

## ANALYSIS

# Why Marine Le Pen Always Loses

Her party is condemned to underperform—even if it finally wins.

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A lot of the media coverage around the presidential election in France has focused on the far-right candidate Marine Le Pen. With some polls showing her almost neck-and-neck with the incumbent president, Emmanuel Macron, after making it through the first-round vote, there is a justifiable fear—especially outside France—that her triumph is imminent.

But there is a different way of reading Le Pen's story. Instead of asking whether Le Pen can win in the upcoming runoff, we should begin with a much less obvious question: Why has she never won before? After all, far-right parties and politicians have recently governed—alone or in coalition with others—in European countries as diverse as Austria, Italy, and Hungary.

By contrast, Le Pen and her party—the National Rally—have failed to impose themselves at any level of French politics. In presidential campaigns, both Marine Le Pen and her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen, were roundly defeated in runoffs in 2017 and 2002, respectively. The National Rally has seven members in a National Assembly of 577, it controls none of France's powerful regional administrations, and only 12 mayors are party members out of a total of just under 35,500.

This is all the more surprising given the longevity of the party. The National Front, as the party was called until 2018, was founded in 1972, which makes it one of the longest-standing far-right parties in Europe. Its first electoral breakthrough was in the early 1980s—almost 40 years ago—and, in many parts of France, it repeatedly manages to secure vote shares of between 15 and 30 percent. Yet the party—and its leader—have a negligible impact on French politics outside the electoral cycles.

What explains this lack of success?

Le Pen and her party faithful have a one-stop answer to this question: the electoral system. As far as they are concerned, the two-round electoral system for most French elections artificially deflates their power. They enthusiastically point to their relative success in European elections—which are decided by a slate-based, single-round proportional system—as an example of how the party could perform if the electoral process accurately reflected vote shares.

There is some truth to this claim. France's current constitutional settlement—the Fifth Republic—was inaugurated in 1958, a time when the country was embroiled in a violent colonial war in Algeria and faced the threat of a far-right military coup. The French Communist Party was also a major political force. The two-round electoral system, which dates back to the late 19th century, was designed to keep the political extremes at bay. Between the 1980s, when the National Front first became electorally significant, and 2017, French politics was dominated by a center-left party and a center-right party. These parties colluded in refusing to form alliances with the far right. This attempt to defend France's republican (i.e., democratic) principles against a party that was historically anti-republican was known as the “republican front,” and it ensured that far-right parties and candidates were largely eliminated in the first round.

There is more to the National Rally's failure than the electoral system, however. The party itself has often appeared to be little more than a vehicle for the personal ambitions and internecine struggles of the Le Pen dynasty. Famously, in 2015, Marine Le Pen expelled her own father from the party he founded, and in this year's electoral cycle, Marine Le Pen's niece, Marion Maréchal, defected to competing far-right candidate Éric Zemmour. These tendencies have been reinforced by a weak party structure. There has been hardly any attempt to recruit and retain activists, nor has there been much engagement with civil society. While the party does now have some experience of local government and municipal administration, this has not so far produced many dedicated party cadres. Instead, Le Pen's absolute power has given rise to widely documented corruption, embezzlement of funds, and clientelism.

Moreover, while Le Pen and the National Rally have been successful in shaping the political debate, their ability to do so goes only so far. Many commentators have remarked on the inexorable penetration of far-right ideas into the mainstream of French politics since the 1980s. Even left-wing politicians have, at times, repeated far-right ideas about immigration,

citizenship, Islam, and national preference. The argument that Le Pen and her party's ideas have been mainstreamed is a powerful one.

At the same time, these ideas are far from widely agreed-upon. The prospect of a Le Pen presidency has come to appear normal, but this does not mean that her xenophobia and racism have gone unnoticed. Long-term opinion polling shows that support for the National Rally's policies plateaus at around 30 percent, which corresponds to the combined score of Le Pen and Zemmour in the first round of this year's election. Le Pen will have trouble overcoming this barrier, not least because—unlike America's Donald Trump or Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro—she is a politically known quantity.

A sign of Le Pen's deep anchoring in French politics is the way that she—and her party—have become a strongly class-based political movement, to the point of recalling the politics of an earlier era. In the 1980s, the party's electorate hailed from a relatively diverse array of socioeconomic groups. Today, it draws more and more from a less well-educated working-class constituency that encompasses low-end service sector jobs as much as factory workers.

The National Rally's class politics are not in themselves an obstacle. Indeed, Le Pen's impressive first-round score this year was due to the way she harnessed popular anxieties about the rising cost of living. But success in democratic politics depends on cobbling together broad coalitions. The party has made few inroads in attracting the country's most educated, urbanized, and globalized elites. While its working-class orientation ensures its status as a major party, it is far from clear that this orientation will bring it victory.

None of this is to suggest that victory is impossible. There are clearly some important developments in French politics that have made Le Pen more palatable. Above all, the main center-left and center-right parties in France have been obliterated, with the first round of this year's election confirming their demise. A republican front strategy is thus much less effective, even if it may be reconstituting itself in a new guise around the various parties and candidates of the left, all of which have made unambiguous calls to "block" Marine Le Pen in the second round.

Nevertheless, the incumbent's polarizing policies and personality have generated the prospect of a countervailing anti-Macron front. This dynamic is particularly relevant to understanding the preferences of those who voted for the far-left candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon. Although Mélenchon himself

unambiguously declared that his supporters should not cast a single vote for Le Pen, his supporters are likely to be torn between the republican front and anti-Macron front, with many choosing to stay home. An unintended consequence of this is that Le Pen's and Macron's second-round strategies are substantively quite similar: Both are trying to appeal to the left without losing support on their right

Still, for her to win, Le Pen would have to overcome one of the biggest impediments to all radical French political movements: a profound fear of social and political disorder. While France remains a society with a reputation for contentious politics and radicalism—and perhaps because of this history—dramatic political change in the 20th century has rarely occurred through the ballot box. The French have never elected a far-right government. Even the occasions when they have gone with self-described socialists are few and far between (1936, 1981, and 2012). Though popular discontent with politics is often high—and, at present, is at a fever pitch—the French appetite for disruptive politics is arguably considerably weaker than in other democracies. The tragicomedies of Brexit and the Trump presidency have done little to warm up the French for similar experiments.

Finally, even if Le Pen were somehow to prevail on April 24, one should not assume that she would be able to follow in the footsteps of leaders like Hungary's Viktor Orban, who have unilaterally imposed their agenda. Many viewed the 1981 victory of François Mitterrand—a socialist who committed to a “rupture with capitalism” and included Communists in his cabinet—with alarm. But, within two years, he had adopted austerity measures and put his reforms on hold.

Le Pen could face similar problems with her plan to propose a referendum to introduce the principle of “national preference,” which would give social benefits primarily to citizens, could be rejected by the electorate, just as the European constitutional treaty was in 2005 despite government support. Her legislative agenda would also depend on how the National Rally fares in June parliamentary elections, which is far from certain. And, like Mitterrand before her, her plan to ramp up social spending could encounter the debilitating disapproval of international bond markets.

So, while it is of great significance that the National Rally has become a major party, this does not mean that it will be immune to the rough-and-tumble that can stymie any political movement, even those that are less controversial.

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