
Original Article

Who are the members of the French National Front? Evidence from interview research

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Abstract The Front national (FN), which embraces populism, cultural monism and anti-immigration sentiments, but eschews violence and operates within the borders of legal frameworks, has averaged more than 10 per cent of the popular vote in French local, regional and national elections over the past 30 years. While previous research has extensively captured the historical development and the structural determinants of its success, as well as that of its European sister parties, there is still a relative dearth of scholarship focusing on the activists of radical right-wing groups. I will add to these few existing studies by analyzing the FN's members. On the basis of interview research with 44 FN activists, I find that individuals who are involved in this populist right-wing party come from diverse social and economic backgrounds and have different types of political socialization. What unites them is their high degree of motivation, their political values (for example, nationalism, anti-immigration), their personal beliefs (for example, the belief in authority and other traditional values) and the fact that they feel at ease within the FN.

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Introduction

Thirty years ago, the radical right re-emerged in France and Western Europe, when the Front national (FN) won nearly 15 per cent of the popular vote in some parts of France (for example, Dreux). Since then, not only has the FN been a significant player in French politics, but other radical right-wing parties have emerged and succeeded in other European countries including Switzerland, Norway and the Netherlands (for example, Crépon, 2012; Dézé, 2012). In response to the emergence of parties like the FN, an academic literature has developed (for example, Sniderman *et al*, 2004; Oesch, 2008) that has mainly covered the electoral success of these



radical right-wing parties. This literature has become pan-European in scope and increasingly methodologically sophisticated. For example, numerous case studies and comparative case studies have detailed the ideology and rise of parties such as the French National Front, the Vlaams Belang and the Austrian Freedom Party (for example, Wodak and Pelinka, 2002; Gingrich and Banks, 2006; Müller, 2009; Lamontagne and Stockemer, 2010; McVeigh and Cunningham, 2012). In addition, large-*N* analyses (for example, Golder, 2003; Carter, 2005; Stockemer and LaMontagne, 2007; Bos *et al.*, 2013) have investigated a series of structural and institutional factors potentially at the heart of radical right-wing electoral successes, such as unemployment, immigration, globalization and the strength of the welfare state.

However, organizations are not in ‘any simple sense born at the macro-level’ (McAdam *et al.*, 2001, p. 263). If we want to holistically understand the discourses, positions, actions and inner dynamics of groups like the FN, we must also comprehend the activists. The activists are important. They opt for engagement that goes beyond the process of ordinary politics, and they display deeper commitment than casting a ballot for a party or participating in a political rally (Mouriaux, 1983, p. 53), and engage in ‘collective challenges by people with common purposes and solidarity in a sustained interaction with elites, opponents and authorities’ (Tarrow, 1998, p. 3). In short, populist right-wing activists are the backbone of their parties. They organize the parties’ daily business, coordinate and participate in rallies and demonstrations, propagate the parties’ populist messages, provide financial resources, and represent these parties as candidates in elections and possibly as elected officials (Rucht, 1999, p. 207).

In this article, I want to add to our understanding of the activists, attempting to detect the FN members’ political socialization, their political and personal values and motivations for engagement, and their engagement trajectories. Through interview research I find that the members of the FN come from diverse social, educational and political backgrounds. What unites them are their personal and political values. Personally, they adhere to values such as honesty, authority and the family. Politically, they believe in nationalism and dispute the immigration of foreigners to France and the European unification process. In addition, they reject Islam and search for more authoritarian values and charismatic leadership. They also appreciate the atmosphere in the FN, which many describe as a large family.

This article proceeds as follows. In the first part, I will quickly introduce the empirical referent of this study, the French National Front (FN). In the next section, I will situate this study within the literature on populist right-wing extremism. In the third part, I will briefly present the methodology. In the fourth section, I will discuss the results of my qualitative study focusing on the FN activists’ socialization and their trajectory as party members, as well as their personal and political motivations for engagement. Finally, I will conclude and provide some avenues for future research.

The French National Front

The FN was founded in 1972 as an agglomeration of far right-wing groups and individuals (Berezin, 2007). In its formative years, the FN was a marginal party with a few sections outside Paris regrouping the nostalgia for Vichy, anti-Gaullists, Poujadists, former colonizers and right-wing intellectuals. During the 1970s and early 1980s, the party won less than 2 per cent of the general vote in elections (Veugelers, 1995, p. 192). However, starting in the late 1970s/early 1980s and responding to their lack of success, Le Pen and the party leadership replaced the extremist discourse with a populist message that could be communicated to a much wider audience (Marcus, 1995, p. 12). Of particular importance, the FN has claimed ownership over the issues of immigration and security in their political programs since 1978 (Dézé, 2012, p. 66).

The definitive point of its electoral breakthrough came when the FN achieved a series of second-order municipal election successes between 1981 and 1983 (Bornschiefer and Lachat, 2009, p. 365). Most significantly, the party garnered 13.6 per cent of the vote in Grande-Synthe and 12.6 per cent in Dreux-Ouest (Perrineau, 1996, p. 41). In fact, the FN would prove most capable of swaying the discontented voter toward the populist right by advancing a populist program that would speak to societal fears and insecurities created by increased unemployment, feelings of insecurity and the rise to power of Francois Mitterrand (for example, Mayer, 2002; Ignazi, 2003; Betz, 2004). Following these local electoral victories, Le Pen capitalized on media attention and increased societal dissatisfaction. In the 1984 European election, no less than 2 million voters (11.2 per cent) cast a ballot for the FN (Betz and Immerfall, 1998, p. 13). In Dreux, the party received a staggering 19.1 per cent of the vote (Kitschelt and McCann, 1995, p. 101). In 1984, the proportional representation system, high unemployment, social cutbacks, and concerns over immigration and security played to the Front's strength (Dézé, 2012, p. 75). This electoral success not only increased the political visibility and legitimacy of this radical right-wing party, but also allowed the FN to build up an organizational structure, enabling it to attract recruits at the grassroots, mid-rank and intellectual level (Rydgren, 2004, p. 19).

