

Chapter 2

The History of the *Front National*

2.1 The Extreme Right in France, 1945–1972

Immediately after the Second World War, there was little space or sympathy for radical right-wing ideas in France. Vichy essentially left a revisionist history of collaboration, which confined the French extreme right to the margins of political life (Kling 2012: 57). In particular, the far-right was the target of *diabolization*, or demonization, in an ongoing attempt to discredit it as a result of its ties to fascism and Nazism (Kling 2012: 58). Nevertheless, several mainly international developments allowed radical right-wing ideas to permeate French society, albeit rather modestly, in the 1950s. Most prominent among the groups that emerged was an extreme-right organization called *Jeune Nation*, founded in 1950 by young army officers disenchanted with the Republic's imminent defeat in the Indochina War (1946–1954). The organization was essentially anti-communist, anti-modernist, xenophobic, and in favour of preserving the empire (Milza 1987: 296).

Following in the footsteps of *Jeune Nation*, other extreme-right organizations came to the fore in the 1950s, focused mainly on the question of Algerian independence. Perhaps the most significant was the Poujadist movement and the party called *Union de Défense des Commerçants et Artisans* (UDCA), which peaked in the 1956 French legislative election, when it won 11.5 % of the popular vote (Kitschelt 1995: 92). Under the leadership of Pierre Poujade, UDCA made frequent appeals to the proponents of *Algérie Française*, which opposed decolonization and Algerian independence (cf. Crépon 2012: 32). More broadly, the 7-year war in Algeria (1954–1962) offered a window of opportunity for the far-right to regain some political space in French society by sparking extreme-right-wing sentiment in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In particular, the wave of secret activities conducted by the *Organisation de l'Armée Secrète* (OAS), a dissident paramilitary organization led by officers and former officers, and the repatriation of one million French colonists after Algerian independence contributed to nationalist feelings and anti-Arab sentiments in France (Betz and Immerfall 1998: 11). Jean-Marie Le Pen was

prominent among the OAS's members; he entered national politics as the youngest deputy in the National Assembly, winning a seat for the UDCA at the age 28 (Art 2011: 121).

The Poujadist movement was short-lived but quite successful. In the 1956 legislative elections, the UDCA won 51 seats and some 11.5 % of the popular vote. Two years later, with the creation of the French Fifth Republic in 1958–1959 under Charles de Gaulle's presidency, Poujade and his party disappeared from the political spectrum. Hence, the French far-right remained fragmented in the late 1950s and early 1960s; it did not have the unity or the numbers to repeat the UDCA's 1956 electoral success (Rydgren 2004: 18; Crépon 1999: 33). Realizing this weakness, Jean-Marie Le Pen aimed to unify the nationalist forces by creating the *Comité d'initiative pour une Candidature Nationale* in 1963 (DeClair 1999: 25). He resolved to create a truly unified national opposition for the presidential elections in 1965. Le Pen's committee coordinated the presidential campaign of Jean-Louis Tixier-Vignancour (1907–1989). A pro-French Algerian and former adjunct secretary of information in the Vichy government, Tixier-Vignancour was firmly linked with far-right causes² (Cohen and Péan 2012). As campaign manager, Le Pen played an important role in Tixier-Vignancour's ability to draw other far-right movements into the fold (DeClair 1999: 26). These included the endorsements of a neo-fascist youth movement called *Occident* (created in 1964) and a far-right periodical, *Europe-Action* (DeClair 1999: 29). Nevertheless, Tixier-Vignancour failed to win more than 5.3 % of the vote in 1965 (Art 2011: 122).

In the late 1960s, the French extreme right remained a conglomerate of political *groupuscules* (small, isolated groups). Former generations of far-right supporters had been mobilized during the height of *Action Française* and, later, the fight for French Algeria. However, this mobilization could not be sustained beyond these single events. Yet, after 1968, the French extreme right gained renewed energy, as a younger generation of right-wing extremists shifted their political focus away from de Gaulle³ in search of new issues (DeClair 1999: 29). Aiming to give the extreme right a new ideological footing, a wave of writers and philosophers from the *Nouvelle Droite* (New Right) formed the *Groupe de recherche et d'étude pour la civilisation européenne* (GRECE),⁴ which, in 1974, gave rise to its offshoot, the Club de l'Horloge. The *Nouvelle Droite* intellectuals were particularly interested in revitalizing the anti-egalitarian doctrine that had been an important characteristic of

²For instance, he acted as defence attorney for extreme-right figures such as General Raoul Salan and Colonel Jean-Marie Bastien-Thiry (DeClair 1999: 25).

³General Charles de Gaulle (1980–1970) assumed the presidency in 1959, at which time he supported French Algeria. He later changed his mind as the military situation deteriorated, creating a rift within rightist political circles. Though the French far-right had been favourable to de Gaulle, his decision to grant Algerian independence irrevocably separated the far-right camp from the Gaullist mainstream (cf. DeClair 1999: 21–23).

⁴GRECE was a far-right intellectual group whose writings and publications espoused nationalist and racialist principals founded in anti-universalism and a “differentialist” paradigm (which called for the preservation of cultural and ethnic particularities).

the French extreme right before the Second World War (Crépon 2012: 33; Declair 1999: 28). GRECE profoundly inspired the ideological positions of the *Front National* (cf. Dézé 2012: 87; Crépon 2012: 42–47).

At the same time, the extreme right was reinvigorated by youth activism. Alongside *Occident*, which remained popular among young supporters of the French extreme right, new groups formed, including the Jeunesses Patriotes et Sociales, founded by Roger Holeindre⁵ in 1968, and the Catholic and Pétainist group *L'Oeuvre Française* (Crépon 2012: 33). The enemy of these mainly youth-based groups was the political left, and they often targeted student-led Communist groups in violent street fights. Still, they were no match for leftist organizations due to a continued lack of coherence among them.

In November 1968, the largest extreme right-wing group in terms of manpower, *Occident* disbanded as a result of its official prohibition following violent protests carried out against leftist student organizations (Crépon 2012: 33). Its leaders regrouped to form other far-right organizations, such as the *Groupe Union-Droite* (GUD). In turn, GUD leaders and a number of former *Occident* members went on to found an activist organization called *Ordre Nouveau* (ON) in 1969. Notable among them were Alain Robert⁶ and former *Occident* member François Duprat (1940–1978). ON was different from its predecessors in that its intention was to become a large party representing a unified far-rightist alternative (Kitschelt 1995: 94). Its model was the Italian Social Movement⁷ (*Movimento Sociale Italiano*, MSI), and it adopted MSI's strategy for a "National Right" (Dézé 2012: 41).⁸ Thanks to this move, ON grew in size and attracted the support of other far-right groups, such as *Une Jeune Europe* and *Action Nationaliste*. By the early 1970s, ON had approximately 5000 members (most of them student activists) operating on the far-right fringes of French politics (DeClair 1999: 31).

