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Explaining the Rise of the Front National to Electoral Prominence: Multi-Faceted or Contradictory Models?

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Introduction: Contradictory accounts of the Front National's electoral potential

Studies of the Front National (FN) form an enormous body of literature, spreading across varied disciplines, languages (since it is by no means limited to francophone contributions) and methods. It is hardly a unified field since conclusions vary a great deal. Despite this unchallenged interest in the radical right, no agreement is found among scholars on how serious the threat of electoral FN victory is for other parties. For Auberger and Dubois (2005), the FN is a mere 'electoral nuisance' (381), while Bonnetain (2004) claims that 'the *Front National* has emerged as a strong challenger in the presidential race' (420). This lack of a common view may be explained by the shortcomings of empirical research itself. In their review of the literature on right-wing extremism, De Lange and Mudde (2005) point to the shortcomings of country case analyses. There is a danger of constantly reanalyzing the better known case studies, among which is the FN, while leaving more obscure cases unexplored. This bias entails a strong risk of tautology when authors try to generalize their findings to other European radical-right parties (RRPs). Whether the FN is considered to be the result of idiosyncratic French dynamics or part of a radical-right European tidal wave, its electoral future remains very much in dispute, not only in academic circles but also in the media, as the coverage of Marine Le Pen's campaign for the 2012 presidential elections so clearly illustrates.

Multi-explanation models

The absence of a shared evaluation of the electoral potential of the FN may derive from diverging theoretical models mobilized by various studies. Many analyses fail to display a fully fledged causal model to support their accounts of radical-right parties' electoral success, including that of the FN. This lack does not derive from an absence

of background theory, but instead points to a wealth of different and sometimes competing theories mobilized in a single study. For instance, Falter (1999), looking for explanations of the RRP vote in the Federal Republic of Germany, includes such factors as the impact of the openness of political systems and the importance of a charismatic leader. He also lists the sociological characteristics of voters, such as gender, women being less likely to vote for RRPs, as well as age, since these parties appeal mostly to youth and older people. These accounts fall into the trap described by De Lange and Mudde (2005): authors usually provide long lists of factors (socio-economic, political, media, etc.) without ranking them. Veugelers (2005) summarizes the factors often cited for their impact on FN electoral success:

> Explanations for the resurgence of far-right parties in Europe since the 1970s tend to focus on: variation in the nature of electoral systems; the leadership, resources, and organizational unity of far-right parties; social insecurity caused by rising unemployment, economic liberalization, and shrinking welfare-state protections; the wish, within a segment of the electorate, to punish politicians and parties tainted by scandal and corruption. (409)

All these elements, he argues, are too often mobilized without taking their historical roots into account.

Besides the lack of a clear explanatory model, which greatly diminishes their predictive capacity, the multi-explanation theories fall short of agreeing on a common list of causes. Such is the case when it come to accounting for the FN's breakthrough in the 1984 European elections. Elements of the national Political Opportunity Structure (POS), such as proportional representation, are often cited, to which authors like Bréchon and Mitra (1992) add the specificity of European elections and their 'second-order elections' status. However, they also include other aspects in their model, such as the rhetoric excellence of Jean-Marie Le Pen or the media attention he received. Conversely, Birenbaum (1987), in his account of the take-off of the FN between 1984 and 1986, focuses on a variety of domestic factors: the conjunction between a long-term economic crisis and immigration, the victory of François Mitterrand and the government participation of Communist ministers (4). These last two examples are studies which make an otherwise very convincing case in favour of a single factor explaining the FN success – rising xenophobia for Bréchon and Mitra and the clever strategy of the party, between ideology and pragmatism, for Birenbaum – but they seem to feel obliged to list a large number of other factors whose impact remains unexplained.