Starting in 1985, the FN also undertook several key strategic changes with respect to party professionalization and positioning. It equipped itself with an organizational backbone of politically experienced activists and candidates, most notably Bruno Mégret, who played a pivotal role in the popularization of the FN's rhetoric (Rydgren, 2004, p. 19). Under his direction, the FN changed the style of its programs and reformulated its xenophobic and exclusionary elements into politically normalized expressions. Le Pen's charismatic leadership also helped the party to capture a relatively significant portion of the French electorate (Williams, 2006, p. 92). These changes proved beneficial for the FN. In the two subsequent national elections – the 1986 legislative election and the 1988 presidential election – the FN won 9.8 per cent



and 14.6 per cent of the vote, thus further strengthening its role as a major player on the French political landscape (Perrineau, 1997, pp. 32–35).

Despite the fact that the FN's anti-immigrant discourse was increasingly absorbed by mainstream parties, Le Pen's party continued to show strength at elections, indicating that part of the electorate preferred 'the original over the copy' (Mudde, 2007, p. 241). In 1992, the FN received 13.9 per cent of the vote, a 4.2 per cent increase over the first regional elections held in 1986 (Declair, 1999, p. 92). In the 1993 legislative elections, the FN consolidated its vote share, by winning 12.4 per cent of the national vote in the country's national parliamentary election and by having 100 FN candidates passing the 12.5 per cent threshold in the first round (Rydgren, 2004, p. 20). By the mid-1990s, the Front's nationalist discourse had gained considerable ground as increasing fears about unemployment and an impending monetary union led to declining support for the European Union (EU).

In 1995, Le Pen once again benefited from Mégret's ability to provide the skills and resources during the many elections that were held that year (Crépon, 2012, pp. 49–50). For instance, in the 1995 municipal elections, a total of 1075 FN-affiliated councilors were elected while only 360 left office (Kling, 2012, p. 87). At the regional level, the FN elected 250 councilors, and placed three mayors in cities of significant size¹. That same year, the FN had its best showing ever in parliamentary elections, with 14.9 per cent of the votes cast (Rydgren, 2004, p. 21). The party continued to progress: in the 1997 legislative elections it received 15.24 per cent of the vote and was considered to be the third most important political force in France (Declair, 1999, p. 104).²

However, in 1998, internal struggles between the party leader Jean-Marie Le Pen and his *de facto* Number 2 Bruno Mégret came to the fore. The struggles, which both tackled leadership issues as well as the strategic orientation of the FN, resulted first in an open contestation of the FN leader Le Pen by Mégret during the FN's national council in December 1998 (Dézé, 2012, p. 125), and shortly thereafter the exclusion of Mégret and his supporters from the FN (Dézé, 2012, p. 127). Only days later, Mégret formed a breakaway party called the National Republic Movement (MNR). Le Pen's and Mégret's factions divided the far right-wing vote in the 1999 European parliamentary elections: Le Pen's Front received only 5.7 per cent of the votes (Berezin, 2007, p. 137; Rydgren, 2004, p. 18) while Mégret secured 3.3 per cent (Ivaldi and Evans, 2005, p. 362; Dézé, 2012, p. 130). Needless to say, this split was a considerable blow to the Front's ideological footing and organizational development. Yet, the FN did not suffer a permanent decline (Rydgren, 2004, p. 21; Williams, 2006, p. 87).

Only three years after the party's internal crisis and still deprived of a substantial portion of its caucus, its elected members and its supporters, Le Pen scored the best result in the party's history when he obtained an astonishing 16.9 per cent of the national vote in the first round of the presidential election, and no less than 17.8 per cent in the second round (Rydgren, 2004, p. 22; Goodliffe, 2012, p. 137). Several reasons accounted for this strong and surprising showing. On the one hand, the

left–right ‘cohabitation’ had accentuated a sentiment of confusion that allowed the FN to denounce acquaintances between the political camps (Crépon, 1999, p. 66). On the other hand, Chirac’s campaign also indirectly served the Front’s objectives, as the RPR leader breached ‘frontist’ themes, related mainly to insecurity but also immigration (de Lange, 2007, p. 421). In the 2000s, the FN continued to take anti-immigrant and authoritarian positions but did so under the guise of economics (Williams, 2006, p. 96). These topics allowed the party to retain the loyalty of roughly 10 per cent of the French electorate (Williams, 2006, p. 364).

However, by the end of the 2000s, it appeared as though the FN’s electoral slide had been arrested. In the 2007 contests, the party’s vote share declined considerably. In the presidential elections, Le Pen only received 10.75 per cent of the vote, and in the parliamentary elections of the same year the vote share of the party dropped to less than 5 per cent. This weak showing in the polls incited a significant turning point within the FN, as members had come to concede the shortcomings of the party’s positioning at the fringes of the political spectrum (Crépon, 2012, p. 70). Starting in 2006/2007, Marine Le Pen projected a ‘modernist’ position that distinguished her from her father and softened the image of the FN (Dézé, 2012, p. 139). In particular, she would abstain from provocative statements such as the reduction of the Holocaust to a detail of history, which sometimes characterized the aggressive rhetoric of Jean-Marie Le Pen (Crif, 2006). Under a strategy known as *dédiabolisation*, Marine Le Pen used a democratic discourse to expose nationalistic and anti-immigrant positions (Hewlett, 2012, p. 415). Facing Bruno Gollnisch, who incorporated the old image of the FN, this strategy catapulted her to the presidency of the FN (at the FN congress in Tours in January 2011, Marine Le Pen won the presidency with 67.5 per cent of the votes against 32.2 per cent in favor of Gollnisch (Dézé, 2012, p. 141; Kling, 2012, p. 119)).