⁵Roger Holeindre is a former combatant in the Indochina war and the OAS, and former youth director of the *Comité Tixier-Vignancour*. He would later become vice-secretary general of the FN's first executive bureau (Dézé 2012: 33).

⁶Alain Robert was the former director of *Occident* and founder of the GUD. He later became secretary general of the *Front National*'s first executive bureau (cf. Dézé 2012: 33; DeClair 1999: 30).

⁷MSI was a neo-fascist political party created by supporters of former Italian dictator Benito Mussolini in 1946.

⁸Giving the party a more respectable image by rejecting violent actions, MSI's Secretary General, Giorgio Almirante, attracted wider support from members of established parties (monarchic parties, Christian Democrats, and Liberals). The party received an unprecedented 8.7 % of the vote in the 1972 parliamentary elections.

2.2 The Foundation of the FN

Even though ON was markedly extra-parliamentarian,⁹ its members recognized that a moderate image was needed in order for the movement to become more strongly anchored in French society (Lecoeur 2007: 3–33). Pragmatic ON members became increasingly willing to participate in conventional political activities (Perrineau 1996: 29). After seeing that the MSI won more than 5 % of the vote in the 1970 Italian general elections, ON, pushed by its moderate wing, decided to run candidates in the 1970 by-elections. Receiving 3.12 % of the vote in Paris's 12th electoral district, ON members were strongly encouraged to pursue the parliamentary route. In the 1971 municipal elections, ON received 19,529 votes (2.6 %) in Paris and had isolated successes in other parts of France (for instance, 22 % of the vote on the municipality of Calais [DeClair 1999: 36]). These positive results convinced the majority of ON members that it would be beneficial to create a party composed of far-right groups and individuals (DeClair 1999: 36–37).

In June 1971, ON's political programme began to take shape with François Duprat's manifesto, *Pour un Front National* (For a National Front) (Dézé 2012: 38). The manifesto buttressed traditional extreme-right-wing values; it continued the tradition of "the belief in natural order, the defense of certain traditional values, suspicion of democracy (at least in its parliamentary form), xenophobia, and even latent anti-Semitism" (Roussel 1985: 95). Supported by Duprat's programme, the ON rallied the forces of the far-right in hopes of making political gains in the 1973 legislative elections (Crépon 2012: 34) and officially became a party in June 1972, under the name *Front National pour une Unité Française* (FNUF). The name was to be interpreted in a literal sense, providing a political "front" behind which far-right activists could pursue their goals (Williams 2006: 82).

The FNUF, as ON intended, was modelled upon the MSI and even copied the party's emblematic tricolour flame (Williams 2006: 82; Rydgren 2004: 18). The FNUF displayed revolutionary tendencies insofar as it called for a break with the past that would lead to a "French renaissance and a new defence" of the French people (Berezin 2007: 141). However, it did so under the guise of parliamentarism. For this purpose, it needed to create a façade by presenting a leader who could bring electoral credibility to the party (Crépon 2012: 35). By the intermediary of Roger Holeindre and François Brigneau, Jean-Marie Le Pen became the first president of the new party¹⁰ (Art 2011: 123). This choice was based on his prior experience in French politics and his public image as a relatively moderate right-wing politician. On October 5, 1972, the *Front National pour une Unité Française* became the *Front*

⁹ON members were partisans of the *Revolution Nationale*, a nationalist movement that called for the demise of the Fifth Republic and the subsequent establishment of an authoritarian regime (Art 2011: 123).

¹⁰Jean-Marie Le Pen is often credited with creating the *Front National*. In reality, the party was created by several individuals: François Brigneau, François Duprat, Alain Robert, and Jean-Marie Le Pen (Declair 1999: 57).

National (FN) (Berezin 2007: 131; Kitschelt 1995: 94). The heterogeneous organization brought together any number of Poujadists, neo-fascists, anti-Gaullists, activists, and right-wing intellectuals (Betz and Immerfall 1998: 12; Bourseiller 1991: 78–83; Soudais 1996: 184–187).

The party strove to present itself as a populist, xenophobic movement that transcended traditional conceptions of left and right (Davies 1999: 7). The party's goals and ideology were summarized in the FN's original publication, "Defending the French—*The Front National Program*" (1973). In addition to its nationalistic, and at times racist, policy prescription, the FN advocated the shrinking of the public sector, the minimization of state intervention, drastic changes to immigration policy, Anti-Europeanism, and proportional representation (Camus 1996: 20). However, themes such as nationalism, immigration, and security were not high on the public agenda at the time and were thus dismissed as propaganda (Kling 2012: 18).

From the outset, internal conflicts proved to be a serious impediment to the new party's organizational development. The FN failed to formulate a cohesive programme as schisms arose between the extremist nationalists and the more moderate supporters of Le Pen¹¹ (Kitschelt 1995: 94). This ideological rift was crystallized as a result of the FN's poor performance in its first national election. On March 4, 1973 in the legislative elections, the FN was unable to deliver on expectations, securing only 108,000 votes, or 1.32 %, nationally (Camus 1996: 21).

The FN's poor electoral showing aggravated the thematic rift, and two contradictory courses of action were put forward: ON members sought to withdraw from electoral politics and return to their militant activism, whereas Le Pen advocated strengthening the party (DeClair 1999: 39). This ideological and strategic division was ultimately resolved on June 21, 1973, when ON was banned from politics after a violent clash with the Communist League in Paris. The ban took effect after an ON meeting called *Halte à l'immigration sauvage* (Halt to wild immigration) during which ON members clashed violently with members of the radical left (these clashes included the use of guns). The meeting was finally ended by police intervention (Camus 1996: 21). With the FN missing its backbone, Le Pen and his friends were able to gradually take control of the party (Perrineau 1998: 29–30).

Nevertheless, the secession of ON was costly for the FN in the short run; the party lost a substantial portion of its support base as well as its investments in the electoral campaigns (Dézé 2012: 54, 58–59). In addition, although ON dissolved, its members continued to contest with Le Pen and his party in 1973, taking up the slogan *Faire Front* in direct opposition to the FN (Art 2011: 123). In 1974, a different group of former ON members founded yet another radical right-wing party, the Party of New Forces (*Parti des Forces Nouvelles*, PFN), in order to

¹¹The revolutionary nationalists remained staunchly antiparliamentarian, whereas supporters of Le Pen generally accepted the republican democratic system (Art 2011: 123). The FN became divided between "pragmatists", who conceded the need for a strategic change in view of ON's politics, and "radicals", who feared the dissolution of the FN's nationalist thrust (cf. Dézé 2012: 45–49).

compete with the FN in parliamentary elections. The FN and the PFN had divergent political strategies, particularly with regard to political alliances. Le Pen categorically refused to negotiate with mainstream right-wing parties, whereas the PFN was favourable to alliances that could defeat the left (Kling 2012: 19). Despite some media attention and the founding of the FN's youth organization, the *Front National de la Jeunesse* (FNJ), in 1974, the renewed division of extremist forces all but crushed the FN's electoral ambitions for nearly a decade (DeClair 1999: 167; Betz and Immerfall 1998: 12).

