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To cite this article: Aurelien Mondon (2014) The Front National in the Twenty-First Century: From Pariah to Republican Democratic Contender?, Modern & Contemporary France, 22:3, 301-320, DOI: [10.1080/09639489.2013.872093](https://doi.org/10.1080/09639489.2013.872093)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09639489.2013.872093>



Published online: 17 Jan 2014.



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The Front National in the Twenty-First Century: From Pariah to Republican Democratic Contender?

Aurelien Mondon*

The impressive result obtained by Marine Le Pen in the 2012 presidential elections has raised many questions regarding her ability to break the glass ceiling which many had thought unreachable for the Front National (FN). For some, this progression in the polls was a consequence of the softening of the discourse of the party and Le Pen moving away from her father's more radical stance. However, the fact that this rise came after five years of Sarkozist presidency should not be underestimated, and the context following Sarkozy's 2007 election can be seen as partly responsible for the FN reaching new heights. What this article will argue is that the new status acquired by the FN in 2012 was dramatically facilitated by the campaign by the Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (UMP), which continued the legitimisation of the Le Pens' party rhetoric and allowed it to enter the selective category of respectable, 'democratic' and 'republican' parties. To highlight this development, this article will focus on three themes: the exaggerated state of crisis, the use of populism and the vilification of Islam through the use of neo-racist rhetoric by both the UMP and the FN.

Les résultats impressionnants obtenus par Marine Le Pen lors de l'élection présidentielle de 2012 ont démontré que le Front National (FN) avait dépassé un nouveau seuil. Pour certains, cette progression était le résultat du processus de modération et du délaissement des techniques plus radicales de Jean-Marie Le Pen. Bien que la stratégie de Marine Le Pen fût un succès, les cinq années de présidence sarkoziste ont également joué un rôle prépondérant dans la poussée électorale du FN. Cet article va montrer que la nouvelle stature du FN a en fait été facilitée par la campagne de l'Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (UMP), qui a poursuivi sa légitimation du parti des Le Pen, et lui a permis de

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rentrer dans la cour des partis 'démocratiques' et 'républicains'. Pour étudier ce développement, cet article va se concentrer sur trois thèmes de campagne déterminants: un sentiment de crise exagéré, une utilisation abusive du populisme, et la stigmatisation de l'Islam grâce à une rhétorique néo-raciste.

Introduction

As the 2012 elections loomed, the Front National (FN) no longer appeared the pariah it had been since its creation; it no longer seemed confined to the margins of political discourse. In fact, after decades of doctrinal readjustments and ideological reframing, it appeared the **Le Pens had succeeded in moving their party closer to being a mainstream contender**. This was confirmed a year later, when, for the first time in 30 years, polls showed that fewer than half of respondents thought the FN was a danger to democracy (Courtois 2013; Mestre 2013). **In November 2011, polls highlighted that FN supporters had already become more comfortable with admitting their support for the former political outcast (Le Monde 2011c)**. In early 2012, a Sofres/Le Monde survey confirmed that a record 31% of respondents agreed with FN ideas, and that only a record low of 35% entirely rejected them (Mestre 2012a); striking figures, particularly when compared with those recorded by Jean-Marie Le Pen throughout his career. In the north of France, where the FN has been increasingly and traditionally successful, up to 40% of respondents declared that they **had a good opinion of Le Pen and 70% felt it was a party like any other (La Voix du Nord 2012)**. However, while it is **undeniable that Marine Le Pen has done much to moderate the image of her party (Mestre 2009)**, it would be wrong to assume that the change of leadership sufficed to legitimise the FN, or that two decades of what former deputy leader Bruno Mégret called the 'vocabulary struggle' had finally paid off on their own. In her impressive rise, Marine Le Pen was greatly assisted by a growing distrust of politicians which coincided with the success of alternative parties as witnessed in 2002, and the growth in abstention, which increased from 15% in 1978 to almost 40% in 2007 (Déloye 2012). In 2012, as France struggled to emerge from the crisis and **faced record unemployment levels, it was unsurprising that seemingly untrustworthy candidates¹ struggled against alternative voices, and that abstention reached new heights of 44.6% in the second round of the legislative elections.**

As a consequence, to regain a semblance of democratic legitimacy, other candidates also made populism central to their campaign strategy. As the elections drew closer, populist rhetoric took hold of both the mainstream right and the extreme right, as well as part of the extreme left, with Front de Gauche leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon often competing with his right-wing rivals in this respect. For the extreme right, two potential outcomes appeared plausible. The first hypothesis: the FN could remain at or below its 2007 level, further diminished by five years of Sarkozism and a very right-wing presidency and campaign. The second hypothesis: the FN could rise above its previous record. Five years of populist presidency had further reinforced the FN's

mainstreaming and legitimisation as a respectable alternative; this hypothesis proved more likely as it was improbable for Sarkozy to remain convincing to the growing distrustful electorate after failing to implement much of his populist agenda in his first presidency.

