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“HERITAGE POPULISM” AND FRANCE’S NATIONAL FRONT

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The established democracies are in a state of major upheaval. For Europe in particular, the years since the late 1980s have brought two powerfully destabilizing changes. The first is internal. It concerns population aging and its consequences. These include welfare states that are becoming harder to afford, immigration, and the ethnocultural recomposition of societies, with Islam emerging as a key issue. The second is external and relates to economic, technological, and cultural globalization. Increasingly, Europe is finding that control over its fate lies beyond its own borders.

As a result of these changes, ever more Europeans are coming to feel that both their material standards of living and their accustomed ways of life are being eroded. Meanwhile, mainstream parties of the left and right have governed—whether in turn or jointly—for the past quarter-century without devising solutions. Voters have become disillusioned and more inclined to turn to populist parties. The latter have benefited from the growing saliency of problems that mainstream parties have ignored or for which, at any rate, they have been blamed. These include not only heavy flows of refugees and migrants into Europe, but also (to one degree or another depending on the country) corruption, unemployment, and terrorism.

A new form of populism has emerged on the right. Its proponents emphasize the protection of heritage, whether tangible (living standards) or intangible (ways of life). This “heritage populism” combines hostility toward elites with opposition to the European Union, immigrants, and
Islam. In a departure from recent history, this wave of populism is affecting not only the whole of Europe but also the United States. Back in the 1970s and 1980s, populist elements in the U.S. Republican Party influenced the Norwegian Progress Party and the French National Front (FN). Now, “Trumpism” appears to be an early U.S. manifestation of populism influenced by globalization-era Europe. With all its unbridled demagoguery, xenophobia, condemnation of the elite, and stigmatizing rhetoric, Trumpism is the U.S. take on heritage populism.

On both sides of the Atlantic, this type of populism reflects the consternation felt by people in the Western world who fear the loss of both economic and cultural influence as globalization prompts a worldwide redistribution of power. The FN is the French face of this new brand of populism. Although the FN is not new, having been founded in 1972, it has been gaining influence since the mid-1980s and especially since 2012. At present, no one doubts the ability of its leader Marine Le Pen (b. 1968) to be one of the two candidates to reach the runoff in France’s May 2017 presidential election.

In France, mainstream parties of the right and left have controlled political life since the Fifth Republic’s inception in 1958. Despite some partisan posturing, the center-right and center-left promoted an implicit consensus that upheld the Fifth Republic (meaning especially the popular election of the president), a generous welfare state, closer European integration, and an Atlanticist foreign policy (albeit in a version laced with criticism of the United States). Going back to 1958, every single presidential and parliamentary majority supported this consensus. For most of that time, the leading “outsider” group was the French Communist Party (PCF), which during the Cold War was the Western world’s most powerful (and also most openly Stalinist) communist party. The PCF raised its voice against Atlanticism and European integration, but its presence faded across the decades and once the Cold War ended it virtually disappeared. The FN, which first entered the National Assembly (then a body of 573 members) with 35 seats in 1986, is now France’s dominant anticonsensus party.

Personalization and Its Limits

The FN has changed significantly since its inception. At first it wafted along on the winds of circumstance and the media flair of its founder, Jean-Marie Le Pen (b. 1928). Soon it reached an impasse, however, and could not turn its electoral potential into results. Jean-Marie Le Pen’s poor showing in the 2007 presidential election—he won 10.4 percent, far behind the two frontrunners—raised questions about the FN’s future. In early 2011, his daughter Marine Le Pen took over as leader after an internal election held by mail. It was more than a change of faces: The FN now takes a more systematic and ambitious approach to policy mak-
ing, and hopes that the current climate of crisis and the decline of the mainstream right and left will provide a path to power.

Until the early 1980s, the FN was confined to the dark parallel world of the far right, refusing more or less explicitly to endorse the legacy of the French Revolution and human rights. At first, the party tried to unify various small groups dwelling on the margins of ideological radicalism. This effort succeeded. The FN imposed itself as the main far-right party, albeit only after intense internal conflict that at times involved physical violence. From the outset, insecurity and immigration were high on its policy agenda. Yet electoral success proved elusive. In the 1974 presidential election, Jean-Marie Le Pen could not secure even 1 percent of the vote. The FN barely registered in the 1978 parliamentary elections and failed to contest the 1979 European Parliament elections, and in 1981 Jean-Marie Le Pen failed to qualify for the French presidential ballot.