Marine Le Pen’s strategy of *dédiabolisation* would not only prove successful internally but also in subsequent elections. She emerged again as a strong candidate in the lead-up to the 2012 presidential elections (Goodliffe, 2012, p. 137) and received 18.03 per cent of the vote (compared with 10.44 per cent for Jean-Marie Le Pen in 2007). Although she did not come in second, as her father had done in 2002, she received 896 000 more votes than did Jean-Marie Le Pen 10 years before (Hewlett, 2012, p. 414). In the 2012 parliamentary elections, the FN received a total of 13.77 per cent of the votes (compared with 4.29 per cent in 2007). In the two elections, Marine Le Pen’s campaign succeeded in appealing to the frustrations of French citizens who felt ignored by mainstream politicians. In addition to national identity and immigration, purchasing power was among the most common themes (Hewlett, 2012, p. 414). The party effectively persuaded voters that immigration was intimately linked to socioeconomic hardship (Hewlett, 2012, p. 404).

As of 2013, the Front’s message is a continuation of its signature themes of immigration and insecurity. Beyond these core themes, the FN has carefully reformulated its populist message to include leading themes such as Euro-globalization,



anti-Brussels and anti-Islamification (FN, 2013). These themes are advanced as part of its original solution: more national sovereignty (Coomarasamy, 2011). Much like her father, Marine Le Pen portrays herself and the FN as the very embodiment of France, as the sole representative of the French people.³ Furthermore, the Front continues to demonstrate antagonism toward the normative framework of the national and European political establishment (Davies, 1999, p. 18; Eatwell, 2000). Currently, the party has manpower of 60 000–70 000 members, who provide the backbone of the party and who, with their energy and dedication, have contributed to the party's recent successes (Checcaglini, 2012). In the empirical part of this study, I will introduce some of these members, their motivations and their trajectories, but before doing so I will situate the study within the literature dealing with the members of populist right-wing parties and present the methodology adopted for this research.

The Literature on the Members of the Radical Right in France and Europe

Despite the fact that radical right-wing parties cannot exist without dedicated members who are ready to campaign, participate in events and represent the party at elections, there are comparatively few studies that have examined their members and sympathizers (for example, Blee, 2005, 2007). Among the existing studies (for example, Klandermans and Mayer, 2006; Kimmel, 2007), we can differentiate between two types of analysis: (i) general studies, which frequently discuss the members of several radical right-wing groups, and whose goal it is to find common features of activists across Western Europe, and (ii) more specific studies that focus explicitly on the members of the FN.

The first set of studies, more general studies, either try to establish certain features of right-wing activists or attempt to typologize their goals and motivations. For example, Virchow (2004) and Kimmel (2007) characterize populist right-wing activists as individuals who have been socialized by family members into a populist rightist milieu, who are aggrieved by economic and social hardship, and who, in their conservative views, feel alienated by the current globalized society with its emphasis on multiculturalism. Spearheaded by the general social movement scholarship of Klandermans and co-authors (for example, Klandermans, 1986, 1997, 2004), another type of general studies distinguishes between types of right-wing extremists based on their motivations for engagement. For example, in their pioneer study, Klandermans and Mayer (2006) differentiate between ideologues and instrumentalists: (i) ideologues are individuals with entrenched values and beliefs, who subscribe to cultural monism, racism and a hierarchical organization of the society; (ii) instrumentalists are individuals with less strongly entrenched extremist credentials, who seek to achieve concrete policy changes or personal gains.

In a sort of follow-up study, Art (2011) pushes Klandermans' (1986, 1997, 2004) classification one step further and distinguishes between three types of activists – extremists, moderates and opportunists: (i) extremists, who are a very radical tide of activist who subscribe to biological racism, resuscitate Nazi discourses and condone the use of violence against their portrayed enemies (for example, immigrants and leftists); (ii) moderates, who are less radical activists who generally support the democratic order and whose defining characteristic is their adherence to ethno-pluralism, or the view that cohabitation of the native population with new groups, such as immigrants, leads to insurmountable societal problems; and (iii) opportunists, who not only have less coherent ideological views than moderates and extremists, but are also greatly interested in personal power, material benefits and public visibility.

While converging on some topics with the general literature, the specific literature on the FN is more detailed and tries to provide a thorough characterization of the party's members. In particular, Birenbaum (1992) and Bizeul (2003) present membership data highlighting some continuation and change in the party's membership. Although both authors concur that men are dominant in the party (for example, Birenbaum, 1992 illustrates that the FN is composed of 82 per cent men and only 18 per cent women), their respective studies hint at a diversification of the party's membership in the late 1990s and 2000s. For example, characterizing the FN's members in the 1980s, Birenbaum (1992, p. 294) highlights that 36 per cent of members classify themselves as independent workers and 40 per cent belong to the private sector (p. 294), whereas the working class is still underrepresented. Ten years later, in 2002, Bizeul (2003) shows that the number of working-class and unemployed individuals in the party had increased to 30 per cent and 38 per cent of the party membership, respectively (p. 65).

With regard to the members' political socialization, the existing FN-specific studies echo the general literature. For instance, both Bizeul (2003) and Crépon (2006) indicate that the political tradition of the FN tends to be passed through family lineage. According to these authors, around one-third of the members come from 'Gaullist' families and slightly more than one-fifth originate from families involved in the Tixier-Vignancour committees. With regard to the members' values and belief systems, the existing studies point toward an ethnocentric worldview of the members rather than biological racism. For example, according to Crépon (2006), it is the members' chief goal to preserve the French identity. To highlight this point, he cites Bruno Mégret: 'il n'existe pas dans l'histoire de l'humanité d'exemple de coexistence pacifique et durable entre communautés ethniques ou religieuses différentes' (Mégret, cited in Crépon, 2006, p. 65). Crépon (2006) further affirms that the members of the FN define being 'français' – French – as traditional and largely based on family heritage; immigrants, because they do not have the French family lineage, cannot be considered truly 'français' (p. 52).

In addition to their ethnocentric persona featuring resentment of other ethnicities, Bizeul (2003, p. 204) adds that FN members have two supplementary traits: (i) an



authoritarian personality and (ii) and a glorification of France's past. Finally, the handful of studies dedicated to the members of the FN also highlight the strong cohesion within the party. Lafront (2001, p. 177), for example, states that the members of the FN are subject to stigmatization and marginalized by French society in a negative way, which enables them to form a cohesive group on the fringes of society. The FN, from Bizeul's (2003) perspective, is a 'community of victims' (p. 19) – outcasts who find refuge within the party and consequently possess a strong sense of solidarity among themselves. Bizeul (2003, p. 37) further argues that French people join the FN because they desire to belong to a social group; they find the FN accessible and easy to integrate in an increasingly closed society.