Therefore, while it was not surprising, Marine Le Pen's result after the first round was impressive. For the first time, the FN became a *national* force to be reckoned with, registering over 12% in all but one *département* and indeed breaking the 'glass ceiling' many thought her father had reached in 1988, 1995 and 2002. More impressive than the percentage (17.9%), which was higher than her father's best (16.9%), was the fact that Le Pen managed to reach such a level despite 'strong' electoral participation (20% abstention compared with over 28% in 2002). This impressive result is even more striking in terms of votes. In 2002, her father had achieved an electoral 'earthquake', registering 4.8 million votes. After five years of Sarkozism, which saw the tide ebb for the FN to 3.8 million votes in 2007, a first fall since 1988, Marine Le Pen gathered almost 6.5 million (see Table 1). As the FN vote jumped by 2.7 million, Sarkozy's plummeted by almost 1.7 million. There is little doubt that many of those who had voted for Sarkozy in 2007 (re)turned to the original in 2012 (Mondon 2013b).

Beyond the impressive results obtained by Marine Le Pen and her party in 2012, this article focuses on the mainstreaming of the FN's rhetoric and the growing acceptance of its discourse within the political arena during the campaign. This process, which has taken place over three decades, starting with the Nouvelle Droite's hegemonic plan to reconquer common sense (Benoist 1977; Taguieff 1994), has reached a new stage under Marine Le Pen's leadership, with the FN entering the selective category of respectable, 'democratic' and 'republican' parties during the 2012 election campaign. To highlight this development, this article will focus on three discursive themes: the exaggerated state of crisis, the use of populism and the vilification of Islam through the use of neo-racist rhetoric. While the borrowing of exclusionary rhetoric from the FN by mainstream parties is not new, and while many moderate politicians from both the left and the right have at times felt justified in criticising immigration in the crudest terms (Tissot and Tevanian 2010, 186–189), none did so with the consistency and eagerness that Sarkozy demonstrated from the 2007 campaign onwards (Mondon 2013b). This is why, for practical reasons, this article will concentrate on the 'Sarkozist' legitimisation of the FN. After a careful study of the candidates' and parties' positions on these issues, this article will demonstrate that, while the FN has continued its adaptation to the ever-changing context, and possibly accelerated its discursive evolution under Marine Le Pen's leadership, notably through the more careful use of populism and neo-racism, the process of mainstreaming was facilitated by the rightward shift of the Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (UMP) and in particular the Sarkozists, who played a crucial part in aiding the FN to register its first major vote increase in presidential elections since 1988.

This study relies predominantly on a critical discourse analysis of candidates' speeches, as well as media reactions. Its aim is therefore not to demonstrate that the FN and the UMP ran their campaigns on similar policy platforms, but that the use of a

Table 1 FN results in presidential elections since 1971.

	Vote in %	Of registered voters in %	Votes	Abstention
1974	0.75%	0.62%	190,921	15.77%
1988	14.38%	11.47%	4,376,742	18.65%
1995	15.00%	11.42%	4,571,138	21.62%
2002 1st round	16.86%	11.66%	4,804,713	28.40%
2002 2nd round	17.79%	13.41%	5,525,906	20.29%
2007	10.44%	8.62%	3,834,530	16.23%
2012	17.90%	13.95%	6,421,426	20.52%

certain type of language employed by the Sarkozist right has facilitated the legitimisation of the FN in the public realm. In a society where soundbites are increasingly powerful, and policy programmes decreasingly convincing (Calvet and Veronis 2006; Veronis and Calvet 2008), this shift in language has proven a particular blessing for the party.

Crisis

Crisis has always been a central theme to the extreme right (Mudde 2007, 205–210; Taggart 2000), and played a key part in FN campaigns. In its attempt at rallying FN supporters, it was therefore not surprising for Sarkozy to borrow this rhetoric in 2007, and before the financial crisis even began, his assessment of the situation was dire:

Notre modèle républicain est en crise. Cette crise est avant tout morale ... Cette crise morale est une crise des valeurs, une crise des repères, une crise du sens, une crise de l'identité. Le dénigrement de la nation est au cœur de cette crise. (Sarkozy 2007)

Four years on and in the aftermath of a global recession, it was clear that Le Pen and her party would take advantage of the state of panic present in Europe. To launch her campaign, she warned:

C'est à une double crise que nous devons immédiatement apporter des solutions. Une crise économique, financière et sociale et une crise de la morale publique et donc de la politique. La deuxième ayant à l'évidence précipité la première. (Mestre 2011)

While the FN leader mentioned the economic side of the crisis, it was not foremost an economic issue for the UMP. Similar to Sarkozy's 2007 account, the UMP argued that the roots of the crisis lay in the concept of identity, with as background the ideas of security and insecurity, be they physical, cultural or transnational. For special advisor to the President, Henri Guaino:

Le grand thème de l'élection de 2012, c'est: comment affronter la crise de société, la crise d'identité, la crise morale, la crise de civilisation que nous traversons. C'est de

quelles qualités, de quel caractère faut-il être doté pour affronter le monde périlleux dans lequel nous entrons. (Guaino 2011)

This crisis was therefore not the result of economic mismanagement, to which Le Pen at least made allusion, it was of a more obscure kind; a crisis that touched the country's core, our 'blood and soil'. Guaino called for tough measures and a clear stand against those responsible for the current situation: **'c'est vrai que dans une société en crise, l'immigration est un problème'** (Guaino 2012). For Minister of the Interior, Claude Guéant, talking about immigration was not playing on the FN's field; it was being **'attentive to the population'**. Guéant understood that 'Les Français ont le sentiment que les flux [migratoires] non maîtrisés changent leur environnement' (in *Le Monde* 2011a). **For the UMP, the French were scared, not of their economic future, but of the very survival of their identity.** This was further exemplified by Guéant's opposition to giving immigrants the right to vote in local elections, which rested on a Barresian understanding of citizenship linked to nationality: 'On vote parce qu'on est citoyen et on est citoyen parce qu'on est Français' (*Le Monde* and AFP 2011).