Demand-side models

The defining social characteristics of the FN electorate have been the topic of many studies, and Evans (2005) identified the convergence of the sociological profiles of RRP voters, as the parties' constituencies gradually became more proletarian. Grunberg and Schweisguth (2003: 332) point to the impact of secularism, since the FN attracts a higher proportion of members of the working class, who in France are statistically less religious than other electorates. The impact of other religious factors has been confirmed in comparative research on RRPs; Minkenberg (2003: 165) argues that they scored higher in Catholic countries than in Protestant ones, where radical-right social movements might be stronger. Some elements remain disputed: most studies point to the lower educational level of RRP voters, yet Evans surprisingly argues that 'in the 1980s, the French FN electorate was one of the most educated among French parties' (81). Polls carried out during the 2012 presidential campaign confirmed that working-class and active voters were more likely to express sympathy with the FN than would retired voters (Vivavoice poll, quoted in La Dépêche, 9 January 2012).

Models explaining the far-right vote with socio-economic models reached their peak with the success of the so-called modernization's losers thesis. A term fruitfully coined by Hans-Georg Betz (see, among others, 1993 and 1994), it tied the impact of unemployment and progressive marginalization of the working class in post-industrial states to its increasing rejection of older political parties (Betz 1993). In his application of this model to radical-right voting in Germany during the late 1960s, Falter notes the impact of a climate characterized by economic and social crisis which might render right-wing populism more appealing to a poorer population experiencing precarious circumstances (1999). Yet, some authors consider such models to be outdated (Van Der Brug et al. 2005) and no longer sustained by empirical evidence. Bonnetain (2004) examines how voters potentially concerned by issues mentioned in the FN platform – among them the appeal of socio-economic measures such as tax cuts to voters particularly afflicted by tax burdens, or of law-and-order measures to those most likely to be victims of crime – might be prone to vote for a radical-right party. He concludes that socio-economic factors, such as unemployment, have a significant impact on the FN vote.

Indeed, attempts to measure the impact of 'real-life' indicators pertaining to the environment for voting behaviour have shown mixed results. Among them, environmental factors related to two topics rated high on the FN's agenda – crime and immigration – do not appear to impact directly on voting behaviour. For Bonnetain (2004), indicators such as the actual presence of many immigrants or local crime rates do not seem to influence the decision to vote for the radical right in any significant way. Bréchon and Mitra (1992: 68) note that although statistical correlation between the FN vote and the percentage of immigrants is valid at the *département* (French territorial administrative division) level, it is not the case in local elections. Yet this does not prevent a general rise in anti-immigrant sentiment, as shown by poll data: 'The electors of the *Front National* appear much more xenophobic than the average voters' (70). These results lead them to conclude that two kinds of FN voters should be distinguished: the ideological hardcore supporting conservative or reactionary authoritarianism, and protest voters reacting to immigration issues.

This remark leads many authors to focus on voter's representations rather than on their material situations, and to attempt to reconstruct the path from subjective perceptions to ideology. For Minkenberg and Perrineau (2007: 32–42), radical-right voters see themselves as 'modernization's losers' in subjective rather than objective terms, and share a strong level of anti-immigrant feeling – a result confirming Veugelers' emphasis on the importance of racial prejudice in predicting far-right voting (2005: 424). Two original contributions are particularly useful in order to conceptualize

this articulation between self-perception and ideological orientation. In her study of the psycho-sociological factors impacting on FN adhesion, Birgitta Orfali (1990) focuses on the psychological rewards associated with joining the FN. The party's tightly connected community will be especially appealing to people suffering from social marginalization that, regardless, form a minority of sympathizers. Beyond these incentives tied to radical-right subcultures, she states that the party's arguments may appeal to specific psychological profiles: law-and-order arguments appeal to a certain category of male members ('order men') as opposed to the antisemitic arguments preferred by Catholic, female and rather subdued members ('*assujettis*'). This direction leads to a renewed interest in the psychological appeal of authoritarian politics initially theorized by Adorno et al. (1993), which for Kitschelt (1995) forms a key part of the policy preferences of radical-right voters when teamed with right-wing economic liberalism. For Veugelers (1997), this appeal is inherent to a fraction of the electorate and opportunities may arise for the radical right if other parties are unable to satisfy the wishes of authoritarian voters – and one may add, following Spektorowski (2000), of anti-egalitarian voters as well.