In the empirical part of the analysis that ensues, I am interested in several questions: (i) To what degree is the characterization of FN members that prior research advances still correct, after Marine Le Pen took power and the membership of the FN strongly increased to around 70 000 members in 2013? (ii) Can we press FN members in certain schemes (for example, do the FN members fit the typology of extremists, moderates and opportunists)? (iii) some more questions not tackled by previous research. For example, I aim to illustrate the personal values (in contrast to political values) and the trajectory of party members. I will answer these research questions through interview research. In the next section, I will briefly present this research methodology.

Methodology

For this project, I went straight to the source of extreme right-wing support, namely, the members themselves (Blee and Tayler, 2002). Through interview research (that is, semi-structured interviews) with sympathizers and members of the FN, I sought to understand the activists' engagement patterns and individual trajectories (Aberbach *et al*, 1975; Davies, 2001, p. 5). The focus on the individual activist allowed me to uncover the activists' socialization, their motivation for engagement, and their values and beliefs. Throughout the interviews, I tried to generate theoretically explicit narratives that carefully traced and compared the sequence of events that unfolds in an activist's career as a member of the FN (Aminzade, 1993, p. 108). Under normal circumstances, I started the interview by asking questions about the person's political socialization and politically and socially formative events that shaped the individual's value and belief system, and, as the interview proceeded, I focused on individuals' motivations for involvement and their trajectory in the organization. I came to each interview with an interview guide, but did not force the interviewee into this predetermined format. Rather, I allowed the respondent to co-navigate the course of our conversation. Apart from greater flexibility, this latter point gave the interviewee freedom to explain his/her story in a way he/she deemed most appropriate (Aberbach and Rockman, 2002). The median interview lasted for over an hour, with a peak of more than 3 h.

I conducted a total of 44 interviews between January and June 2013. All of the interviewees were activists of the FN; none of them was employed by the party. Among the interviewees were eight departmental secretaries, five regional or municipal councilors and four members of the FN youth wing the Front national pour de la jeunesse. About half of the interviewees had some kind of function within the movement (for example, they served on the regional board or served as the party's local representative). The other half were simple activists with no official position. I recruited these interviewees with the help of the departmental secretaries, who, in addition to agreeing to talk to me, often helped me recruit other respondents. With their help, I could also diversify the interview sample.⁴ I could talk to men and women, young and older members (the age range of my sample is 19–69 years), strongly engaged and weakly engaged individuals (for example, activists who only pay their membership dues and individuals who spend more than 30 h per week for the FN), members who have joined recently and individuals who have been members for over 25 years, and activists from various parts of France (for example, regions where the FN is very strong such as Rhône Alps and regions where the FN is weak such as Pays de la Loire).

While conducting these interviews, I had to tackle two caveats. First, a study based on in-depth interview research can never be fully representative. Aware of this potential problem, I tried to both increase the number of observations and diversify my sample. Not only did I conduct more interviews than many researchers have previously (for example, Adler and Adler, 1987; Guest *et al*, 2006) but, more importantly, I also selected the interviewees for comparison between the respondents (Brannen and Nilsen, 2011). For example, I talked to various groups of members such as former Algerian colonizers, former UDF/UMP members, traditional Catholics and previously politically uninvolved citizens. Among these groups, I found remarkable consistencies in the members' values, motivations and trajectories. Certainly, the differences in members' political socialization, their personal backgrounds and the intensity with which they advanced their views were considerable, but the themes and topics they advanced were remarkably similar.

Second, there is the possibility that the FN activists communicated a soft version of their thoughts and beliefs to me and that they hid some of their more radical points of view. While it is of course impossible to exclude this risk, there were several indications that attest to the participants' honesty concerning the communication of their beliefs and values. First, the FN members are strongly convinced that their worldview and policy descriptions are the 'truth' and are eager to diffuse their message. Second, many interviewees acted very emotionally during the interview; they implicitly or explicitly communicated their indignation, anger and frustrations about the political establishment, immigrants or the European Union. Third, by not being part of French academia, which some of the interviewees characterize as corrupt, I relatively easily gained the support of the departmental secretaries or local coordinators. In most cases they complimented my approach and appreciated that



somebody 'neutral' from a foreign country had come to France to interview them. Finally, more than 60 per cent of the interviewees had never done an interview in their life. Many of these activists do not know how the FN is characterized in academia and what others have written about them and their party. They have also never had public relations training. As a result, I deem it unlikely that the FN members have hidden a 'darker' side.

Who are the Members of the FN?

The activists' socialization into a radical right-wing milieu

The most striking feature of the members of the FN is their diversity. The FN is no longer an old boys club, a party that exclusively represents the petit bourgeoisie or a party that merely regroups individuals with a radical right-wing background (Birenbaum, 1992). In fact, the party's membership has become multi-dimensional when it comes to social class, educational background and political socialization. For example, I talked to individuals of all educational levels ranging from middle school to a doctorate. Professionally, my interview partners are lawyers, businesspeople, students, retirees, police officers, real estate agents, salespeople, nurses and doctors. Pertaining to the members' political socialization, the background of FN members is much more complex than the literature (Klandermans and Mayer, 2006; Kimmel, 2007) would assume. Certainly there are individuals who have been socialized by a rightist family milieu. Marian is indicative of this group, raised by nationalist parents. Not only did he embrace a very rightist ideology early on, but he was also encouraged by his father to partake in the street fights of the 1960s, which opposed the extreme left and the extreme right on the streets of Paris (Interview 6).⁵ Others in this group of individuals come from a very traditional Catholic milieu or are descendants of former Algerian colonizers. Monica represents this last group. She states:

I come from a family that colonized Algeria. I know what has been accomplished in this country by my parents, grandparents and great grandparents. How they lived and what they did there has nothing to do with the dehumanizing image which the media and our education system has protracted upon them. Only 1 per cent of the 270 000 European colonizers had large quantities of land. Hollande's last trip to Algeria has reinforced this image that the colonizers were criminals. He said that we have to leave the colonization period behind us, as if the word colonization would imply some cruelty that we have committed. What bothers me the most is that, in the name of these incorrect accusations that my ancestors have never committed, foreigners can behave in the most atrocious ways in our streets and we will not do anything. (Interview 8)

However, individuals like Marian, Simon and Monica only make up around 25 per cent of the activists. Others activists are disgruntled supporters of the moderate right. They left the RPR, UDF or later UMP either because of some political happening or a general state of dissatisfaction with the party. For example, four older individuals affirmed that they left the RPR after they received a letter from Jacques Chirac asking them to support Francois Mitterrand instead of Giscard d'Estaing in the run-off of the 1981 presidential election. Others felt betrayed by Nicolas Sarkozy. For example, Serge states, 'I joined the FN in reaction to Sarkozy, whose policy regarding Europe did not sit well with me. Despite the fact that the European treaty was rejected by the people in 2005, he had the same treaty now called Lisbon treaty ratified in parliament' (Interview 15). Moreover, some disgruntled supporters have switched allegiance because of some general dissatisfaction with the way politics has been conducted in the ranks of the moderate right. Representative of this cohort, Jessica affirms:

Having always believed in individual initiative and individual freedoms, I became an active member of the RPR at the age of 25. However, I soon found out that there is hypocrisy in the ranks of the moderate right. Elected officials think about themselves before they think about others. One day, I was folding flyers for our candidate and overheard him saying: Do you see how these idiots work? I told myself you need these idiots to win an election. Now you see how you can do without me. I left the party and looked for another venue. The only other party that I thought would listen to my problems was the FN. (Interview 27)

A third group of members have become close to the FN or joined because of their political socialization in school or university. Many studies (for example, Jennings and Niemi, 1981; McAdam, 1988) have found that for leftist activists somebody's high school and college years constitute a period of cognitive availability where individuals develop their political beliefs, and that is also true for some of the FN activists. For example, Maurice started to study law at the Paris Assas University, got socialised into a right-wing student milieu and joined the right-wing student organization le GUD (Interview 4). In contrast, Jean showed interest in Jean-Marie Le Pen and the FN, because of its apparent diabolization in the educational sector. He states:

As a high-school student I realized that most of the Profs were very left-leaning. If my Profs talked about the right or the far right, they talked about it in a descending way. Patriots and especially the FN were treated like fascists. I wanted to know if this was really true and informed myself right at the FN. What I found was that the people there were no fascists but had the most correct suggestions to move France forward. (Interview 31)

A fourth group of activists became politically socialized because of exposure to some societal features in France. For example, Patrick, a former police officer who has worked on the outskirts of Strasbourg, affirms, 'I saw every day what a big mess the



immigrants create. You are constantly called into the immigrant districts because of burglaries, burning cars, drug dealership and physical violence. The 'normal' parties do not do anything and I have slowly found out that the only party who tackles this problem is the FN' (Interview 33). Another member, Charlene, who owns a small business outside of Paris, has become interested in the FN because she works in an environment of insecurity. She feels exhausted because her shop has been vandalized several times. In addition, she sees foreigners dealing drugs right outside on a regular basis. She notes, 'I have to show my anger against this fanaticism and the only party who listens to me is the FN' (Interview 9).

While I have outlined four socialization mechanisms to explain why individuals adopt populist right-wing beliefs, these mechanisms are far from being inclusive. Rather, there are more trajectories. For example, some members' way of thinking has just become more right-wing over the years or decades (Interview 15). Others have become disgruntled with what they perceive as clientelism and corruption within the mainstream political parties the PS and the UMP, which the FN members derogatively label 'UMPS'. Representative of these individuals who hope that the FN or Marine Le Pen will conduct a more honest policy, Jean-Luc says:

For a long time, I had a very bad image of politics, I saw parties as clientelistic networks where people give and receive favours. I also did not take Jean-Marie Le Pen seriously. However Marine impresses me, in addition to being a good speaker, she uses lots of factual evidence to back up her points.

Finally, there are even members with a communist or socialist background in the FN, who switched allegiance because of some happening or event. Maurice is one of these activists. He describes his 'switching' to rightist ideas as follows:

My father was a socialist, who was friends with the socialist Prime Minister Pierre Bérégovoy. Thanks to him, I have always been attached to the social aspect of politics. However, when, during my studies, I saw the destroyed walls and the vandalism at the philosophical faculty in Lyon, which was conducted by left wing anarchists in the 1970s, I could not identify with leftist currents, any more. I started to do some reading and became close to the nationalist rightist current 'la nouvelle droite'. (Interview 26)

However, whereas the FN members are highly diverse when it comes to their family background, political socialization and standing in society, they are quite homogenous when it comes to their personal and political values.

The FN members' political values

To use Art's (2011) terminology of extremists, moderates and opportunists, nearly all the FN activists I talked to fall into the category of moderates. For instance, they have

no opportunistic tendencies and are not in the FN to build a political career (which is impossible in a party that has almost no national representation and compared to its vote share very little local and regional representation). On the other hand, they are no extremists either, if we use Art's terminology. The members do not use revisionist or neo-Nazi discourse and aim to achieve the transformation of French society through peaceful means. However, classifying them as moderate extremists does not mean that their views are moderate in the typical sense. While they accept the institutions of the Fifth Republic, albeit with a populist twist, the activists have some strong beliefs, some of which go against democratic values.⁶

Supporting Crépon (2006, 2012), my interview data clearly highlights that the FN members adhere to ethno-centrism; they have a glorified picture of their nation. They see their nation as the center of gravity. According to them, France has been historically formed by a set of customs, values and beliefs. From this stipulation, they derive the idea that the nation-state is reserved for a certain type of people: citizens who share the same history, culture and religion. The FN activists see it as their mission to protect their motherland; they want to shelter it as if they were protecting a human body from outside viruses. These 'viruses' are: (i) immigration (for example, 'we are invaded; in the supermarkets, hospital and restaurants you see more Africans than French nationals' (Interview 8))⁷; (ii) Islam (for example, 'the problem of Islam is that this religion has not changed over the centuries, it has remained as aggressive as during the time of Mohammed' (Interview 29)); (iii) Europeanization (for example, 'France will disappear demographically and politically through its integration into the European Union' (Interview 20)); and (iv) economic liberalism and globalization (for example, 'we are no longer governed by politics but the international financial institutions' (Interview 23)).