2.3 Years of Marginality

The far-right remained marginal in the French political landscape during the 1970s (Art 2011: 123; Kitschelt 1995: 94), despite several attempts to break away from its position on the fringes of French society. As part of its attempt to improve voter support, the party modified its ideological stance by abandoning some of its most radical positions (e.g. it stopped accusing outside influences of being responsible for France's decadence) and adopted a more general position against infringements on the country's national identity (Camus 1996: 24). Despite these changes, the FN was unable to obtain more than 0.62 % of the vote in the 1974 presidential election (Perrineau 1996: 30). Realizing the necessity to become more firmly anchored to and connected with other far-right-wing groups, Le Pen developed ties with others on the far-right, including national socialists and Catholic fundamentalists. In 1974, François Duprat and his national revolutionist group were integrated into the FN.¹² Three years later, in 1977, Jean Stirbois and the solidarist movement joined the party.¹³ In terms of ideology, the arrival of these two groups did not bring the FN closer to mainstream politics. Instead, the FN continued to embrace an ideology that included racism, militarism, anti-democracy, and virulent anti-communism (Ivaldi 1998).¹⁴

The influx of these radical right-wing factions did not prove beneficial to the FN in elections. To the contrary, the FN remained marginal in electoral politics, obtaining fewer than 200,000 votes (0.29 %) in the 1978 legislative elections (Perrineau 1996: 30). In the second round of the elections, Le Pen also faced a

¹²As a former member of *Jeune Nation* and *Ordre Nouveau*, Duprat was a very influential figure in the French far-right. He also convinced many extreme-right factions to join the FN, including the *Fédération d'Action Nationale et Européenne* (FANE) and the *Groupes Nationalistes Revolutionnaires* (GNR). In the mid-1970s, the FN managed to attract approximately 300 GNR and 500 FANE members, bringing its total membership to just under 1000 (Dézé 2012: 60).

¹³The solidarist movement advocated a third way, supporting neither the Soviet Union nor the United States of America (Marcus 1995: 65).

¹⁴Duprat's national revolutionist movement was characterized by a very aggressive anti-communist stand. Among others, it advocated that force was the only way to deal with communists (see Birenbaum 1992).

dilemma; he was being pushed by the media and some factions within his party to choose between supporting the centre-right party and the left-wing party, or, as he referred to it, to choose between “diarrhea and cancer” (DeClair 1999: 180). When he chose to support the centre-right, there was a certain amount of dissension among the “revolutionary nationalists” (DeClair 1999: 180). The FN suffered an additional blow in 1978. Duprat, who by then had become the second-in-command of the party and Le Pen’s chief aide, died in a car bombing. For Le Pen and his party, this resulted in a double loss: first, Le Pen lost his main organizer; second, many of the national socialists who had joined the FN with Duprat in the mid-1970s left the party. As a result, the FN’s dismal electoral performance continued in the 1981 presidential elections. Le Pen failed to receive the 500 signatures¹⁵ required to run in the 1981 presidential contest (Kitschelt 1995: 94). Consequently, the FN was powerless to prevent a Socialist victory in the presidential election that year (Kitschelt 1995: 97).

2.4 From the Fringes to Party Politics

Yet, to cite Le Pen, the period of “crossing the desert” did not last forever for the FN (DeClair 1999: 42; Williams 2006: 83). Although detrimental in the short run, over the long run the Duprat incident proved to be an opportunity for the FN to engage in electoral politics by stripping itself of direct associations with Nazi or fascist parties (cf. Camus 1996: 35–36; Hainsworth 2000; Simmons 2003). In particular, it allowed the FN to potentially open its support base towards veterans, professionals, and students (in Betz and Immerfall 1998: 15). These groups became also more attuned to supporting the FN ideology because the social climate began to change in the early 1980s. In fact, the FN’s rise in electoral politics was directly linked to social, economic, and political transformations that occurred in France starting in the early 1980s. In particular, three structural factors proved beneficial for the FN.

First, there was some latent unhappiness within the French population about law and order after the Socialists took office in 1981. For example, Mitterrand’s decision to use his presidential prerogative to release 6200 prisoners, almost 14 % of France’s inmates, in the summer of 1981 (Shields 2007: 200) created uneasiness: the granting of amnesty to so many prisoners was viewed as too generous by 61 % of the respondents to a survey (Favier and Martin-Roland 1990: 179). Other controversial policy reforms in the early 1980s included the revocation of the right of the police to conduct random security checks and two laws that circumscribed police powers. Conservative individuals and proponents of a

¹⁵In France, a candidate’s placement on the presidential ballot is contingent upon the solicitation of 500 signatures from mayors, senators, National Assembly deputies, or other official representatives. In the 1981 presidential elections, Le Pen was unable to secure the sponsorship signatures and thus could not run (cf. DeClair 1999: 44).

strong France, among others, thought that these reforms went too far and compromised public security.

Second, the French population became increasingly sensitive to issues related to immigration (Ignazi 2013: 71). Under Mitterrand, immigration regulations and enforcement measures to take illegal immigrants back to the border were eased. The same applied to obstacles to reuniting immigrant families; these, too, were partly removed. Through the emergence of prayer rooms in the workplace and an increase in the number of mosques (the number of mosques surged from under a dozen in 1970 to almost 1000 at the end of the 1980s), religious pluralism became a reality in French cities (Shields 2007: 201)—a development that did not sit well with conservatives and traditional Catholics.

It was not simply the increase in the number of immigrants that was frightening to parts of the French population but also the proportion of North Africans, who by the 1980s had become a very visible minority. In 1946, immigrants from North Africa and the Maghreb represented 2.3 % of the foreign population, whereas 88.7 % were European. In contrast, in 1982, the proportion of European immigrants had decreased to 47.6 %, whereas North Africans represented 38.5 % of all immigrants (Weil 1991: 374–375). Although North Africans had first been temporary migrants who came to fill manual labour jobs, they became a permanent addition to the country under Giscard d'Estaing's presidency (1974–1981). Some people associated immigrant families who moved into social housing with increased ghettoization and higher crime and delinquency rates in those housing projects. Moreover, there were fears that immigrants from Northern Africa would be incapable of adapting to French culture (Shields 2007: 203).