For the President, one of the central themes in the campaign was border security. In a pseudo-philosophical attempt at justifying exclusion, comparing a country to a 'home', Sarkozy emphasised the importance of physical borders, but also 'moral borders': **'Without borders, there is no civilisation.'**

La frontière, c'est ce qui distingue le dedans du dehors, le chez soi et le chez les autres, la frontière c'est ce qui permet que l'on puisse avoir un chez soi, que l'on puisse avoir un foyer, que l'on puisse avoir, écoutez-moi bien, un espace d'intimité dans lequel on est libre de choisir qui l'on fait entrer. Sans frontière, sans cadastre, il n'y a pas d'intimité, il n'a pas de vie privée... La frontière, c'est l'affirmation que tout ne se vaut pas. Qu'entre le dedans et le dehors, ce n'est pas la même chose. Qu'entre nous et les autres, il y a une différence. Qu'entre chez soi et dans la rue, ce n'est pas pareil... C'est rien d'autre que le long travail de la civilisation. (Sarkozy 2012o)

In a manner reminiscent of the Nouvelle Droite's attacks on colonialism (Benoist 1979), although perhaps more virulent in his description of the barbarian invasion, Sarkozy (2012o) insisted that: 'Les frontières ethniques et religieuses sont inacceptables, nous n'en voulons pas. Faites sauter les frontières de la France, et vous verrez les *tribus* imposer des comportements dont nous ne voulons pas sur le sol français' (emphasis added). In another interview on 1 May, Sarkozy declared bluntly that 'il y a trop d'immigrés en France' (Sarkozy 2012r).

Yet Guéant refused the association of his party's stance with 'xenophobia'; instead, he stated that the French 'veulent que la France reste la France' (*Le Monde* 2011a). His wording meant not only the creation of an 'Other' as a scapegoat (Girard 1989), **but gave every French person permission to express their prejudice (ethnic, religious, racial or even gender) in whatever manner they chose, for all they defended was their love of France.** Guéant's strategy was clear and he did not refrain from borrowing the most populist comparisons from Le Pen, such as that linking the yearly immigration intake to the population of Rennes, a major French city, a borrowing

so lacking in subtlety that Le Pen thanked the minister for supporting her claims (Le Blevennec 2011).

Populism

Je suis la candidate de la révolte populaire face au système. (M. Le Pen 2012b)

Following Sarkozy's successful 2007 right-wing populist campaign, which led to the FN electorate migrating en masse to the UMP, the 2012 French presidential elections appeared as a reliable gauge for the distance covered by populist and neo-racist ideas in the mainstreaming of extreme-right politics in France. In early 2012, with Sarkozy's approval ratings at an all-time low, the extreme-right electorate appeared to have abandoned the 'copy' and moved back to the 'original', as many within the extreme-right party had predicted (Le Pen and Doucet 2010; Lemarié 2011). In March 2011, before the Socialist candidate was elected in very successful primaries, a poll suggested that Marine Le Pen would even lead the first round of the elections with 23% (*Le Parisien* 2011). Even taken with the caution that must be afforded to electoral polls, her growing appeal could not be downplayed.

As her party's rhetoric became increasingly accepted during the Sarkozy presidency, voting for Le Pen seemed no longer taboo in 2011, and many began to believe she spoke for the people. It is with this in mind that she has continued the FN's infiltration of the growing part of the population which feels constantly exploited by the 'establishment' (*Le Monde* 2011b). Shameless in her attack on the 'UMPS', Le Pen even compared mainstream French parties to the collaborators of the Second World War, guilty of selling France out to globalisation (Mestre and Monnot 2011). In 2011, like her father had for years, she announced she would be 'la candidate des oubliés', 'des invisibles', 'de ceux qui ne se plaignent pas, de ceux que l'on ne veut pas voir, que l'on ne veut pas entendre' (M. Le Pen 2011), claiming thus to be the representative of the conveniently silent majority. She happily referred to herself as 'populist', against those who 'méprisent le peuple'. Typical of the traditional extreme right, Le Pen was the 'neither left nor right' candidate, the candidate beyond corruption, the outsider, the exact same embodiment her father and Sarkozy had successfully managed in the past (Mondon 2013b). After the first round, she pushed further for the normalisation of her party, declaring that she would not 'tolérer de voir leur [her voters] choix réduit à un comportement irréfléchi ou animé par de mauvais sentiments': the vote for the FN was 'un vote réfléchi, construit, un vote d'espérance, de soutien, en somme un véritable vote d'adhésion au nouveau chemin que je propose à la France' (M. Le Pen 2012f). Le Pen's aim was clear: to do away with the image of her party as a receptacle for protest vote.