Faced with this perceived imminent danger, which stems from immigration, Islamization, Europeanization and liberalization, it then comes naturally to the FN activists that 'French nationals' must be protected and given preference in the political and social realm. For Stéphan, the national priority in the attribution of jobs, housing and social aid is a straightforward truth (Interview 37). Many of the interviewees strongly favor a change in the attribution of the French nationality as well. They concur that the French nationality should be given by blood, that is, only to French citizens who have at least one French parent, and not by soil, that is, if you are born in France, you are automatically granted French citizenship status. Some FN members including Simon even want to retrospectively check the attribution of the French nationality (Interview 35). Finally, FN activists advocate France's retreat from the European Union and Schengen, and propagate protectionist policies and the reindustrialization of France.

Even more importantly, the FN activists not only see that the current political landscape confirms the salience of these issues, they are also proud that the leaders of the FN have 'correctly' predicted that Europeanization, immigration and Islamization have posed insurmountable problems to the French state. In the respondents' view,



this gives the FN legitimacy and helps the party win the battle of ideas in society. The interviewees also see themselves as the alternative; they not only perceive that the establishment refuses to take on the issues of immigration, Europeanization and Islamization, they also think that the politicians are corrupt. Luis, who once ran for mayor as an independent candidate in a middle-sized town in the East of France, gave me an example of this corruption. He told me that the socialist mayor asked him to drop out of the race and as compensation offered either 2000 franc or the position of director of the tourist office (Interview 38).

Similarly, the FN members maintain that in addition to being corrupt, the 'established' forces and elites in France are part of a globalized, Europeanized network, and as such they willingly perpetuate the decadence of France's culture, economy and society. According to Mathias, the French elites cannot be trusted and betray French citizens (Interview 44). This rejection of the elite and establishment includes all sectors as the following three quotes highlight. Referring to the political leadership, Paul states:

In all they do Sarkozy and Hollande are co-pilotes. Either of the two continues the same globalization and Europeanization policies. Neither of them turns right or left from this preconceived policy. The 'UMPS' will drive France right against a wall. It is time that the FN takes the steering wheel, otherwise the country will crash. The FN is the only force, who can change the directions of events. (Interview 18)

Concerning the media, Stephanie affirms:

The journalists in our country are not free; they are guided by the establishment and they provide incorrect information about current events to our citizens. There is an enormous propaganda for government projects. However, when Marine gives an interview, journalists put words in her mouths and then use these words against us. Through the media people are brainwashed: our program is not racist, our speeches are not racist and our actions are not racist either. However, people think that we are racist. (Interview 2)

Finally, and in relation to the education system, Caroline argues (while showing me her 11-year-old daughter's textbook):

Our national education system is a shame. Look at this textbook which has been done in conjunction with SOS racism. There are chapters entitled 'fight racism' or 'embrace foreign cultures'. All these affirmations there are shocking. The sheer headline fight racism implies that there is racism in France. In addition, our children are animated to accept a multi-cultural world, a world where we should embrace foreign lifestyles, foreign food, and diverse religions, but nobody talks about the French culture, the fact that our lifestyle that has grown over hundreds of years is declining. Even worse, national



education distorts history. Students can get their high school diploma without knowing, who Luis XIV or Napoleon was. However, they learn about French Africa but only from a negative lens. The connotation with which the word French Africa is used now is so bad that if you use the word it is nearly an insult. If this education continues to mislead our children as it does currently, our children will soon learn that we are responsible for the extinction of the dinosaurs. (Interview 16)

As a final political asset, many FN members believe in strong and ‘charismatic’ leadership, leadership that stands above politics and that connects the people with the leader. They despise politicians of the main class as insignificant – ‘Hollande, Ayrault, Chirac and Sarkozy are dwarfs’ (Interview 1) – but see their leaders Jean-Marie Le Pen and Marine Le Pen as the embodiment of the ‘perfect politician’. For instance, Claude affirms that ‘in order to govern France you need somebody charismatic, convincing and independent, who works for the good of the country and not for their own gains and financial interests’ (Interviewee 10). Furthermore, Jean-Marie Le Pen, called Jean-Marie by more than 85 per cent of the respondents, is considered a ‘visionary’, ‘a man whose actions are where his mouth is’ and ‘a man with great convictions’. Two activists even affirm that he has been like a ‘grandfather’ who has built and sustained them (Interviews 6 and 7). The following excerpt from the interview with Richard further summarizes the FN members’ high opinion of their leader:

Jean-Marie Le Pen is a visionary. All his analyses have proven right. He has been right about outsourcing, unemployment, the European questions, insecurity and the massive and non-regulated immigration. He also puts his actions where his mouth is. As a young parliamentarian he left his seat in the National Assembly to serve in the French army in Algeria. Who of our politicians would do something like this today? (Interview 22)

Admiration among the members for Jean-Marie Le Pen’s daughter Marine (also called by her first name) is equally strong. Some members such as Catharine are honored to fight on her side (Interview 34). For others such as Claude she incorporates ‘inspiration, political knowledge and leadership’ (Interview 10). One member, Stéphan, even sees prophetic qualities in Marine Le Pen. For him, she simply incorporates the truth, a truth he wants to follow (Interview 37).