Beyond psychological factors, the appeal of authoritarian politics and a dislike of foreigners therefore appear to be ideologically connected for FN voters: noting that the main emphasis of the FN is ideological, with 'xenophobia and punitiveness [being] the core of FN voter's ideology' (ibid.: 337), Grunberg and Schweisguth (2003) conclude that 'the FN electorate is highly structured from an ideological standpoint and therefore cannot be considered merely as a protest electorate, or simply as being to the right of the right' (339). This type of explanation departs from models considering the FN vote as a manifestation of problems – psychological or socio-economic – afflicting voters, as one is led to investigate how the party's specific ideology translates into fully fledged partisanship: Gschwend and Leuffen (2005) go as far as to assert that 'ideology, candidate evaluation and partisan preferences are the main determinants of the [FN] vote in France' (704), a claim which certainly clashes with their popular representation as social outcasts. If typical FN voters are often referred to as '*petits blancs*' (white trash), for instance, by Bréchon and Mitra (1992: 70), this depiction leaves aside the question of the roles played by repressive and xenophobic ideologies in their representations and their sociability, which impact directly on their voting preferences.

Supply-side models

Supply side explanatory models of the electoral rise of the FN emphasize the strategic means used by its party leaders to shape and tap into this specific electorate. Founded in the 1970s, as a synthesis of diverse trends and small splinter groups, the party reached electoral significance in the 1980s and early 1990s, before undergoing a split in 1999 which, for many commentators at the time, was expected to be fatal. Contrary to these predictions, the FN obtained its most remarkable achievements to date in the early 2000s: first, during the 2002 presidential elections, where Jean-Marie Le Pen bypassed the Socialist candidate and reached the second round; and secondly in 2005, with the victory of the 'No' vote to the referendum on the Constitutional Treaty of

the European Union (EU) which the RRP claimed as its own. Throughout its history, the FN has increasingly been able to attract voters who had previously favoured the conservative right, especially during its take-off in the 1980s (Veugelers 1997: 40). The party's growing electorate now incorporates new voters recruited from among previous non-voters (Mayer & Perrineau 1990: 42) and beyond its appeal as a one-time 'protest vote', the FN was also able to establish loyalty from recurrent voters (ibid.: 45). Yet, some authors underline the capacity of the party to advance its own candidates, in a context where the heterogeneity of the electorates of the moderate and radical right renders alliances is problematic anyway (Gschwend & Leuffen 2005). The relative strength of the FN in the 2002 legislative elections made it possible for the party to maintain its candidates in a number of constituencies at the second ballot, thereby weakening the moderate right and creating incentives for the latter to form alliances with the left (Blais & Indridason 2007). The strength of the party may also be confirmed by the amounts spent on the election (Epstein & Franck 2007) – before its financial resources were endangered by the party putting itself heavily in debt. As a whole, the increased capacity to function as a party whose aim is to conquer through electoral victories, instead of being an anti-system protest, has been cited as a key element to the longevity of the FN (Crépon 2006, Dézé 2012).

The party has managed to retain the support from core like-minded communities: cultural approaches emphasize the key role of extreme-right subcultures which intermediate between the party and its constituency. In the French case, such links have been repeatedly noted, despite the heterogeneity of the radical-right social movement sector, stretching from skinheads and 'identity rock' fans to small élitist and occultist groups (François 2006). Civil society organizations may propagate world views close to the FN's ideology without actually being organizationally tied to the party. Support for FN politics ranks high among ex-colonials and repatriates, especially if they belong to associations valuing a colonial past (Veugelers 2005). Far-right associations are neither completely disconnected from the party nor a mere communication channel for it. Minkenberg (2003) argues that radical-right social movements do not represent a radicalized and more dangerous form of extreme-right politics than parties, but they do prepare the ground for them when they rely less on violent modes of action.