Surprisingly, after five years of presidency, Sarkozy also attempted to pose as the candidate of the rupture, the candidate of the people against the elite. He made clear that his strategy was to appeal to the FN electorate 'whose suffering and anger he understood' (Sarkozy 2012h):

Je viens de commettre une grave erreur, je chasse sur les terres de l'extrême droite... Moi je veux parler au peuple de France, à la France qui souffre, comme à la France qui croit en l'avenir. Je veux parler aux Français, quel qu'était leur vote dans le passé, ça m'est égal. Parce que ce que je veux c'est construire avec tous les Français un avenir commun, pour notre pays, pour notre patrie, pour la France... Nous acceptons votre part de différence, mais nous, nous ne voulons pas changer les valeurs qui sont les nôtres, que nous parents et nos grands-parents nous ont transmises et que nous voulons à notre tour transmettre à nos enfants. (Sarkozy 2012e)

As he defended an old-fashioned approach to culture and identity, borrowing from the most reactionary doctrines, he also paradoxically attempted to present himself as the candidate of change against old canons (Sarkozy 2012i). Even though Sarkozy had been part of many governments since 1993 and held a range of important portfolios as well as the presidency, he denounced '*nos élites qui vivent dans un petit club ... ceux qui vont à la télévision avec un miroir*' (Sarkozy 2012f). For Guaino, the elite was guilty and '*si tout le monde avait privilégié l'intérêt général dans les corps intermédiaires et les élites depuis trente ans, peut-être n'en serait-on pas là*' (Guaino, Leparmentier, and Schneider 2012); yet after 10 years of unbridled right-wing government, he argued that '*le changement, c'est Sarkozy, pas Hollande*' (Guaino 2012b). Patrick Buisson, Sarkozy's most influential hard-right advisor and former editor of extreme-right magazine *Minute*, went further, declaring that '*Nicolas Sarkozy et Mélenchon incarnent le vote antisystème*' (Leparmentier 2012b).

In his speech after the first round, Sarkozy attempted to incarnate the brave candidate, not afraid to break taboos and go against political correctness, asking that '*tout doit être débattu, sans hypocrisie, sans esquivé, sans faux-fuyant*' (Sarkozy 2012k). In his project, like Le Pen and her 'neither left nor right' strategy, Sarkozy boldly refused to be partisan: '*car c'est au peuple français, à tout le peuple français que je veux parler*'. For the second round, he called for '*tous les Français qui mettent l'amour de la patrie au-dessus de toutes considérations partisans ou de tout intérêt particulier à s'unir et à me rejoindre*'. Others could vote for Hollande.

Between the two rounds, Sarkozy borrowed some of his rhetoric directly from the speech Jean-Marie Le Pen gave after the first round in 2002, particularly when he addressed '*les petits, les sans-grades*' (Sarkozy 2012l). Sarkozy was also the anti-intellectual martyr against the system, the '*spécialistes*' (Sarkozy 2012l), and claimed he had led a campaign '*neuf [autre candidats] contre un*' (Sarkozy 2012l). No longer was Le Pen the populist pariah, the 'outsider': Sarkozy was. Yet he did not like the word 'populism', which he found 'degrading'. The campaign and the vote for the FN had been one of 'crisis'; a crisis which required change, because '*si nous ne changeons rien, si nous ne nous mettons pas d'accord sur de nouvelles règles, nous risquons de refaire le chemin tragique des années 30*' (Sarkozy 2012l). Yet, in a sentence heavy with Pétainist undertones, Sarkozy called on his troops to '*nous retrouver très nombreux le premier mai pour fêter le travail [but] le vrai travail*', setting those who work hard against those who take advantage.²

As the campaign went on and their ratings failed to improve, many populist proposals such as the use of popular referenda, proportionality in the voting system or 'jurys populaires' were added to the UMP campaign. In an attempt at creating his people through exclusion, Sarkozy's attacks became increasingly directed at the *Other(s)*. Reminiscent of the Le Pens' rhetoric (J.-M. Le Pen 2012; Mestre 2012c), and as he had in his 2007 campaign, he reiterated his attacks against the culture of 'repentance', and declared that France should not have to 'repent for the Algerian war' (Sarkozy 2012a). His rightward shift did not even spare his European partners; to reduce immigration, he threatened to pull France out of the Schengen treaty (Sarkozy 2012b; Sarkozy et al. 2012). Again, Sarkozy was willing to break 'taboos' and bring the word 'borders' back to the centre of European politics (Sarkozy 2012h). His attempt at rallying the FN's supporters did not go unnoticed around the world (Chrisafis 2012) and led to strong criticism, and even to the *Wall Street Journal* (2012) titling one of its articles 'Nicolas Le Pen'. Yet for the first time, late in March, and despite this embarrassing publicity, opinion polls showed Sarkozy in front in the first round, as Le Pen's support slumped from a high of 19% in October the previous year, to 14% in early April (*Le Monde* 2012b). For the *New York Times*, the end justified the means and 'Mr Sarkozy [had] no problem being frivolous or cruel [towards the Muslim community] if it means he can peel away some of her voters' (2012).