The FN members’ personal values

The FN members’ personal values are closely linked to their political views, but with interesting nuances. In general, the activists strongly support the founding values of the French Republic, Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, but with their own interpretation. With regard to the first value, liberty, some of the respondents add that



liberty can only be practiced if certain rules and regulations are followed. Concerning equality, they maintain that they are in favor of equality before the law, but not the equality of life. According to Jean:

Luckily there are differences between individuals. Men and women are not the same and there are individuals with different capabilities, intellects and interests. We should cultivate these differences and not try to make everything the same. (Interview 31)

For the FN members fraternity means that you should love your fellow French citizens more than you love people from different backgrounds. In Paul's words, 'You should be brothers with those who deserve it. Today, there are many individuals living in France who do not deserve to be my brothers' (Interview 3). Many of the interviewees add three values that were propagated during the Vichy regime, namely, family, work and the church. For several interviewees, the family is the social construct that links the individual to the nation, the nucleus of a society and the basis of all human interactions (Interviews 5, 10). The second feature, work, is the mechanism through which a society advances (Interview 7). For the third feature religion, members see Christian values as a bastion against the mediocrity and decadence of western society. Around 20 per cent of the interviewees are also strongly engaged in their parish and send their children to Catholic schools.

Very importantly, the interviewees further maintain that the moderate right no longer upholds these traditional values. For example, Alexander tells me that the UMP's resistance against *le mariage pour tous* is hypocritical and unfounded. He further adds that while in power the UMP allowed more stem cell research and introduced civil unions for homosexual couples. According to him, this resistance against homosexual marriage is a political joke; in his view, this applies even more so if we consider that without the three UMP votes the law would not have passed in *Le Sénat* (Interview 30). The FN members' traditional beliefs are complemented by two more features: (i) a wish to see more authoritarian values (but not an authoritarian society) recur and (ii) a desire to build a strong state (see also Bizeul, 2003).

The FN members adhere to some 'altruistic' values. For example, many of the members mention honesty as the most important quality in politics, a quality that in their view the FN embodies. Claude expresses this conviction in the following way: 'There is a truth in politics and we represent it. We tell the French people what is wrong with our country' (Interview 43). The FN members also wish to do something for their fellow citizens. In René's simple words, 'Politics signifies to me that I take care of the people around me and that I honour my motherland' (Interview 13). Even more significantly, for Sophie, joining the FN is an act of consciousness (Interview 24). Sometimes the activists feel so strongly that they are on the right side of the political spectrum that they not only treat individuals in other parties with disrespect, but also those 'citizens' who think and act like

themselves but do not have the courage to join the FN. Richard summarizes this thought as follows:

My environment amuses me. Some of the people I know respect me because I am in the Front and they think that I am courageous. However, these people are small, they have no convictions, and they do not want to do anything. I do not have a lot of respect for them, because they do not have the courage to join us. (Interview 22)

The FN members' attachment to the FN and their motivations

Supporting prior research (for example, Birenbaum, 1992; Lafront, 2001), I find that the FN represents a counter-society to the activists, a society that is internally cohesive but rejected externally. For example, despite Marine Le Pen's strategy of diabolization, around 70 per cent of members I talked to affirm that they still face societal or professional disadvantages as a result of their membership in the FN. These acts of stigmatization range from verbal insults to acts of discrimination at work to physical attacks. As an example of a verbal insult, Marianne tells me that when she drops off her children at school some of her son's classmates frequently yell at her, 'Fascist, how many Arabs did you kill today?' (Interview 34). With regard to professional discrimination, Jérôme affirms that 'publicly declaring your affiliation with the FN signifies the immediate stop of your political career' (Interview 19).

Concerning physical violence, several FN members claim to have been physically attacked while putting up posters (Interviews 6 and 26). In addition, it is nearly a constant that members have lost friends and acquaintances, have seen trash thrown in their backyard or their children insulted by classmates. As a result of this still latent societal rejection, 10 of the interviewees affirm that they do not make their FN membership public, and some of them even work 'in the dark' to support the FN. For example, Jérôme maintains one of the largest FN Facebook pages, but does so anonymously and with a fake personal profile. Like many others, he would also never run in an election as an FN candidate.

While many members find the still existing diabolization unjust and initiated by the political establishment, some members are proud of their status of 'real activists'. According to Stéphan, 'it is not an easy way to be engaged in the FN; you are not engaged in the Socialist Party and you are not engaged to advance your political career' (Interview 37). Nevertheless, nearly all FN members enjoy not only their interaction with other activists, but also the accommodating and open climate inside the organization.⁸ It seems that FN members, by joining the party, no longer feel marginalized and may even come to feel recognized, popular and valued. The FN also offers them an environment in which to express their views, which turns the organization into a very appealing outlet. In fact, it was not uncommon for the



interviewees to refer to the FN as ‘a second family’, a kind of counter-society where people interact with one another beyond politics; they make friends and acquaintances and sometimes even find their life partner there (Interview 20).

Regardless of their degree of activism, no member I talked to could imagine leaving the party, except if the leaders were to betray the party’s ideals and beliefs. In fact, many ‘members are proud of representing the FN’ (Interview 27). They feel compelled to continue their fight for a different France. For instance, Arno argues that ‘if I would not do this, I could not look in the mirror in the mornings’. Similarly, Clemens states that, as a Catholic nationalist, it is his duty to fight for his convictions (Interview 28). Some even express that only death could stop them from being engaged (Interviews 27 and 39). Nearly all activists also affirm that their drive to do something is high, regardless of the electoral results. For example, Marianne states, ‘If we win or not, I always want to continue. We are not in the FN to have a mandate but to spread our ideas’ (Interview 34). Paul adds that ‘those who give up are those who have come for personal reasons; real activists keep on fighting whatever happens’ (Interview 20).

Trajectory

Apart from those members who only pay their membership dues, newcomers normally integrate into a departmental federation and, if one exists, a local group. They start off as real ‘activists’ distributing flyers, putting up posters and participating in meetings. Those who want can then very quickly become candidates for local, regional and cantonal elections, where, as a result of the still existing diabolization and some members’ hesitation to run for office, there is often some need for candidates. In general, the speed with which the activists advance within their federation depends mainly on the departmental secretary, who nominates the members for internal positions. This implies that if individuals show good activist credentials they can advance quite fast. If members want to advance their activist career beyond the departmental federation, they must be nominated by the national leadership. The national leadership also nominates the departmental secretary.

