

Postcard: Saint-Gilles.

For tourists, it is a perfect town of southern France. But for the French, Saint-Gilles is better known for its identity politics.

Welcome to France's nationalist heartland

BY BRUCE CRUMLEY

TOURISTS HAVE LONG ADMIRERD Saint-Gilles for its ancient center: narrow streets, tightly packed stone buildings and 12th century monastery ruins. Its more recent political history, however, has given this Languedoc town a kind of ill fame across France. In 1989, Saint-Gilles became the first town to elect a mayor from the extreme-right National Front party. The National Front leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen, a perennial loser in presidential elections, has consistently placed first in Saint-Gilles. In short, the town has voted for the kind of xenophobic zealotry that for many years was disavowed by polite French society. But the first round of presidential voting, on April 22, may finally find Saint-Gilles in the political mainstream, not because Saint-Gilles has drifted left but because France has veered right.

And the front-running conservative candidate, Nicolas Sarkozy, has built his lead in part by moving in the same direction, even co-opting some of the positions that have made Le Pen so popular here.

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For years, many Saint-Gilles residents have been transfixed by a central issue: immigration. In the 1960s and '70s, Saint-Gilles's agricultural sector recruited armies of foreign workers until the growth boom went bust in the early 1980s. Jobs here and across France have been in short supply ever since. Nearly 20% of Saint-Gilles's residents are jobless, and practically all of those live on state assistance. Roughly 25% of the town's population of nearly 12,000 are immigrant or first-generation French citizens—virtually all of North African origin. Most live in the Sabatot housing projects uphill from the town's center and are frequently reviled by older Saint-Gilles inhabitants as disorderly, uncivil and crime prone.

"Before, immigrants like the Spanish and Portuguese worked hard and integrated, but that's just not happening with the Arabs," says Yvonne Bovetto, 87, a retiree and native of Saint-Gilles. "Sabatot is the



Dividing line Saint-Gilles's ethnic minorities live mainly in the segregated Sabatot housing projects

biggest problem for us today. Lots of people just feel overrun, fed up or both." As if in reply, Morit (who would give only his first name), an 18-year-old first-generation Saint-Gilles citizen of Moroccan descent, says, "We feel the racism and scorn everywhere."

Similar tension is evident far beyond Saint-Gilles. In the wake of the 2005 riots in suburban projects and pitched battles between police and immigrant youth last month in Paris' Gare du Nord train station, more French are gravitating toward hard-line positions. Sarkozy, the former Interior Minister, is a natural law-and-order candidate who spent his time in office noisily battling crime and deporting illegal aliens. But even some of his allies have questioned his campaign pledge to create a "Ministry for Immigration and National Identity"—a linkage many decry as a Le Penesque

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—NICOLAS RULLIER, 29

invocation of a creeping foreign menace to France. However controversial, the moves have helped "Sarko" win over some Le Pen loyalists. "The true racists will never abandon Le Pen," says Nicolas Rullier, 29, summarizing what he hears at his newsstand beside the sun-washed medieval Benedictine abbey. "But I think lots of regular people here who voted for Le Pen in the past to voice their fears and anger are seriously thinking of voting for Sarkozy this time."

A recent national poll gave Sarkozy 31.5% backing, against 24% for his Socialist rival Ségolène Royal (who, sinking in the polls, took her own stab at identity politics, suggesting in March that all French citizens should learn *La Marseillaise*). To some in Saint-Gilles, Sarkozy's allure is in his electability. "I'm voting for Sarkozy not only because I think he truly believes these policies are necessary," confides a retired Saint-Gilles farmer and past Le Pen voter who identifies himself only as André, "but also because Sarkozy has a far better chance of winning and applying them than Le Pen ever will." If that prediction is correct, this town so reviled for its politics in the past may turn out to have been simply ahead of its time.