However, as the elections drew closer, it seemed that Sarkozy's populist campaign tapped into only part of the discontentment that convinced almost a fifth of those that voted to eventually turn to Marine Le Pen. While Sarkozy managed to satisfy many in their fear of immigration and the scapegoating of an 'enemy from the inside', he failed to address the social insecurity which had left an important part of the population deeply distrustful of the major parties and up for grabs by the extreme left and right. This was confirmed in late March by an IFOP survey which highlighted the predominance of the issue of purchasing power in the FN electorate (Leparmentier 2012a).

The Rise of Green Fascism: Islam as Scapegoat for the Populist Crisis

As the election drew closer, Le Pen made it increasingly clear that she was targeting the Muslim population, and that her republican and secularist stance was little more than a façade (Mondon 2013a, 91–92). Her claims that 100% of the meat sold near Paris was halal were not substantiated, and yet managed to inflame the electorate early in the campaign and added further stigma to the Muslim population (Reuters 2012). This polemic was later reinforced by Sarkozy, who claimed against all evidence (TNS Sofres 2012) that this issue was 'Le premier sujet de préoccupation, de discussion des Français' (Leparmentier and Schneider 2012a). To counter this 'invasion', Le Pen stated in an authoritarian manner that with her election 'street prayers ... would come to an end' and that no more money would go towards assisting the building of mosques. Warning a blurry category of 'intégrists', she proclaimed that 'les intégristes doivent savoir qu'ils trouveront face à eux et pour la première fois depuis des

décennies, un pouvoir extrêmement déterminé' (Mestre 2012b). Whether Le Pen meant the decades since the early 1940s or those of the Algerian War is unclear, but her choice of words is nevertheless very significant.

The leader of a party founded by Vichy supporters and neo-fascists turned history around, and described herself as the resistant against green fascism (M. Le Pen 2012c), the one who would take up the war the state had lost against the barbarous invaders from the suburbs who '[met] la France à genoux'. While describing the threat as limited to Muslim fundamentalism and referring to the traumatic shootings in Toulouse in March 2012, **she placed under suspicion all the asylum-seekers trying to reach Europe by sea but also anyone with a Muslim background**, asking 'Combien de Mohamed Merah dans les bateaux, les avions, qui chaque jour arrivent en France remplis d'immigrés? Combien de Mohamed Merah parmi les enfants de ces immigrés non-assimilés?' (M. Le Pen 2012d). Further stigmatising the Muslim population, she threatened to put constant surveillance in place in mosques and to ban the wearing of religious symbols on public transport (M. Le Pen 2012d). Highlighting her distrust of Islam, she questioned whether a Libyan fundamentalist dictatorship would not be worse than Gaddafi's secular one (Mestre and Monnot 2012).

While Le Pen's targeting of the Muslim community was often extreme, parts of the mainstream right felt that this was where the electoral battle was to be fought. In February 2012, as Sarkozy was still struggling with the defection of many voters to Le Pen, Guéant reinforced the UMP's stigmatisation of Islam and Muslim immigration, noting with 'bon sens et d'évidence' that 'toutes les civilisations ne se valent pas au regard des valeurs humanistes qui sont les nôtres' (Huet and Guéant 2012). He clarified that he was not targeting any culture in particular, before highlighting the importance of banning street prayers and the wearing of the hijab in public places such as the National Assembly, measures similar to Le Pen's proposals. A day later, Sarkozy would come to the support of his minister and reiterate that his statements were merely 'du bon sens' (*Le Monde*, AFP, and Reuters 2012). With the support of his President, Guéant felt confident letting the president of the French Council of the Muslim Cult, an organisation created by Sarkozy himself, know that it was the 'Muslim religion' he had targeted (Guéant 2012a). Where Le Pen insisted that Islam would have to adapt to secularism (M. Le Pen 2012a), Guéant *ordered* that it obey republican secular ideals. Sarkozy added, to an already tense situation, that Christian public holidays were part of the secular 'civilisation of the French Republic' (Sarkozy 2012c): secularism and the Republic were now to be understood, in all 'common sense', as against Islam.

In the same vein, Sarkozy and his team also took advantage of the Socialist proposal to give foreigners the right to vote in local elections. For the President, it would be 'une atteinte à la République', linking his obscure reasoning to the burqa issue (Sarkozy 2012c). Guéant affirmed that it could lead to making 'obligatoire la présence de la viande halal dans les cantines': 'Les étrangers doivent accepter nos règles, c'est à eux de s'adapter. Chacun comprend que si on reçoit moins d'immigrés, les choses se passeront mieux'; 'il y a du *bon sens* à remettre dans la gestion des affaires publiques'