One of the major points of contention in the literature regarding FN strategies to attract supporters relates to which form of ideological positioning, between moderation and radicalization, has been more successful. Many authors such as Veugelers (1997), following Ignazi (1992), have emphasized the agenda-setting role of RRPs, for instance concerning immigration or national identity, or opposition to a corrupt system – a position coined as 'populist antistatism' by Kitschelt (1995). In contemporary FN discourses, this part is played by anti-Islam positions, for example, vilifying street prayer or the spread of halal butchers in poor neighbourhoods, both elements which have been widely commented upon in the media, and sometimes integrated into the topics of mainstream parties' candidates. This impact on the mainstream political agenda reveals the growing acceptability of FN theses: the normalization ('*banalization*') of the party's standpoints (especially with regard to immigration) may therefore be understood as a crucial element in obtaining more electoral success (Berezin 2006: 271): 'it may no longer be accurate to categorize [the FN] as simply representing the

politics of the *refus* – those left behind by society' (ibid.: 272). The acceptability of FN ideology is on the increase, not as a consequence of its toning down in order to appeal to moderate voters, but because the whole space of political discourses has shifted to include FN themes and vocabulary. This confirms Birenbaum's results (1987: 6) that the party conducted a strategy of simultaneous openness and radicalization. These trends were represented by different party leaders, except for Jean-Marie Le Pen who managed to combine both dimensions in his rhetoric, and did not hesitate to rely on provocation by intentionally adopting Vichyist images and metaphors. Supply side models ought therefore to consider the multiple constituencies and publics to which the FN is trying to appeal.

Assessing the impact of leadership change on the FN's modernization

Inspired by research into fascism, many authors have scrutinized the FN leadership in order to explain the longevity of the party, even though the history of its electoral fate is by no means linear. Studies have focused on the style of its historical leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen, and the characteristics of his rhetoric have been described in much detail (see for instance Souchard et al. 1998). For others, the main competence displayed by the FN leadership does not lie in its electoral strategy but in its communication and media outreach. Bernard (2007) underlines the impact of a strategy based on scandal and provocation and suggests that the negative media coverage following Le Pen's infamous remarks may indeed have been beneficial to the party (40). They allowed the leader to defend his right to use, in good faith, shocking metaphors to convey his ideas, while arguing that they could be widely understood. This strategy renders alliances with the conservative right more problematic – and therefore reinforces loyalty among FN candidates who might otherwise be tempted to appear moderate so as to reach electoral agreements with the conservative right. It also favours the FN with continuous media coverage, even between elections, while allowing party leaders to portray themselves as the victims of a media conspiracy aimed at silencing them (Beauzamy & Naves 2010).

The recent change in the party's leadership following Jean-Marie Le Pen's retirement – though he still remains its honorary president – and the nomination of his youngest daughter, Marine, as the presidential candidate for 2012 have led to a renewal of leadership-centred examinations of the party's strategy. A controversial thesis argues that the rise of Marine Le Pen to FN leadership is a sign of the party's modernization and renunciation of its roots – be they fundamentalist Catholic and counter-revolutionary or fascist. A lawyer, like her father, Marine Le Pen is presented as a 'modern' candidate because of her non-traditional lifestyle – she is a twice-divorced single mother of two. Her ideology has also been described as being markedly more culturally liberal than the party's official position – she claims to be pro-choice, although with some reservations, and has made several attempts to seduce gay and Jewish electorates. Yet continuity prevails with regard to her favourite themes, with a strong denunciation of Islam and of European integration, and a reaffirmed nationalist stance. She has also borrowed her father's populist tribune style and has increased the

attacks on journalists, claiming that they present her ideas in a simplified or erroneous fashion. She has also maintained her father's strategy of considering the mainstream right and Nicolas Sarkozy to be her main adversaries.