Third, many voters were dissatisfied with the intensity and duration of the economic crisis in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Perrineau 1996: 33). After the two oil shocks (1973 and 1979) and the rise in unemployment under Giscard d'Estaing's government (more than 1.5 million people were jobless), Mitterrand sought to implement a neo-Keynesian economic policy to promote growth and reduce unemployment. The government nationalized several industries and banks, created 150,000 public-sector jobs, offered loans and subsidies to companies, and raised wages and welfare benefits. However, these policies resulted in a government budget deficit. The rise in wages reduced the profits of French companies, resulting in a decrease in investment and job creation. Furthermore, because of the overvalued franc, France's competitiveness on the international market was reduced; as a consequence, French enterprises struggled to export their goods. Finally, the increase in public consumption profited neighbouring countries such as West Germany (Shields 2007: 198). Altogether, the economic policies implemented by Mitterrand resulted in an increase in unemployment, recorded at 1,794,900 people in May 1981 and 2,005,000 people in May 1982 (12 % increase) (Favier and Martin-Roland 1990: 114). The public-sector spending also had negative effects on the government's ability to control inflation (which was as high as 14 % in the early 1980s) (Shields 2007: 200).

In the early 1980s, the FN capitalized on these developments by creating a new image centred on immigration and security (Simmons 2003: 67; Williams 2006: 82).

In particular, Stirbois and his supporters became a central component within the party pushing forward reforms.¹⁶ Most important, the FN attempted to hasten the rise of the immigration issue in public awareness. The party made the connection between immigration, on the one hand, and crime and unemployment, on the other hand. In a strategic move, it also capitalized on the socioeconomic crisis to advance xenophobic and authoritarian elements that had already become ingrained in the French political fabric. Similarly, the FN's defence of French nationals politicized anti-establishment attitudes (Arnold 2000: 254).

In another strategic move, Le Pen replaced the party's extremist discourse with a populist message that could appeal to a much wider audience (Marcus 1995: 12; Art 2011: 125). The FN began to use populism both as a means of differentiating itself from mainstream parties and presenting itself as an alternative to the political status quo. In particular, the FN-affiliated think tank GRECE had a significant influence when the party adapted some new language that emphasized concepts such as "difference", "identity", and "exclusion" (Davies 1999: 21). For instance, the FN embraced discourses that proposed exclusionary conceptions of community, thus countering the ideals of an internationalized and multicultural society (e.g. Mayer 2002; Ignazi 2003; Betz 2004). Finally, the FN and its leader effectively denounced the anti-colonial and integrationist values put forward by the left (Frey 1998: 74).

After the leftist win in the 1981 presidential elections, both main centre-right parties, the Union for French Democracy (UDF) and the Rally for the Republic Party (RPR), revised their platforms to adopt a more aggressive discourse and a more radical stance on immigration and social matters in order to reaffirm their conservative positions. In turn, this enabled the FN to gain legitimacy, as these new positions resembled their own (Ignazi 2013: 76–77). In addition, faced with ever-growing unemployment and social problems, such as the ghettoization of the suburbs around large cities such as Lyon and Marseille, many voters were losing faith in the established political system and confidence in its ability to address key issues. This resulted in a high level of pessimism about France's future, a problem on which the FN could capitalize (Ignazi 2013: 73).

The FN's electoral breakthrough came between 1981 and 1983 (Bornschiefer and Lachat 2009: 365). The party's 1981 legislative election campaign in the small town of Dreux provided its first partial success. Dreux was composed mainly of unskilled labourers living in public housing, who had witnessed a steady influx of immigrants during the 1960s and 1970s¹⁷ (Kitschelt 1995: 100). Le Pen and Stirbois organized support for the FN based on anti-immigration appeals, which they linked to insecurity and unemployment. This position resonated with voters; in Freedman's (2004: 40) view, it was the single most important issue through which

¹⁶Jean-Pierre Stirbois was a former Union solidariste member and activist for *OAS-Metropole*. He was among the most active members of the Tixier-Vignancour movement (Dézé 2012: 69). In 1977, he was appointed to the FN's political bureau, and he quickly became secretary general of the Comité Le Pen and, after 1978, second-in-command of the FN (Dézé 2012: 70).

¹⁷By the 1980s, the immigrant population in Dreux had reached approximately 30 % (Kitschelt 1995: 100).

the FN mobilized support. In fact, strong grass-roots mobilization and the exploitation of immigration as a main cause for unemployment and insecurity allowed the party to garner 13.6 % of the vote in Grande-Synthe and 12.6 % in Dreux-Ouest (Perrineau 1996: 41).

In the 1983 municipal elections, the FN was able to consolidate these successes. Le Pen won an astounding 11.26 % of the vote in the first round and was appointed municipal councillor in the 20th arrondissement of Paris. As it had in Dreux, Le Pen's campaign proved effective in neighbourhoods where unemployment was high and foreigners were poorly assimilated (DeClair 1999: 60). For his part, Stirbois won 16.72 % of the vote and was elected to the municipal council in Dreux (Charlot 1986: 43). Following these partial electoral victories, Le Pen capitalized on the media attention that he and his party received (see also Chap. 3). For example, he appeared on a television interview programme called *L'heure de vérité* (The Hour of Truth) on February 13, 1984 and embarked on a nationwide promotional tour. These efforts proved fruitful; by the spring 1984, 7 % of the French population indicated that they would vote for the FN, if they had to vote now. In Kling's (2012: 34) view, the FN was beginning to find an echo throughout France.

The momentum generated by the media and the municipal elections led to the FN's first national electoral success in 1984. The European elections that year sent shockwaves through France's political landscape (Betz and Immerfall 1998: 21; DeClair 1999: 61). Although a meagre 57 % of the discontented electorate bothered to cast a ballot, no fewer than two million voters (11.2 %) cast a vote for the FN (Betz and Immerfall 1998: 13). The proportional representation system and societal concerns over unemployment, immigration, security, and cutbacks in social services had played to the FN's strength (Dézé 2012: 75). To the surprise of established parties and the media, the party appeared to have suddenly shifted from the fringes of politics to become a major player in the French partisan system (DeClair 1999: 63).

2.5 The FN in the 1980s and the 1990s

The FN's 1984 electoral success not only increased its political visibility and legitimacy but also enabled it to build an organizational structure which attracted recruits at the grass-roots, mid-rank, and intellectual levels (Rydgren 2004: 19). For example, as part of their effort to professionalize the party, two cadres, Carl Lang and Martial Bild, created a school to train party elites and formed standing committees on various issues (DeClair 1999: 198). In addition, the party instituted an "organizational backbone" of politically experienced activists and

candidates¹⁸—most notably Edouard Frédéric-Dupont and Bruno Mégret¹⁹ (Rydgren 2004: 19).