In an era shaped by the aftermath of the Second World War, the end of the colonial empire, support for European integration, and a desire among the French for democracy, the farther ends of the political spectrum struggled to remain relevant. The traditional far right found itself sidelined amid the postwar boom, while the PCF saw its own influence start to wane long before communism’s historic collapse in 1989.2

The climate changed in 1981, when Socialist Party (PS) candidate François Mitterrand won the presidential election, and then called snap legislative elections that produced a left-wing parliamentary majority. It was the first time in the history of the Fifth Republic that the mainstream right had been defeated. Jean-Marie Le Pen saw it as an auspicious moment for the return of the “real” right. The left, meanwhile, had to face the challenges of office and the associated litany of disappointments and frustrations that being “in charge” always brings. The FN was left free to castigate both the left-wing government and its moderate rightist opposition. In the 1984 European Parliament balloting, the FN won an 11 percent vote share—its first taste of electoral success.

Political game-playing by the Socialists also helped the FN. For almost two decades after 1984, the French left made Jean-Marie Le Pen its hidden ally. It is now widely acknowledged that Mitterrand imposed an impossible decision on the right: Make a pact with the FN and immediately be shamed, or lose elections. Mitterrand asked public-broadcasting executives to give FN candidates more television time. The PS created and manipulated the SOS Racisme antiracist movement (whose first president was the Socialist politician Harlem Désir) and sought to turn the issue of immigrant voting rights to partisan advantage as well: By consistently promising to grant such rights to those who did not have French nationality, Mitterrand was provoking a strong negative reaction from right-wing electors and leading them to vote for the FN. Finally, just a few months before the 1986 elections, the Socialist government
introduced proportional representation in order to help the FN split the right in the National Assembly.

No party benefited more from these manipulations than the FN. It scored its first major success in the 1988 presidential election, when Jean-Marie Le Pen won 4.3 million votes, or 14.4 percent. Seven years later, he won 4.5 million votes, good for 15 percent.

The constant media and political turmoil around the elder Le Pen gave his rhetoric broader exposure and drew new voters—including former members of the Communist and Socialist electorates—to FN candidates. The mainstream right, meanwhile, found itself backed into a corner. In September 1988, the political office of the Rally for the Republic (or RPR, the Gaullist party of that time) had to announce that it was banning “any national or local alliances with the FN.” This step was needed in order to quash rumors that RPR founder Jacques Chirac, who earlier that year had suffered his second straight failed presidential bid, was pondering an electoral coalition with Le Pen.3

Chirac did finally win the presidency in 1995, and in 1997 called an early parliamentary election. Contrary to Chirac’s hopes, this balloting brought the left to power with a hefty 55.4 percent of seats in the National Assembly, but only through a process that relied on the FN to split the right-of-center vote. The left’s actual vote share was about 46 percent; it acquired its seat bonus only through the presence of candidates from the FN (which had commanded a first-round vote share of almost 15 percent) in the three-way contests that dominated the second round of voting. In some cases, leftist candidates actually won their “triangular” races with only minority vote shares thanks to the FN’s effectiveness in siphoning votes away from the establishment right.

In the 1998 regional elections, the FN again proved a thorn in the center-right’s side. In some regions, rightist candidates (albeit not from the RPR) gave into the temptation to form liaisons with the FN, only to back away pathetically from them when stung by intense criticism. Still later, however—call it ironic or poetic justice—the left itself became the most dramatic victim of its own “Mitterrand ploy.” This happened in 2002, when Jean-Marie Le Pen edged out Socialist premier Lionel Jospin for second place in the presidential first round by gaining 16.9 percent to Jospin’s 16.2 percent. This launched the FN standard-bearer into a runoff against Chirac while leaving the left frozen out completely.

Jean-Marie Le Pen grew the FN with media stunts—his specialty was provocative claims about the tragedies of the Second World War—but without party alliances this led nowhere. The FN was entering a critical phase. Some of its members were calling for a strategic alliance with the mainstream right, and a faction split away in order to try this. Not much came of that, but the 2002 elections showed the underlying problem: Although Jean-Marie Le Pen made the May 2002 presidential runoff, Chirac obliterated him in that contest by 82.2 to 17.8 percent. And in the
legislative elections held a month later, the FN drew only 11.3 percent and failed to win even a single seat.

Under Jean-Marie Le Pen, in short, the FN was a protest party. It could make noise, but it had no real plan for gaining power. It is remarkable that neither the party nor its leader appeared to take stock of European societies’ shift to the right or the consequences of a new climate shaped by the collapse of communism, the rise of globalization, and the graying of traditional European populations. The high approval ratings that Chirac’s former interior minister Nicolas Sarkozy was winning should have told Jean-Marie Le Pen that his own rhetoric was losing its frisson of originality.