(Guéant 2012b, emphasis added). Sarkozy agreed that ‘nous avons trop d’étrangers sur notre territoire’ and promised to halve immigration (Sarkozy 2012a). The foreigner was not the Western European or Asian migrant though, it was solely the Muslim one, with an *innate* inability to live in *our* democracies: the increase in the number of Muslims ‘et un certain nombre de comportements posent problème’ (Pouchard 2012). Three days before the election, Sarkozy conveniently quoted a woman who denounced the problems in her *banlieue* and assured his audience that ‘Vous savez très bien que ce ne sont pas des Portugais’ (Sarkozy 2012j). This strategy reached new heights when, to describe the soldiers shot in the Toulouse attack, Sarkozy created a new category in the population: the ‘Musulmans d’apparence’ (Sarkozy 2012d). For Sarkozy, as for Le Pen, the shootings confirmed his rightward strategy: Mohammed Merah was not a lonewolf terrorist, or a madman as Norwegian terrorist Anders Breivik had been described, he was the symbol of those who do not manage to ‘integrate’. Sarkozy believed he had ‘le droit de parler de la civilisation européenne, de ses racines chrétiennes, de l’identité de notre pays’ (Sarkozy 2012h), and insinuated that this identity was opposed to one type of immigration: that linked in even the most tenuous sense to Islam. In a ‘Lettre au peuple français’, Sarkozy added further stigma to the Muslim population by stating that ‘qu’il y a chez nous des règles qui s’imposent à tous’. Such rules included:

la laïcité, l’interdiction de la burqa dans l’espace public, du voile dans les services publics, l’école obligatoire, le caractère non négociable des programmes scolaires, l’égalité entre l’homme et la femme, le droit des femmes de travailler, l’interdiction absolue de la polygamie et de l’excision; en France, les horaires dans les piscines sont les mêmes pour tous, les médecins sont les mêmes, les menus dans les cantines sont les mêmes. (Sarkozy 2012g)

After this list of rules directly aimed at anyone with a Muslim background, be they atheists or moderates, French citizens or immigrants, Sarkozy added threateningly that ‘Personne n’est obligé de venir vivre en France. Ceux qui veulent venir doivent savoir quelles sont nos valeurs et être convaincus que nous les ferons respecter’ (Sarkozy 2012h).

A speech in Longjumeau between the two rounds carried all the contradictions Sarkozy had made use of to appeal to the FN’s voters during his presidency and campaigns (Sarkozy 2012m). Without ever mentioning Islam, he raised all the themes related to that religion which had made him so popular within Le Pen’s electorate in 2007. As usual, his arguments were not attacks against a minority, they were to protect the Republic, to protect secularism, to protect women. Making use of populist common sense, Sarkozy denounced female circumcision, neglecting to mention the rarity of this practice as opposed to other forms of sexist behaviour; ‘clothed jails’, without conceding that wearing the hijab could be a choice; swimming pools open only for women at certain times as another form of segregation; halal food as a threat to the school system.³ The crowd was his; he could take yet another step towards Le Pen’s electorate: ‘je suis pour la préférence communautaire, mais je ne vois pas pourquoi on ne pourrait pas être pour la préférence nationale’. Thirty years of FN discourse had become further acceptable; the President of France affirmed that

discrimination on the basis of nationality, with all the racist undertones acquired with each successive FN campaign, was now something worth defending. This strategy seemed to work: halfway between the two rounds, a survey showed that 64% of the FN electorate felt Sarkozy's positions were the right ones; the same survey also showed that 60% of centre-right candidate François Bayrou's voters found the President had gone too far right (Opinionway and Fiducial 2012). With Le Pen's electorate almost double that of Bayrou's, Sarkozy had clearly made his choice as to who to court. UMP national secretary, Yves Jégo, confirmed that Sarkozy's campaign for the first round would be a 'Buisson campaign' (named after Sarkozy's hard-right advisor Patrick Buisson), aimed at the FN's electorate. Once the FN had been crushed, there would be time to run a more 'Bayrou' campaign in the second round, one aimed at the centre electorate (Schneider 2012).

A Moderated Extreme Right or a Radicalised Right?

While the themes discussed above became increasingly mainstream in France, Marine Le Pen's 2012 candidacy evoked troubled feelings beyond French borders. In the lead-up to the French elections, British broadsheet *The Guardian* described her as 'the most dangerous woman in France' (Shorto 2011); on the contrary, the tabloid *Daily Mail* argued that 'despite her flaws, the only responsible vote in France next Sunday is one for Marine Le Pen' (Waghorne 2012). If nothing else, the result of the first round of the elections proved that Marine Le Pen was the best contender the FN had ever put forward, as she convinced almost a million more voters than her father ever had.

Yet, despite its firm grounding in extreme-right tradition, Sarkozy described the new FN as a 'democratic party' (Sarkozy 2012n), another step in the normalisation of a party born out of a neo-fascist alliance. Not only was it 'democratic', Sarkozy declared the FN's values to be 'compatible avec la République' (*Le Monde* 2012e). For the first time since the Second World War, a president had accepted the extreme right as a normal contender; the idea of the 'Republican Front', which had held for most of the Fifth Republic, had fallen. While the FN had adapted to the new context and modernised its rhetoric, it was not so much an ideological change which took place, but a change in the way the party was viewed: the mainstream had been radicalised more than the extreme had been moderated. Yet Sarkozy himself appeared to regret this comment, which had been caught on video; he attempted to deny it, and felt obliged to affirm that he would never offer the FN a portfolio (Sarkozy 2012p). The then President found himself caught in a populist paradox and attempted to escape it with the use of common sense:

À partir du moment où la République autorise Marine Le Pen à être candidate, c'est que c'est un parti démocratique, sinon on ne l'autoriserait pas à être candidat [*sic*]. Il faut être cohérent. Deuxièmement, à partir du moment où la République autorise Marine Le Pen à être candidate, c'est donc que les Français qui votent pour elle, les citoyens qui votent pour elle, on va pas le leur reprocher... il n'y a pas un mauvais vote et un bon vote. (Sarkozy 2012n)

The most radical part of the UMP became increasingly comfortable with this unabashed strategy, and Minister of Defence, Gérard Longuet, did not hesitate, in an interview given to extreme-right weekly *Minute*, to call on ‘patriots’ to prevent the election of Hollande and his ‘alliés socialo-communistes’, a term dear to Jean-Marie Le Pen himself (Longuet 2012a).⁴ For Longuet, the left had no moral justification to prevent the UMP from allying with the FN, since the left has in its midst ‘communists, who are responsible for millions of deaths and for the German–Soviet pact which led to the tragedy of the Second World War’. No longer were the crimes of the Second World War the responsibility of the extreme right; the FN was not only legitimised, its political family was exonerated from its heinous past. With Marine Le Pen’s new sensible approach, Longuet felt it was now ‘possible to discuss thorny issues with an interlocutor who might not be supportive, but who at least is not disqualified’. While the minister would not vote for the left in the legislative elections because of its ‘socialo-communisme’, his reasons not to vote for the FN were not ideological; he merely felt that Le Pen’s party led ‘certaines aspirations légitimes de ses électeurs dans l’impasse’. While some prominent UMP personalities claimed to be shocked, the attempt to appeal to the extreme-right electorate was clear and the damage was done. Sarcastically, Le Pen declared, in regards to Longuet’s past, ‘je ne sais pas si on peut parler avec des gens d’extrême droite’ (Mestre 2012e). As the UMP appeared ever more divided in its attempt to appeal to the extreme and moderate right as well as the centre, Gilbert Collard, one of the Front National’s mainstream recruits, insisted that it was time for Sarkozy and his party to take a clear stance on Le Pen (Zappi and AFP 2012).

For Sarkozy, and according to most commentators, the first round was a failure. The President had reached the elections with very low approval ratings, and had not succeeded in recuperating the FN’s electorate despite an extremely rightist campaign, often echoing the most radical voices within Le Pen’s party. A tipping point was even reached when UMP deputy Christian Vanneste mentioned ‘la légende de la déportation d’homosexuels’ during the Second World War (*Le Monde* and Reuters 2012). These comments led an FN candidate from the same region to ‘exprimer [sa] profonde indignation devant les propos de monsieur Vanneste’. Le Pen’s campaign director, Louis Aliot, added that it was time for Vanneste to ‘relire ses livres d’histoire’ (*Le Monde* 2012a). It was no longer the FN’s most extremist members who were guilty of the most atrocious forms of revisionism, it was the UMP’s.

Despite the ultimate defeat, supporters of the rightward shift believed the campaign was a success, and it was argued that if Sarkozy had not conducted such a rightist campaign, Marine Le Pen would have been even higher (Roux 2012). For Buisson, the campaign was only tarnished by the centrism of some of Sarkozy’s other advisors, which had prevented the candidate from gathering all the discontented and which was responsible for Le Pen’s success (Leparmentier and Schneider 2012b). His voice was echoed by many of Sarkozy’s lieutenants. For another advisor, ‘jamais la droite n’a été aussi élevée’, and Sarkozy had to concentrate on ‘un besoin d’autorité et de protection’. For General Secretary of the UMP Jean-François Copé, despite polls showing otherwise (TNS Sofres 2012), ‘Toutes les thématiques de Nicolas Sarkozy sont celles

des Français: l'immigration, la sécurité, le pouvoir d'achat'. For the Minister of Agriculture, Bruno Le Maire, 'si l'on veut convaincre les électeurs du FN, il ne faut pas leur faire des œillades mais montrer que nous sommes intransigeants sur les valeurs qu'on défend. Il faut y aller en ligne droite. Pas un coup à droite et un coup au centre' (in Leparmentier and Schneider 2012b).

Conclusion

Even though Sarkozy's supporters felt his campaign had been a success, it was François Hollande who won the second round of the elections. Yet, despite an extremely right-wing campaign, Sarkozy managed to gather more than 48% of the vote, which showed that many central tenets of extreme-right rhetoric had now entered the mainstream. With this result, the FN felt that for the first time, it could help the system implode. For Aliot, the UMP was about to fall and the Front would remain as the only contender on that side of the political spectrum. With its new electoral power, his party would play a part in its competitor's demise: 'Quand on a un adversaire sous la semelle, il faut appuyer dessus' (Mestre 2012d).