These strategic changes boded well for the French far-right, as the FN won a national victory in the 1986 legislative elections. The party ascended to the National Assembly under the slogan *Rassemblement National* (National Rally) (Dézé 2012: 83). It garnered a respectable 9.65 % of the vote and won 35 (out of 577 seats)²⁰ (Pedahzur and Brichta 2002: 42; Kling 2012: 41). Noteworthy is that, in its attempt to limit socialist losses and weaken the moderate right, the Mitterrand government had changed France's electoral system from a two-round majoritarian system to proportional representation, thus allowing FN representation (Betz and Immerfall 1998: 21). In other words, strategic considerations by the French left were partly to blame for the ascendance of the FN and its representation in parliament. French voters were disillusioned by these electoral games and by the inability of established parties to address social concerns ranging from pensions to Islamic fundamentalism.

In such a situation of general dissatisfaction, the FN's populist discourse became well known, as Jean-Marie Le Pen regularly denounced the policies of the "gang of four"²¹ and the "system candidates" (Bornschier 2005: 23). The FN's populist strategy appeared to be effective, as its key issues were being increasingly absorbed by mainstream parties (cf. in Boulanger 1990: 37–40). The party brought its concerns to the top of the national political agenda, thereby forcing other political parties to take positions on particular issues—most notably immigration (Davies 1999: 1). Centre-right parties and politicians also borrowed elements of Le Pen's anti-immigration rhetoric as a competitive tactic to advance their own policy agenda²² (Betz and Immerfall 1998: 22). For instance, former president Giscard d'Estaing lamented the "immigrant invasion" in the *Figaro Magazine* (DeClair 1999: 93). Yet, the mainstream right's attempts to co-opt the immigration issue

¹⁸Other well-known intellectuals and politicians involved included Yvon Briant, Jean-Yves Le Gallou, Pascal Arrighi, and François Bachelot (DeClair 1999: 64).

¹⁹Bruno Mégret left the RPR (1978–1981) and joined the LePenist movement in 1985. He became highly influential among these new members. In particular, he is known for creating the FN's radical anti-immigration programme (1991), which outlined "50 concrete measures", including cancellation of naturalizations granted after 1974 and repealing the "anti-racist laws" that protect minority rights (Betz and Immerfall 1998: 16).

²⁰The FN temporarily made an alliance with the *Centre National des Indépendants et Paysans* (CNIP) party for the 1986 legislative elections.

²¹The FN used the term "gang of four" to describe what the party viewed as a corrupt oligarchy at the centre of French politics: the RPR (*Rassemblement pour la République*), the UDF (*Union pour la Démocratie Française*), the PS (*Parti Socialiste*), and the PCF (*Parti Communiste Français*) (cf. Davies 1999: 4).

²²For instance, hard-line Gaullists adopted tough anti-immigration rhetoric in the lead-up to the 1988 presidential elections in order to keep Gaullist voters from deserting to the FN (Merkel and Weinberg 1993: 41). However, in making the decision in 1988 to distance itself from the FN, the RPR government played into Le Pen's hands (in Merkel and Weinberg 1993: 41). The anti-immigration policies pursued by the post-1993 conservative government and the RPR interior minister, Charles Pasqua, also attested to the FN's influence in France's mainstream politics (Kitschelt 1995: 119).

redounded to the FN's advantage, giving credibility to the party's ethno-pluralist rhetoric and allowing Le Pen to assert that voters "prefer the original over the copy" (Mudde 2007: 241; Goodliffe 2012: 151; Betz and Immerfall 1998: 22). Likewise, the FN's nationalist standpoint was almost the exact opposite of the Socialists' "cosmopolitan" perspective during the Mitterrand era. This contrast enabled the FN to rail against the notions of integration and multiculturalism endorsed by the PS (cf. Davies 1999: 4).

In this propitious climate for the FN and Jean-Marie Le Pen, the party had its best-ever showing in the 1988 elections. Thanks to a well-planned campaign, under the slogan "*Le Pen, Le Peuple*" (Le Pen, the People), and a strong organizational capacity, the FN won 14.38 % of the vote in the presidential elections (DeClair 1999: 81). Its total vote (4,375,894 votes) represented unprecedented political progress in just 4 years. In absolute terms, the FN doubled its vote share from the 1984 European elections; this success was sufficient to solidify its place in national politics (Crépon 2012: 70). However, its showing at the legislative elections in 1988, which were held simultaneously with the presidential election, was less stellar. Although the party garnered a respectable 9.7 % of the vote, or 2,350,000 votes, the vote of the FN decreased, compared to the legislative election in 1986, in 115 districts. In addition, the return to the two-round majority system deprived it of basically all national representation. Not a single FN candidate received a majority in the first-round vote (Crépon 2012: 83), and only one candidate, Yann Piat, defended his seat, in Var's 3rd district.

More generally, by the late 1980s, the electoral success of the FN had plateaued. The media had become indifferent or hostile to Le Pen's frequent provocations, thereby depriving him of a national audience and significantly reducing his political prospects (Merkl and Weinberg 1993: 42). Le Pen's provocations also shone a negative light on the party. They had started on September 13, 1987, when, during an interview on *Grand Jury RTL-Le Monde*, Le Pen infamously referred to the gas chambers in Nazi Germany that killed millions of Jews as "a detail" in the history of the Second World War (Kling 2012: 68; DeClair 1999: 89). One year later, in another reference to the gas chambers built by the Nazi regime, Le Pen referred to the minister of public service at the time, Michel Durafour, as *Monsieur Durafour Crématoire*.²³

Already weakened by Le Pen's *gaffes*, the FN faced a difficult challenge, especially in small towns and villages, in the 1988 municipal elections held at the end of that year, which required candidates for 36,000 communes. Lacking sufficient human resources, the party's leadership decided to concentrate its efforts on large urban areas. Even so, only 214 out of the 390 cities with a population of over 20,000 had an FN candidate (Perrineau 1998: 41). Despite some local successes (e.g. the party received 33 % of the vote in Marseille), the party's momentum appeared to have stalled. The crisis was aggravated by Stirbois's death in a car accident in November 1988 and the defection of no fewer than 18 regional

²³To explain the play of words, four (in French) means oven.

councillors to the National Centre of Independents and Peasants (*Centre National des Indépendants et Paysans*, (CNI)), RPR, and UDF (DeClair 1999: 64, 162). Nevertheless, predictions of the demise of the FN were premature.²⁴

Despite internal problems, increased criticism by the media, and the tacit agreement of republican parties not to forge an alliance with it, the FN secured 11 % of the national vote in the 1989 European elections (DeClair 1999: 91). It seemed that some internal reshuffles had borne their first fruit. In October 1988, Bruno Mégret was appointed general director of the party. As such he was in charge of the party's discourse and political strategy with the goal of establishing the FN's hegemony over right-wing politics (Perrineau 1998: 41). In particular, Mégret played a vital role in the popularization of the FN's rhetoric. Under his direction, the party changed the style of its programme and reformulated its xenophobic and exclusionary elements into politically normalized expressions²⁵ (Betz and Immerfall 1998: 17). In doing so, he strengthened the party's strategy of polarizing the political debate about its ideas and reached beyond its core constituency (Betz and Immerfall 1998: 17). Also in 1989, Mégret created the FN's in-house think tank, Conseil Scientifique. This initiative sought to improve the party's image in the academic sphere, in order to remove it from its marginal position within French politics (Gauthier 2009: 388).