Enter Heritage Populism

Since the FN amounted to little more than its leader, it seemed possible that after him it would fade away. Many observers believed that his poor (10.4 percent) showing in the 2007 presidential race heralded the beginning of the end. Instead, the FN began to undergo basic changes with Marine Le Pen’s January 2011 confirmation as its new elected leader. Although the shared surname gave a misleading sense of continuity, there was no doubt that the party was taking a new path. The FN joined the Europe-wide ranks of heritage populism. As noted above, this new brand of populism is built on material and cultural concerns prompted by economic globalization and population aging. Its characteristic feature is a propensity to invest intangible heritage with a set of values, principles, and rules that supposedly inhere in the European or Western way of life, such as individual freedoms, gender equality, and secularism. Previously, populists aroused mass protests by opposing liberal democracy. Today, they present themselves as the chief protectors of liberty, blaming the elite and the mainstream parties for failing to uphold the values and rules of liberal society and for being complacent about the rise of multiculturalism and Islamism—trends that populists trace to irresponsible immigration policies.

In Europe, far-right parties have recast themselves as national-heritage populists, showing formidable skill in appropriating the role of liberal society’s defenders. This has secured them a considerably larger audience and enabled them to gain much greater influence. This movement originated in 2002 in the Netherlands when the openly gay Pim Fortuyn (1948–2002) came to media attention as the sworn enemy of immigration, Islam, and multiculturalism—a stance that he took in the name of freedom and tolerance, including respect for sexual orientation.

Hostility toward Islam and immigrants, a key element of far-right political thought, is now no longer necessarily based purely on racist assertions or expressions of xenophobic contempt, but on a feigned concern with defending secularism, gender equality, freedom of speech, and
press freedom. Now the populists even claim to be defending journalists and intellectuals. The Iranian death *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie for the latter’s 1988 novel *The Satanic Verses* and the 2005–2006 storm over the publication of Muhammad caricatures in a Danish newspaper aided populists in this goal. This is the theme now adopted by many European political movements that oppose immigration.

When Marine Le Pen compared Islam to “occupation” in December 2010, she was automatically condemned—perhaps because she included a reference to the Second World War—with inaccurate charges that she was following in her father’s rhetorical footsteps. In fact, she was breaking with him. She had become the first FN representative to stigmatize an opponent by comparing that person to the immoral figure of a “fascist” or “Nazi.” Like the iconoclastic Italian essayist Oriana Fallaci, Marine Le Pen views immigrants as representing a new form of fascism. She claims to oppose anti-French forces in the manner of Joan of Arc, a favorite symbol of the French far right for more than a century, but also in the manner of the World War II–era French Resistance (not a model that the far right has heretofore been fond of citing).

Heritage populism is already found across Northern Europe as well as in Austria, Greece, Italy, and Switzerland. Now France is going that way too. If parties that used to be seen as far-rightist start denouncing immigration in the name of defending liberal democracy, it will become harder to convince voters not to back them. The struggles that governing parties have had in managing the public-finance crisis have added to heritage populism’s appeal as an alternative. Heritage populism has the potential to attract a very broad electoral base. Many middle- and working-class voters worry a great deal about falling living standards and threatened ways of life.

Officially, the FN has split from the quasi-fascists of the reactionary, anti-Semitic, and dogmatic far right. Dreams of ideological revenge have been abandoned. Time has passed and these conflicts have lost their meaning. Some call this a strategy to “detoxify” the party, charging that the FN is simply trying to hide its real antirepublican agenda. It would be more accurate, however, to call the changes within the FN formalizations of a new appeal accompanied by a new strategy.

**An Ethnosocialist Agenda**

Marine Le Pen launched her 2012 presidential campaign on 11 September 2011 in Nice, with a speech symbolizing this shift. She capitalized on the demise of the PCF and the gulf that the Socialist Party had allowed to develop between itself and working-class voters in order to put forth an agenda featuring a mix of socialism and nationalism. She promised to defend the essence of French social identity and “our social model, our public services, our pensions.” She charged that immigration
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policy was being made to serve employers by “driving down wages at the expense of workers.”

Such words could equally have been spoken by leaders of the far left. While the mainstream right seemed to blame the unemployed for not trying hard enough to find work, Marine Le Pen said that the lack of job uptake proved the insufficiency of pay levels. Using a winning formula pioneered by the new populist parties of Europe, she made ethnosocialism her own. Her father had condemned the welfare state in the name of shopkeepers’ and small business owners’ desire for lower taxes. She accepted the popularity of the welfare state, but wanted to ensure that only French people could reap its benefits. “National solidarity is for nationals!” is the new version of the old far-right slogan, “France for the French!” Foreign nationals in France, she said at Nice, “should take care of themselves.” Then she added, “French people should be given priority for the few available jobs.” She blamed the national debt on the EU, welfare fraud, immigration, tax breaks, and decentralization.