Political Opportunity Structure models

Van Der Brug, Fennema and Tillie's article (2005) is a model case of the POS approach, in which they integrate such elements as the level of electoral competition and institutional arrangements by which votes are transformed into seats (544) – that is, proportional representation rather than majority elections. In opposition to the 'protest vote' hypothesis, they claim that RRP voters want their vote to matter when it comes to curbing immigration. The authors tested hypotheses related to the party system – the level of support for the political system, voting loyalty to one particular party – but also added variables relating to the economic and/or immigration situation. They found that RRPs are likely to fare poorly in elections when faced with strong competition from mainstream-right candidates close to their own ideology (ibid.: 566). This result sheds some light on why such mainstream parties as the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) may choose to incorporate FN themes as a counter strategy – as in the case of the appropriation of the theme of 'national identity' by Nicolas Sarkozy in his 2007 presidential campaign. However, one finds that the trivialization of its ideas does not necessarily benefit the FN.

If the use of POS is a promising direction, the previous example illustrates that it is not exempt from the problem of integrating multiple and heterogeneous factors into a single model – factors which have already been examined separately, in many cases with inconclusive results. Such is the case for the impact of the electoral system on voters' preferences for the FN, which appears limited. According to Minkenberg (2003), the low level of proportional representation has not prevented the party from winning a faithful electorate. Examining the impact of voters' regime preference – unified if the presidency and the majority at the National Assembly are from the same party, divided in the case of *cohabitation* – Gschwend and Leuffen (2005) distinguish patterns of strategic voting and preferred voting according to the institutional consequences of electoral results. Yet the FN's greatest electoral breakthroughs have not been obtained at national level, and Birenbaum's (1987) emphasis on the importance of local politics for the electoral fate of the FN is still salient, a result confirmed by Bréchon and Mitra's indepth analysis of the rise of the party in its stronghold of Dreux (1992). Local political and socio-economic dynamics played a key role in the electoral victory of the Stirbois, the élite local FN couple, but Bréchon and Mitra stress the importance of the FN vote as a form of protest against government immigration policies (Bréchon and Mitra 1992: 77). In this case, it is a complex interplay between local variables and national policies which created a favourable situation for the FN. Similarly, the tendency of the FN to fare better in European elections has been explained concurrently by either a disinterest towards the stakes of the elections – the second-order elections phenomenon (Minkenberg & Perrineau 2007) – or by voters' actual hostility to the European construction which may render them more receptive

to RRPs ultra-nationalist discourses (34). Yet the authors state that: 'In the EU of 25, the radical right has not gained significant strength' (50). Such models are useful because they disaggregate the 'FN vote' as a single phenomenon, pointing to the very real impact of the electoral system and thereby making sense of otherwise puzzling variations in electoral results.

A key element of POS explanations for the RRP vote is the nature of the political environment created by competing candidates. Some re-examine the protest vote hypothesis, that is, a decision motivated by dissent with the system or with the ruling élite(s) (van Der Brug et al. 2005: 541), or simply by the wish to punish the ruling majority for poor economic performance (Auberger & Dubois 2005). The dealignment of voters from mainstream parties also impacts on FN electoral performances (Veugelers 1997), which are likely to be higher when support for the two main parties' candidates (socialist and conservative right) is eroded, thereby supporting the description of the FN as being anti-systemic (Bonnetain 2004). For Grunberg and Schweisguth (2003), the French political space is no longer adequately mapped as bipolarized by a Right-Left cleavage, since the far right constitutes a third pole distinct from the mainstream right. Minkenberg complicates this concept by pointing to the complex relationship between both political ensembles: 'the French established right's response to the FN since 1988 reflects a reversal of strategies. A combination of ideological demarcation and organizational co-optation was followed by one of ideological co-optation and organizational demarcation' (2003: 163). Both rights therefore entertain close and complex relations, with part of the mainstream right still very much attached to a strategy of Republican distinction from the FN, while other UMP politicians adopt much of the FN's doctrine and vocabulary. The electoral outcome of President Nicolas Sarkozy's appropriation of the theme of 'national identity' in his mandate – for instance by adding it to the title of the 'Ministry for Immigration, Integration and National Identity' from 2007 until 2010 – among other FN-inspired policy themes, may prove to be a key direction for research into the 2012 presidential elections. The 2012 presidential campaigns illustrate this dynamic, with close followers of Nicolas Sarkozy borrowing radical-right ideological features – such as theories of racial inequality for his Ministry of the Interior Claude Guéant – while Marine Le Pen herself concentrates her attacks on the president's poor policy record with regard to immigration.