After some internal turmoil in the early 1990s (several hundred party members renounced their party allegiance when the FN denounced the US-led foreign intervention in the first Gulf war in 1991 [Maréchal 1994: 45]), the last decade of the twentieth century offered several openings for the FN. In particular, the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the era of globalization, which became an extremely salient issue in French national politics, offered the FN a window of opportunity. Responding to social and economic globalization, the party developed a sophisticated argument against the nature of global capitalism and advocated a form of popular capitalism²⁶ that placed more emphasis on social and anti-neoliberal economics (Minkenberg and Perrineau 2007; Kitschelt 1995: 91). In this reformulation of its economic policy, which put more stress on the needs of the poor, the FN's guiding principle remained that the economy must serve the interest of the nation (Bornschier 2005: 32). As such, it arguably evolved towards "economic nationalism" characterized by a focus on national preference and protectionism (Davies 1999: 24). This repositioning also allowed it to advocate a "third way" between liberalism and socialism: "Neither Left nor Right: French" (Davies 1999: 22; Rydgren 2004: 128). The result was a market-liberal, anti-state

²⁴For example, Simone Veil, a cabinet minister for Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and president of the European parliament, stated in December 1989 that the FN had arrived at its final chapter and was on the verge of collapse (Perrineau 1998: 39).

²⁵For instance, by presenting a differentialist discourse under the slogan *Les Français d'abord* (The French first), Mégret skirted the anti-racist legislation and advanced a "disguised" xenophobia under an a priori principle of non-exclusion (Dézé 2012: 91).

²⁶Other terms for popular capitalism are "political entrepreneurialism" and "capitalist-authoritarianism" (cf. Minkenberg and Perrineau 2007; Kitschelt 1995: 91).

programme with populist-authoritarian aspects (Betz and Immerfall 1998: 14). In addition, the theme of globalization was incorporated into its political strategy and linked to populism, immigration, and security.

During the 1990s, the FN's populist appeal remained popular (Rydgren 2004: 112). The party's self-definition as the alternative to the mainstream moderate parties was being increasingly absorbed by a large portion of its supporters.²⁷ Moreover, the FN had effectively influenced the mainstream right's discourse on immigration and insecurity. This polarized the rightist camp and shifted attitudes within traditional political cleavages (Lecoeur 2003a, b). For instance, the FN's nationalist discourse had gained considerable ground as rising fears about an impending monetary union led to declining support for the European Union.²⁸ As a result, the FN modified its divisive "us/them" discourse to include new political "enemies" such as elites from the European Union and international political institutions (Lecoeur 2003a, b). To remain as credible as possible, the party's new populist discourse matched these new considerations with familiar national-populist themes, including immigration and xenophobia; authoritarianism and authoritarian law-and-order policy; and a continued anti-party/system stance (Evans and Ivaldi 2005: 354).

This populist strategy translated into the FN winning up to 15 % of votes cast by the mid-1990s (Arnold 2000: 255). It received 13.9 % of the vote in the 1992 regional elections—more than triple the amount of votes (4.2 %) it received in the 1986 elections (DeClair 1999: 92). It more or less consolidated this proportion in the 1993 legislative elections, boasting 12.4 % of the total vote and 100 candidates passing the 12.5 % threshold in the first round (Rydgren 2004: 20). Le Pen's anti-EU campaign in the 1994 European elections earned the party 10.5 % of the vote and 11 seats in the European Parliament (Kling 2012: 94; DeClair 1999: 97). The year 1995 proved particularly successful for Le Pen and his party. In particular, the FN continued to benefit from Mégret's ability to provide skills and resources during the many elections in that year. As social cleavages rose between supporters of national sovereignty and Europeanization, Mégret formulated an isolationist discourse that framed the FN as a defender of the French nation (Crépon 2012: 49–50).

In the municipal elections held in the spring of 1995, a total of 1075 FN councillors were elected, while only 360 left office (Kling 2012: 87). In addition, the FN elected 250 regional councillors and three mayors in fair-sized cities.²⁹ Also

²⁷For instance, a 1990 survey showed that 71 % of FN activists who were delegates to the party's 1984 national convention would have abstained in the second round of any elections if the choice was between a candidate from the moderate right and a socialist (Ysmal 1991: 189–191).

²⁸Debate was particularly heated over the ratification of the Maastricht treaty. The narrow margin by which the initiative was ratified by the Socialist/RPR government was a repudiation of Mitterrand and underscored the discontent of French citizens with EU policy-making. Le Pen seized the opportunity to be a leading voice against these policies for EU integration (cf. DeClair 1999: 96). These mainly economic policies provided him with a discursive platform for cultural differentialism.

²⁹The FN took political power in Marignane, Toulon, and Orange (Perrineau 1997: 82).

that year, the party peaked in the parliamentary elections by winning 14.9 % of the votes cast (Rydgren 2004: 21). The corruption scandals that surfaced among ruling parties helped revitalize the FN's anti-establishment rhetoric during the 1995 presidential campaign.³⁰ Le Pen gained 15 % of the vote, with the support of 30 % individuals in low income jobs, 25 % of the unemployed, and 18 % of workers—the last being particularly surprising given that they were traditionally left-wing party supporters (Birenbaum et al. 1996: 349). To cater to their new supporters, Le Pen and the FN began to actively solicit workers. For example, during the large public sector workers' strike, Mégret and other activists visited workers at the Moulinex plant in Mamers to show their support (Perrineau 1998: 47–48). In 1995 and 1996, the FN also became involved in the syndicate movement by founding two unions: one for police officers and one for prison guards (Perrineau 1998: 47–48).

In the 1997 legislative elections, the FN continued to rise, attracting about one million new or former supporters (Williams 2006: 85). The party received 15.24 % of the vote and was considered to be the third most important political force in France (DeClair 1999: 104).³¹ It appeared that it had become a serious contender in French political life (Berezin 2007: 133). Only 15 years after its first electoral success in Dreux in 1983, the FN was beginning to challenge the mainstream parties, the PS and the RPR. Over two decades, the party had progressed from the fringes to the centre of national politics in spite of an onslaught of organizational and institutional challenges.