While Le Pen failed to reach the second round, her first-round result was certainly revealing. First, it highlighted Sarkozy's inability to continue to appeal to those he had managed to gather under his banner in 2007 by borrowing Jean-Marie Le Pen's rhetoric. Despite running a populist, at times neo-racist, campaign and admitting openly his intentions to focus on the FN's electorate in the first round, he was unable to convince them that he could deliver. Despite his much higher chances of reaching the second round, and the presidency, than Marine Le Pen, the electorate which had turned to him as an opportunity to see their ideas put in practice in 2007 refused to settle for the more moderate response to their ethno-exclusivist demands. The combination of five years of Sarkozism and two decades of 'vocabulary wars' had been a major factor in mainstreaming the FN, or more precisely, Lepenising the mainstream. Amongst an increasingly disillusioned and frightened French electorate (Miquet-Marty 2011), voting for the FN was no longer a shameful act for many (Wieder 2011). Voting for the FN was no longer considered a pointless act. Marine Le Pen appears increasingly as a credible contender, a candidate her supporters want to be in charge.⁵ Perhaps the strongest symbol of this mainstreaming was the lack of demonstrations after Le Pen's result; within 10 years, France had lost the disgust for extreme-right politics which had pushed tens of thousands onto the streets on 21 April 2002.

To achieve such a success, there is no doubt that the party has adapted to the new political situation and successfully changed its rhetoric, in part returning to Bruno Mégret's strategy of 'de-demonisation'. While such a change was for the most part aesthetic, it proved that a huge step towards modernisation had been taken, as it was that very strategy which had cost Mégret his career in 1998. Still, as James Shields highlighted, 'scratch the new glossy surface and there remains a party culture that is still largely unreformed' (Shields 2013). Therefore, as with that which occurred under her father's leadership, albeit to a lesser extent, Le Pen's 'moderation' should not be

exaggerated or distorted, and it is crucial to look past mere rhetorical twists. While Le Pen's rhetoric has changed, one must not overlook the strategic aspect of such changes and mistake them for deeper ideological shifts (Mayer 2013). While anti-Semitism is no longer prominent in the party rhetoric, it has also lost much of its past appeal in France and Europe in general. Besides this, the FN can rely on Jean-Marie Le Pen's symbolic presence to reassure the older, more anti-Semitic generation of supporters. With regards to a gay-friendly attitude, the recent demonstrations in France have clearly shown that the party remains deeply committed to its ultra-Catholic tradition, and that the silence of its leader was little more than a solitary strategic manoeuvre (*Nouvel Observateur* and AFP 2013). As for the secular resistance to the Muslim threat, Le Pen is playing the same tune which has made the extreme right so popular in the past by presenting herself and her party as defenders of France against an Other, whoever that Other might be. As Léon Poliakov suggested, rabid anti-Semite Edouard Drumont's 'Jewish France' was in fact little more than 'modern, secular and republican France' (Poliakov 1981, 291); Marine Le Pen's 'Muslim France' was similar: modern as in multicultural; secular as in the right to 'freedom of worship' as guaranteed by the first article of the law of 1905; republican as in the right to all to share the same rights, no matter background, gender or sexual preference.

While Guéant referred to the FN's programme as 'nationalist and socialist' (*Le Monde* 2012c), his own party greatly facilitated the FN's strategy and allowed Marine Le Pen to gain new credibility. By focusing on the themes central to the FN's agenda, Sarkozy and his team legitimised a discourse which had until then confined the extreme-right party to the margins. As demonstrated here, the focus on a particular type of moral or civilisational crisis confirmed many of the FN's oldest fears, even though polls suggested that the French were primarily preoccupied by the state of the economy (TNS Sofres 2012). In a state of widespread political distrust and disillusionment, the use of populism further reinforced the scapegoating of the Other, and in the current climate this Other 'naturally' became the Muslim. Throughout much of the 2012 campaign, the UMP's attack on the Muslim community was as stringent and stigmatising as the FN's. Yet, while Sarkozy's campaign allowed him to suffer a less serious defeat than was first expected, it left his party divided, unable to reconcile itself with the dilemma the FN's vilification or acceptance posed. For Le Pen, with a weakened UMP, the Front National is 'désormais la seule et véritable opposition à la gauche ultralibérale, laxiste et libertaire' (M. Le Pen 2012e). She had become 'la chef de l'opposition' (in *Le Monde* 2012d), and 'la bataille de France ne fait que commencer' (M. Le Pen 2012e).

Notes

- [1] A poll in early 2012 showed that only 22% of respondents considered that 'all or most politicians respect high moral rules', while 20% thought that none do. Similarly, a majority felt that politicians are less and less sincere and are increasingly driven by private interests (Courtois 2012).

- [2] Despite evidence to the contrary, Sarkozy later declared he had not made mention of the concept of 'real labour' (Touati 2012).
- [3] For Sarkozy, it was crucial to put discipline back at the centre of the school system, 'for students to learn they are below the schoolmaster'. This was again borrowed almost word for word from Le Pen's programme (Sarkozy 2012q).
- [4] Longuet was the co-founder of the extreme-right organisation Occident in the 1960s. A few days after this interview, in an ironic Freudian slip, Longuet would declare 'for us, at the FN' instead of 'for them, at the FN' (Longuet 2012b).
- [5] A recent poll showed that 35% of respondents believed the FN is 'a party with the capacity to take part in the government', up from 25% in 2011 and 31% in 2012 (Mestre 2013).

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