Conclusion

So who are the members of the FN? While diverse on the social, educational and professional front, as well as in their socialization, the FN members are united in their values, goals and motivations. To describe this feature, Paul references Asterix and Obelix, stating:

Inside the FN we are bunch of different people similar to the Gallic people in the cartoon Asterix and Obelix. Yet, we have some common convictions and

we are ready to fight for these convictions. These common convictions resume around the necessity to protect the nation state. We might disagree about many things inside the FN, but once our France is attacked we will defend it with the same force as the Gallic tribes defended their country against the Roman invasions. (Interview 20)

In this sense, the FN members not only see their party as the last bastion that defends their interests, but they also see themselves as the ‘alternative’, an alternative that propagates ‘honesty’, more authoritative values and charismatic leadership. Using Art’s (2011) terminology, they are activists of the ‘moderate’ type.

A further feature shared by the activists within the FN is their high degree of motivation. This motivation displays itself in the unwavering commitment to the FN expressed by almost everybody I talked to. This motivation also shows in the many hours the activists spend in and for the party, without receiving any compensation (for example, in some cases up to 6–7 h per day). In addition, the interviewees enjoy being in the FN; they appreciate their fellow members and take pleasure in the fact that they can express their opinions openly and without discrimination. In addition, the interviewees also indicate that there are very few reasons (for example, the FN leadership betraying the FN’s goals and ideals) to assume that this commitment will change in the future.

The FN has consolidated its third-place position among French political parties and has attracted more than 5 million votes in recent elections. Certainly structural conditions (for example, an economic, political and identity crisis) and the party leadership (for example, the new energy Marine Le Pen portrays) have their fair share in this success. However, to win elections one needs the local implantations; one needs activists who propagate the message, convince others and run the party’s daily business. In this research, I have presented some of these activists, and their motivations, values and trajectories. In this sense, I hope that this study not only contributes to a better understanding of the backbone of the FN, but also helps to explain this populist right-wing party more holistically.

The Interviews:

Interview 1 conducted on 7 January 2013 in La Défense.

Interview 2 conducted on 7 January 2013 in La Défense.

Interview 3 conducted on 8 January 2013 in Clichy.

Interview 4 conducted on 9 January 2013 in Paris.

Interview 5 conducted on 15 January 2013 in Paris.

Interview 6 conducted on 17 January 2013 in Sevres.

Interview 7 conducted on 17 January 2013 in Sevres.

Interview 8 conducted on 18 January 2013 in Asnières sur Seine.

Interview 9 conducted on 21 January 2013 in Paris.

Interview 10 conducted on 24 January 2013 in Paris.



Interview 11 conducted on 27 January 2013 in Puteaux.
 Interview 12 conducted on 27 January 2013 in Puteaux.
 Interview 13 conducted on 28 January 2013 in Paris.
 Interview 14 conducted on 29 January 2013 in Paris.
 Interview 15 conducted on 31 January 2013 in Paris.
 Interview 16 conducted on 2 February 2013 in Boulogne.
 Interview 17 conducted on 2 February 2013 in Boulogne.
 Interview 18 conducted on 4 February 2013 in Paris.
 Interview 19 conducted on 15 February 2013 in Paris.
 Interview 20 conducted on 3 March 2013 in Paris.
 Interview 21 conducted on 3 March 2013 in Paris.
 Interview 22 conducted on 15 March 2013 in Paris.
 Interview 23 conducted on 29 March 2013 in Paris.
 Interview 24 conducted on 18 April 2013 in Tours.
 Interview 25 conducted on 27 April 2013 in Nancy.
 Interview 26 conducted on 27 April 2013 in Nancy.
 Interview 27 conducted on 7 May 2013 in Grenoble.
 Interview 28 conducted on 7 May 2013 in Grenoble.
 Interview 29 conducted on 7 May 2013 in Grenoble.
 Interview 30 conducted on 7 May 2013 in Grenoble.
 Interview 31 conducted on 15 May 2013 in Tours.
 Interview 32 conducted on 15 May 2013 in Tours.
 Interview 33 conducted on 15 May 2013 in Tours.
 Interview 34 conducted on 21 May 2013 in St Etienne.
 Interview 35 conducted on 24 May 2013 in Nantes.
 Interview 36 conducted on 24 May 2013 in Nantes.
 Interview 37 conducted on 25 May 2013 in Nantes.
 Interview 38 conducted on 7 June 2013 in Chalons.
 Interview 39 conducted on 7 June 2013 in Chalons.
 Interview 40 conducted on 7 June 2013 in Chalons.
 Interview 41 conducted on 7 June 2013 in Chalons.
 Interview 42 conducted on 7 June 2013 in Chalons.
 Interview 43 conducted on 7 June 2013 in Chalons.
 Interview 44 conducted on 7 June 2013 in Chalons.

Notes

- 1 The Front National took political power in Marignane, Toulon and Orange (Perrineau, 1997, p. 82).
- 2 In a partial election in February, Catherine Mégret also won 52.5 per cent of the vote to become mayor of Vitrolles (Williams, 2006, p. 88).
- 3 For instance, she continues to campaign with slogans such as 'Marine Le Pen: The Voice of the People, The Spirit of France' (FN, 2013).

- 4 I also asked the departmental secretaries about the composition of local FN members to gain some more general information on the members of this populist party.
- 5 Simon is another example of family socialization. He states, 'my engagement has a long family tradition; since the war in Vendée in the 1790s, my ancestors have fought on the side of reactionary forces. Out of family loyalty I continue this fight' (Interview 35).
- 6 According to Stéphan, 'the institutions of the Fifth Republic suit us. The president can build a strong relationship with the people, he can become like a king of the people, a real leader' (Interview 37).
- 7 Lucie, a middle-aged member of the FN, expresses this anti-immigrant sentiment even more vigorously. 'We have an overpopulation of immigrants. There are too many foreigners that come and impose their culture and their way of living in France. Colored people, who come from who knows where, aggress us every minute. You cannot walk through the street quietly any more' (Interview 42).
- 8 This feature is quite astonishing given that the FN has a very hierarchical structure, which is modeled after communist parties.

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