2.6 Crisis and Renewed Success

The FN's rise in electoral fortune and popular perception was (temporarily) crushed in December 1998, when the internal struggles between party leader Jean-Marie Le Pen and his *de facto* number two, Bruno Mégret, came to the fore. These struggles had begun in 1995, when Mégret officially criticized the strategic orientation of the FN (Dézé 2012: 125). As a contender to replace Le Pen as party president, Mégret developed permanent ties with other right-wing parties to enhance the role of the FN within French politics. This strategy resembled that of Gianfranco Fini, leader of the National Alliance party in Italy, who participated in Berlusconi's government. However, Le Pen rejected this approach; he was not interested in alliances and wanted to stay on the far-right fringe (Gauthier 2009: 391). Mégret's more moderate stance also did not sit well with the party's hard-core nationalists, who

³⁰In addition to anti-immigration and security measures, Le Pen's campaign planks included the promise to create a Sixth Republic to replace the scandal-plagued institutions of the Fifth Republic (DeClair 1999: 97–100).

³¹In a by-election in February, Catherine Mégret won 52.5 % of the vote to become mayor of Vitrolles (Williams 2006: 88).

preferred ideological purity to political expediency (DeClair 1999: 163). This strategic dispute between Le Pen and Mégret continued into the party convention in Strasbourg in 1997, providing the image of a rather divided party.

The conflict over isolationism versus alliances with the mainstream right aggravated the rivalry between Le Pen and Mégret (Williams 2006: 87). Tensions peaked over the nominations in the 1999 European elections. After Le Pen physically assaulted socialist candidate Aline Paulevast during a campaign event in Mantes-la-Jolie in May 1997, a French court suspended his civic rights for 2 years. Consequently, he could not run in the 1999 European elections and had to withdraw his name (Dézé 2012: 115). Mégret was next in line to occupy the top position on the FN's list. However, Le Pen nominated his wife, Jany, as the chief candidate for the 1999 European elections and not Mégret. When criticized by Mégret and his supporters, Le Pen's response was scathing: "There is but one number in the FN; it is the number one" (Gauthier 2009: 392).

By mid-1998, Le Pen began to marginalize Mégret and his allies. He attacked Mégret's character and integrity, dismantled the youth group (*Renouveau Étudiant*) developed by Mégret, and demoted Mégret on the list for the 1999 European elections (Dézé 2012: 125). Finally, tensions between the opponents exploded at the party's national congress in December 1998, when Mégret stated that Le Pen had now become a handicap for the party (Gauthier 2009: 393). Mégret's fate, along with that of his allies, was sealed. The executive bureau, in which Le Pen supporters had the majority, voted to expel Mégret and his supporters from the party (Dézé 2012: 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: the FN received only 5.7 % of the votes (Berezin 2007: 137; Rydgren 2004: 18) and the MNR secured 3.3 % (Evans and Ivaldi 2005: 362; Dézé 2012: 130). Despite the MNR's defeat, the split was a considerable blow to the FN's ideological footing and organizational development: it lost not only its most prominent strategist but also close to half of its members. Yet, the FN did not suffer a permanent decline (Rydgren 2004: 21; Williams 2006: 87). In 2002, only 3 years after the party's internal crisis, and still deprived of a substantial portion of its caucus, Le Pen scored the best result in the party's history with an astonishing 16.9 % (4.8 million) of the national vote in the first round of the presidential election, bypassing the socialist candidate, Lionel Jospin, who won 16.2 % of the popular vote (Crépon 2012: 66). In the second round of the elections, the FN was able to capture 17.8 % of the votes cast (Rydgren 2004: 22; Goodliffe 2012: 137).

The 2002 election results made Le Pen the first leader of a nationalist party to accede to the second round of a presidential election in France. This election result was surprising even for FN members. The party was still recovering from the loss of at least half of its executive and activists, who either joined Mégret's MNR or, frustrated with this internal struggle, simply left politics altogether (Crépon 2012: 66). Several, mainly structural reasons accounted for the FN's surprisingly strong showing in the presidential elections. On the one hand, left-right "cohabitation" had accentuated a sentiment of confusion that allowed the FN to denounce the

connections and personal ties between the political camps (Crépon 2012: 66). On the other hand, Chirac's campaign also indirectly served the FN's objectives, as he breached "frontist" themes related mainly to insecurity but also to immigration (de Lange 2007: 421).

However, this victory was not an unmitigated success for the FN, as it gave rise to ardent resistance by established parties and the French public. For instance, between the two rounds, defeated PS candidate Lionel Jospin went so far as to call for a block of Republicans of all stripes to unite against the nationalist threat presented by Le Pen (Crépon 2012: 65). Well beyond the second round of the presidential elections, the FN's credibility was seriously undermined by the media's anti-FN mobilization, which had a long-term impact on voters. Many FN members, such as Marie-Christine Arnautu,³² believe not only that the party would have come to power were it not for the media's manipulation of the French public, but also that Le Pen's victory hurt the party in the long run (Crépon 2012: 68–69). Regardless of the party's future prospects, the anti-FN mobilization revealed that the party did not have the democratic legitimacy that it was desperately trying to achieve.

It was during this time that Jean-Marie Le Pen's daughter, Marine Le Pen, began to take a very active role in the party's activities. With the support of Louis Aliot³³ and FNJ leader Samuel Maréchal, she endeavoured to revitalize the FN's image for a new generation of supporters, the "*Génération Le Pen*", which was founded by Jean Marie Le Pen's son-in-law, Samuel Maréchal, in 1998 (Crépon 2012: 56, 59). In 2000, she took up the presidency of this group of young FN supporters aiming to stop the "demonization" of the party. Her main goal was to improve the party's democratic legitimacy by expelling the more radical elements of *LePenism*. The 2007 electoral contests indicated that this "ideological" renewal was necessary. The party's vote share declined considerably; in the presidential elections, Jean-Marie Le Pen only received 10.75 % of the vote, and in the parliamentary elections the same year, the party's vote share dropped to less than 5 %. Yet, in subsequent elections, Marine Le Pen's strategy became influential within the FN and began to pay off (Williams 2006: 96).

Although Marine Le Pen and the party continued to campaign on nationalist-populist themes, they gradually refined the FN's discourse in a way that popularized its far-right ideas. This process of legitimization greatly contributed to the FN's ability to reverse its electoral slide. In the 2004 legislative regional and European elections, the party garnered 14.7 % and 9.8 % of the vote, respectively, whereas its moderate right-wing counterparts suffered defeat at the hands of the left on both occasions (Evans and Ivaldi 2005: 351). Bolstered by these electoral victories, Marine Le Pen continued to assume a "modernist" position that distanced her

³²Marie-Christine Arnautu is presently the FN secretary-general for l'Île-de-France and member of the Political Bureau and Central Committee (Crépon 2012: 67).