Lastly, some argue that the structural elements impacting on the FN vote include the overall significance of political cleavages relating to immigration and national identity in France. Since, as we have seen, no straightforward correlation can be observed between the percentage of immigrants – or even of people perceived as such – and FN electoral results, the general climate of hostility towards foreigners should be integrated into explanatory models in a more subtle way. Some authors focus on how events focusing on the media's agenda contribute to the materialization of more diffusive opinion trends favourable to the radical right. These events might be public debates, such as the headscarf affair (Bréchon & Mitra 1992: 66), but also electoral events per se. Berezin (2006) explains, for instance, how the 'shock' of 21 April 2002 – when Jean-Marie Le Pen reached the second round of the presidential elections instead of the socialist candidate – created favourable conditions for other victories. For example, she identifies, perhaps too categorically, the influence of the FN in the other 'shock', the

victory of the 'No' vote in the 29 May 2005 referendum on the European Constitutional Treaty. There is, however, a risk of circularity in this argument: FN victories create the conditions for more triumphs to come. Yet a key conclusion is that the party is a serious electoral contender and not only a troublemaker in a political space dominated by mainstream parties. The hypothesis that a more profound alignment between FN ideology and some elements shared by media discourses and public debates might be responsible for the party's growing strength has been examined by van der Valk (2003), using a Critical Discourse Analysis-informed approach. In both France and the Netherlands, anti-immigrant discourse is commonplace in both right and radical-right discourses, where similar discursive strategies may be found, such as negative presentation of the Other (200). Yet anti-immigrant stances are more pronounced in France, which suggests that the content of public debates on themes related to immigration and/or national identity is shaped in a way which welcomes radical-right contributions as quasi-normal and legitimate ones.

Ethnicization models

This last remark points us towards including dimensions pertaining to how ethnic identities – including white ones – are transformed into legitimate political topics and thus lead to the ethnicization of French politics. In a French context marked by the well-researched distrust of public acknowledgement of ethnic minorities (Amiraux & Simon 2006), accounts of ethnicization have mostly been the stuff of pessimistic and sometimes apocalyptic depictions of growing ethnic tensions in multiracial France (see for instance Costa-Lascoux 2001, or Lagrange 2010) – a discourse which in many ways parallels FN analyses. Prophets of the ethnicization of France generally fail to provide convincing backgrounds for their arguments because of a shared tendency to overgeneralize while reifying cultural elements (such as forms of sociability or family structure) which they associate with ethnicity. This dimension is usually scrutinized only in Others, traditionally Arabs, but recently increasingly defined as Africans or Muslims: Black families are for instance increasingly blamed for the poor educational results, and participation in youth gangs, of their children (Beauzamy & Montes 2011). Yet this should not lead us to discard ethnicization from the array of legitimate topics for inquiry, especially when examining the fate of radical-right ethno-racial politics and its electoral impact.

Following Brubaker and Laitin's results pertaining to the study of mobilizing the power of ethnicity as an ideology in violent conflicts (1998), a first direction is to attempt to make sense of the relative growth of debates on ethnicity and national identities in the French context. In their study, Brubaker and Laitin find that 'even without direct positive incentives to frame conflicts in ethnic terms, this has led to a marked ethnicization of violent challenger-incumbent contests as the major non-ethnic framing for such contests has become less plausible and profitable' (op. cit., 425) – which in our case suggests looking into the possible exhaustion of other ideological macro-discourses to make sense of certain events or grievances. For instance, media discourses aimed at explaining the major riots of 2005 show a marked

