right of the left-right scale. They form a hard core of convinced and dedicated extreme-right wing leaners, among whom the probability to vote for the FN, on the contrary, rises with the level of education. Thus, the relationship between level of education and voting for Le Pen or his party is complex, confirming the dual nature of his support. It can be a sophisticated, ideological, extreme-right FN vote on the one hand, and a simplistic, anti-immigrant, protest vote on the other.

The second area where Veugelers questions my interpretation is the “reactionary”—anti-postmaterialist, anti-permissive and anti-social-libertarian values—dimension of such a vote and there I do not follow him. He is absolutely right to point to the differences between the socially and morally conservative right-wing voters of the FN and the more laxist, irreligious and anticonformist “ninists.” However, this is exactly what I try to show in chapter 12, about the “two electorates” of the FN. Socially, politically, and culturally, they belong to different worlds. One definitely cannot put these voters in the same bag, and I do not. The “silent counter revolution” theory—the idea that the permissive values of the 1960s foster a conservative reaction, developed by authors such as Ignazi—is only halfway true¹¹.

Lastly, he sets apart the final comparative chapter of the book, as if it were of a different nature: “Mayer suspends the analytical focus and methodology that underpin the rest of her book” and some “narrow-minded” people might even say that she “ought to have driven the nail home by showing that what applies to France also applies elsewhere.” There again, this is precisely what I tried to do. Although there was no first-hand comparative data available, I relied on similar survey research done by Swyngedouw, Billiett, and de Witte in Belgium, Falter in Germany, and many others. Furthermore, I show that basically, in most European countries, extreme-right wing parties, con-

sidered as such, attract the same kind of voters: mostly young, male, uneducated, detached from religion and increasingly working-class. If some of these parties have taken off electorally and others have not, it is because of their unequal ability to promote political resources: leadership, party organization, alliances, and political legitimacy. In 1997, the French FN was among the champions of the European extreme Rights. It benefited from the charisma of its leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen, and the strength of the party organization renovated by its delegate general, Bruno Mégret, from the impact of its clearcut program, and the divisions of its opponents. Indeed, the recent collapse of the French Front National, *a contrario*, confirms this interpretation. The electoral extreme right-wing “potential” is still there, but the split deprived the party of its resources and thus brought the French extreme Right back to its level of the 1980’s. Veugelers is right: the social base of party politics does not explain everything.

Notes

1. Incidentally, the term “non-whites” used by Veugelers is not appropriate in the French context. In France, because of its colonial history, the word “immigrant” is synonymous with Arabs, and specifically, “Maghrébins,” the largest group among immigrants.
2. Russell J. Dalton and Martin P. Wattenberg, “The Not So Simple Act of Voting,” in Ada W. Finifter ed., *The State of the Discipline 2* (Washington: APSA, 1993), p. 193-218.
3. Jürgen W. Falter, Hans-Gerd Jaschke, and Jürgen R. Winkler, *Rechtsextremismus. Ergebnisse und Perspektiven der Forschung* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1996); Peter H. Merkl and Leonard Weinberg, *The Revival of Right-Wing Extremism in the Nineties* (London: Frank Cass, 1997); Klaus Von Beyme ed., *Right-Wing Extremism in Western Europe* (London: Frank Cass 1988).
4. The expression is taken from Hans Dieter Klingemann and Erwin Scheuch. See “Theorie des Rechtsradikalismus in westlichen Industriegesellschaften,” *Hamburger Jahrbuch für Wirtschafts und Gesellschaftspolitik* 12 (1967): 11-29.
5. See Piero Ignazi, “The Silent Counter-Revolution. Hypotheses on the Emergence of Extreme Right-Wing Parties in Europe,” *European Journal of Political Research*, 22, 3 (July 1992): 3-34; Hans-Georg Betz and Stefan Immerfall, *The New Politics of the Right. Neo-Populist Parties and Movements in Established Democracies* (New York: Saint Martin’s Press, 1998); Hans-Georg Betz, *Radical Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe* (New York: Saint Martin’s Press, 1994); Herbert Kitschelt and Anthony G. McGann, *The Radical Right in Western Europe: A Comparative Analysis* (Ann Arbor, MI: U. of Michigan Press, 1995).
6. It is the same in the 1988 regional elections. See Daniel Boy and Jean Chiche, “La qualité des enquêtes d’intention de vote,” *SOFRES Opinion publique 1999* (Paris: Seuil, 1999), p. 252.

7. Guy Birenbaum, *Le Front national en politique* (Paris: Balland, 1992); Jean-Yves Camus, *Le Front national. Histoire et analyses* (Paris: Olivier Laurens, 1996); Pascal Perrineau, *Le Symptôme Le Pen. Radiographie des électeurs du FN* (Paris: Fayard, 1997).
8. Based on national samples of 2000 voters.
9. Pascal Perrineau, "La dynamique du vote Le Pen. Le poids du 'gaucho-lepénisme'," in Pascal Perrineau and Colette Ysmal eds., *Le Vote de crise. L'élection présidentielle de 1995* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 1995), p. 243-61.
10. Samuel Stouffer, *Communism, Conformism, and Civil Liberties: A Cross-Section of the Nation Speaks its Mind* (Garden City, NY : Doubleday, 1955).
11. Ignazi, "The Silent Counter-Revolution."