³³Louis Aliot joined the *Front National* in 1990. He acted as regional secretary (1998–1999) and has been regional councillor for Languedoc-Rousillon since 1998. Aliot is now FN vice-president, as well as member of the Executive Bureau, Political Bureau, and Central Committee (cf. Crépon 2012: 56–60).

from her father and softened the image of the FN (Dézé 2012: 139). Facing Bruno Gollnisch, representing the old image of the FN, in the internal elections to select Jean-Marie Le Pen's successor as president of the FN, Marine Le Pen incorporated this new image. Her *dédiabolization* (de-demonization) strategy was rewarded (Dézé 2012: 141; Kling 2012: 119). On January 16, 2011, she was voted in as the new president of the FN with 67.65 % support (11,546 votes); Gollnisch received 32.35 % support (5522 votes) (Dézé 2012: 141). Despite the discontent expressed by a few party members from the older generation who felt slighted, the transition occurred with astonishingly little tribulation, both within the FN and in the media (Kling 2012: 119).

2.7 The FN Under Marine Le Pen

So far, Marine Le Pen's *dédiabolization* strategy has proved successful not only internally but also externally in the electoral market (Coomarasamy 2011). She emerged as a strong candidate and rallied supporters under the slogan *Rassemblement Bleu Marine* in the 2012 presidential election (Goodliffe 2012: 137). Her platform mixed her fathers' signature issues of immigration, security, and national identity with a strong populist leftist message that included wage increases for workers and the re-nationalization of France.

The FN's campaign was a success; in the first round, Marine Le Pen received 18.03 % of the vote—an increase of almost 8 % from the results obtained by her father in 2007 (10.44 %). Although she did not come in second, as her father had done in 2002, she received 896,000 more votes than he had 10 years before. In the ensuing 2012 legislative elections, the FN received a total of 13.77 % of the votes (compared with 4.29 % in 2007) and won 2 seats in the National Assembly (Hewlett 2012: 414; Shields 2013: 189). The 2012 elections also marked the first time that the party managed to make significant gains in rural France and in the suburbs of large towns and cities (Hewlett 2012: 415).

The “new” *Front National* not only experienced a political revival in its appropriation of France's extreme-far-right space, it also gained more respectability in the eyes of the French public. In particular, Marine Le Pen's efforts to rebrand the party succeeded in modifying the opinion of a significant portion of the French population. Polls showed a decrease in the number of people who considered the FN a “danger” from 70 %, in 2002, to 53 %, in 2012 (TNS-Sofres 2012a). Another poll indicated that a slight majority of respondents saw the FN as “a party like the others” (TNS-Sofres 2012b). Finally, in a third poll, almost as many respondents felt that Marine Le Pen represented “a patriotic right attachment to traditional values” (41 %) as felt that she represented the “nationalist and xenophobic extreme right” (43 %) (TNS-Sofre 2012c).

In 2014, the FN tide continued to swell. In the March municipal elections, the FN won 12 towns and elected 1534 councillors—its best result ever on the local level. Most notable were its wins in Frejus, the 7th district in Marseille, and Hénin-

Beaumont (Laubacher 2014). In the European elections in May 2014, the FN success was even more pronounced. Winning an astonishing 25 % of the popular vote, the FN became the first party in France, passing the two moderate parties, the PS and the UMP, by several percentage points (the UMP came in second, with 20.8 % of the popular vote, and the PS came in third, garnering only 14 % of the vote). In total, the FN sent 24 deputies to Brussels and Strasbourg, making it not only the strongest party in France, but also the most successful radical right-wing party in Europe (*Ministère de l'Intérieur* 2014). In the 2015 departmental elections, the FN won 25.2 % of the vote, thus confirming its result in the 2014 European elections. In the December 2015 regional elections, the FN saw yet another moderate boost in its vote share, which stood at 27.9 %. However, this success plateaued in the second round. Although it elected regional councillors in all metropolitan regions, the FN garnered only 19 % of the vote in this second tour (*Ministère de l'Intérieur* 2015b).

It would be wrong to overestimate the electoral success of the FN; the European elections in 2014, as well as the 2015 departmental and regional elections, took place in the context of an ongoing economic crisis, record high unemployment, record low support for President Hollande, and internal conflicts within the centre-right-wing party, the UMP. In this context, there is the possibility that some voters used these second-order elections to direct their anger against the mainstream parties and their inability to resolve the economic, political, and social crises that France has been facing (Pertusot and Rittelmeyer 2014). This scenario is even more likely when we consider that electoral participation hit a record low: less than 50 % of the French electorate cast a ballot in the European elections and in the first round of the departmental and regional elections.

Nevertheless, it would also be wrong to underestimate the FN's success. The Front capitalized on the favourable structural conditions on the ground; Le Pen and her party convinced one out of four voters to support them. The party has also doubled its membership over the past three to 4 years. With over 80,000 dedicated members and a (latent) support base of around five million French voters, the party is well equipped to continue to play an important role in French politics. However, there are also some potential spoilers, which might keep it from continuing to rise in the polls and public opinion. In addition to the structural conditions, Marine Le Pen is having an open fight with Jean-Marie Le Pen over the strategic orientation of the party, and the former leader is continually challenging her leadership. In fact, after reiterating his anti-Semitic statements and (partial) denial of the Holocaust, Jean-Marie Le Pen has become more and more of a problem to his daughter. In the light of some internal turmoil and fights, the latter has (temporarily) expelled the former from the party. Although Jean-Marie Le Pen is contesting this expulsion and the two leaders are engaged in some nasty battles, this tumult has not hurt the FN. Throughout 2015, the party continued to score high in opinion polls. According to the Ifop representative survey conducted on September 3 and 4, 2015, Marine Le Pen is credited with a near-record 29 % of vote intentions. There is also no sign of a mass exodus of FN members. Hence, the FN is likely to continue to play a major

role in French politics in the years to come—although how major a role is up for debate.

In this book, I want to put the recent success of the FN into perspective. What, if anything, has changed in the supply side of right-wing support and activism between Jean-Marie Le Pen and Marine Le Pen? To what degree have the FN's programme and ideology changed? Is there some real shift to the centre, or has the FN just repackaged its slogans differently, or is there no programmatic change at all? These questions have strong repercussions for the demand side of activism. How have the membership and the voters changed? Who are the millions of new voters and tens of thousands of new members? Why do they support the FN? These questions are of utmost importance if we want to understand the party and its electoral successes. By discussing the change (or lack thereof) in the party's ideology between Marine Le Pen and Jean-Marie Le Pen, the leadership styles and composition of the party elites of the two leaders, the party's membership before and after the leadership transition, and the FN voters under Marine Le Pen and Jean-Marie Le Pen, I provide answers to these questions in the following four chapters.

The Front National in France
Continuity and Change Under Jean-Marie Le Pen and
Marine Le Pen

Stockemer, D.

2017, VII, 113 p. 3 illus. in color., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-49639-9