shift away from the traditional socio-economic accounts of urban conflicts to include élite-based (and especially governmental) explanations focusing on subcultures and ethnicity (Beauzamy & Naves 2006). Public debates on national history also display an increasingly ethnicized view of 'Frenchhood', thereby revealing the rise of an ethnic definition of the nation (Terrio 1999). This ethnicization does not completely coincide with xenophobia, nor does it derive directly from anti-immigrant sentiment: 'The saliency of ethnic, religious and regional identities cannot be definitively linked to a "backlash" against immigrants [or] minorities' (Tossuti 2002: 66). It may therefore be fruitful to examine the regional pattern of ethnicization in Europe, following Tossuti's results (op. cit.) concerning the role of transnational factors and of globalization in explaining attachments to national or sub-national identities, which may materialize in support of nationalist, ethnic or religious parties. Similarly Köves, in her attempt to make sense of what she interprets as a revival of fascism (2004), examines the link between globalization and 'ethnic polarization' and sees ethnicity as a by-product of the remains of a class struggle under decomposition in post-industrial France: 'Ethnicity is a form of protest against the demands of neoliberalism and globalization' (46) – an argument which takes us back to the vicinity of the 'modernization's losers' thesis. This regional trend would resonate particularly in France, where the dominant Republican view of nationhood promotes the integration of migrants through their socio-cultural assimilation – a model which Spektorowski calls 'ethnocentric' (2000: 286).

Returning to the FN and the strategies of its leaders, one finds that it may be described as an ethnocentric party, and in fact the only party that defines the nation in ethno-nationalist terms, thereby fulfilling Köves' definition of contemporary fascism as 'the articulation and translation of racism and ethnicity into politics' (2004: 36). It may rely on an elaborate ethno-differentialist theorization of race relations framed by *Nouvelle Droite* (New Right) ideologues (Taguieff 1994, Spektorowski 2000) – even though such ethno-differentialism translates into FN party programmes only obliquely, and some ideological divergences between the two may be identified. However, the FN can still boast that it is the first party to address issues related to ethnicization openly – the topos of the 'absence of taboo' has been appropriated by other political actors, particularly from the mainstream right.

Conclusion

Many approaches have been used to examine the FN's appeal to its voters, from indepth accounts of its organizational structure and leadership issues – recently focusing on the replacement of historical leader Jean-Marie Le Pen by his daughter Marine, supposedly in favour of the 'modernization' of the party's discourse and ideology – to wide and far-ranging examinations of the social, economic and political conditions in which the party may thrive. As we have seen, simply adding or superposing these approaches does not give us a clearer picture of the situation. While providing a comprehensive alternative framework is too ambitious a goal for this chapter, some different directions do however appear to be promising.

On the supply side of FN party politics – which, De Lange and Mudde argue (2005: 483), is a relatively underdeveloped field of RRP studies – a key question is the nature of the interaction between the FN and the mainstream right – chiefly the Union pour un Mouvement Populaire, the main conservative party – especially under UMP governance and a Sarkozy presidency. While certain authors have examined ruptures or proximities between members of both parties, the overall impact of the appropriation of FN themes and their inscription on the government agenda remains by and large unknown so far.

Demand-side models ought to go beyond the quest for straightforward socio-economic and socio-cultural explanations of the decision to vote for FN candidates. Poor socio-economic conditions and belonging to an increasingly unemployed working class do not mechanically lead to voting for the FN, since these factors are mediated by social representations of one's situation. Increasingly, stereotyped and polarized perceptions of Self and Other are likely to encourage xenophobic attitudes and ideologies. We ought to be particularly attentive to not covertly return to the 'petit blancs' thesis, leading to a description of the FN electorate as white trash. Insights pertaining to the ethnicization of current definitions of Self and Other in France show that factors other than a sense of loss and resentment may be at play. Pride and belonging should also be examined in this construction of an ethnicized – primarily white – Self potentially attracted to FN candidates, as studies pertaining to radical-right sociability suggest. Rather than treating the FN vote as a problem disfiguring French politics, such a way of envisioning the French radical right could open a gateway to explore more general issues pertaining to multiethnic French society, such as the marked rise of anti-immigrant and Islamophobic attitudes.

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