The enemies she denounced are globalization, inaccessible transnational authorities, and elusive forces that break down the border between inside and out. She condemned the “technocratic three-headed monster” of the IMF, the EU, and the European Central Bank. Banks and markets are “the new masters,” she complained. “Mass immigration” is “funded by taxpayers,” while “assimilation is impossible” since “cultures are too different” and these differences give rise to “multicultural societies which are multiconflictual societies.”

She decried a decline in secularism that she ascribed solely to the influence of Islam, citing Muslim street prayers, mosque construction, the activities of the French Council of the Muslim Faith, and even the wider availability of halal products. She assumed the task of “defending our culture, identity, values, and republic.” She promised protectionism and reindustrialization under the rule of a “strong state,” and vowed to “manage the public finances with an iron fist.”

This rhetoric illustrates the switch to heritage populism. The appeal is to both working- and middle-class voters; to both those who labor for small businesses and those who own them; and to both private- and public-sector workers. The message is both social and national, appealing to voters on the left and right. It reflects grievances against the EU (and its common currency), the banks, the powerful, immigration, Islam, and even pay differentials. The “no” camp that rejected the draft European constitution in France’s 2005 referendum had made a similar case and won, but back then the FN had been caught in crisis-management mode (among other things, its leaders were busy trying to stave off a looming bankruptcy). Marine Le Pen’s 2011 address was more ambitious. The third incarnation of the FN, whose program she outlined, aims to pursue power in alliance with the French right. The goal is to win local and regional majorities and maybe even to share power at the national level.
This is the plan behind the FN’s conversion to heritage populism. Amid a historic crisis of French public finance, with a huge and structural national budget deficit threatening to render the welfare state unaffordable and drawing recurrent EU warnings, we must consider the electoral potential of a party that is highly critical of immigration, insecurity, Islam, and the public deficit, while also lashing out at bankers, the rich, globalization, Europe, and the euro, and which moreover now presents itself as the great defender of the welfare state and the French social model.

The FN is hoping for electoral results similar to those achieved by the Progress Party in Norway, the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, and the Finns (formerly True Finns) party in Finland, all of which have won 20 percent or more of the vote. Scores such as those of the Swiss People’s Party or the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ)—nearing or even topping 30 percent—would be even better. Conditions seem to favor the FN: The mainstream parties are in disrepute and decline amid economic and financial woes, the refugee and migrant crisis, the rise of militant Islam, and the wave of terror attacks that swept France in 2015 and 2016.

The whole of Europe may be going the FN’s way. The 2016 Austrian presidential election, which the FPÖ won after a runoff so close that a court ordered it rerun, may be a harbinger. So might be Brexit. Xenophobic and anti-European populists are gaining ground. They are on the verge of taking power.

In France, Jean-Marie Le Pen gained 17.7 percent in the 2002 presidential runoff with less socially focused policies and in an economic climate far more favorable to the mainstream parties. A decade later, his daughter surpassed this showing with 17.9 percent in the April 2012 first round. The FN’s electoral performances since then show no loss of momentum. In the June 2014 European Parliament balloting, no single party did better than the FN, which gained almost a quarter of the vote.

In the March 2015 first round of the département elections, the FN once again showed its electoral dynamism with a 25.2 percent showing that nearly doubled the Socialist vote share of 13 percent. And in the December 2015 regional elections—held within a month after the Bataclan attacks in Paris—the FN attained an all-time high with 27.7 percent, finishing ahead of both the rightist coalition (26.6 percent) and the Socialist-led alliance (23.1 percent).

**President Le Pen?**

Since 1983, the FN’s gains have come at the expense of the mainstream parties. The December 2015 regional balloting showed this with special clarity. The FN picked up right-wing voters disillusioned with the conventional right’s behavior when in power, and left-wing voters disillusioned with how the left had governed when it had been given the
chance. Something similar—call it 360 degrees of disillusionment—had happened in 2002 when Jean-Marie Le Pen beat Jospin in the first presidential round.

In May 2017, Marine Le Pen will in all likelihood reach the presidential runoff. If that happens, it will show beyond any doubt that mainstream parties no longer control French political life. In the runoff, as in 2002, the overriding goal will be to deny Le Pen the presidency. Thus left-wing voters will feel obliged to vote for a rightist candidate (Sarkozy, perhaps) as the only alternative to Le Pen, while right-wing voters (should Marine Le Pen end up facing a leftist) would be compelled by the same “stop Le Pen” logic to vote for a left-wing candidate. The upshot in either case will be a French president with no substantive mandate to govern, elected only to bar Marine Le Pen and the FN from the highest office in the land. Any real plan for reform will be out of the question. The only order of the day will be avoiding a systemic crisis at the heart of the Fifth Republic’s key political institutions.

Marine Le Pen, meanwhile, is hoping that she will stand to gain the most from the successive failures of the right, which lost to François Hollande and the Socialists in 2012, and of the left, which currently faces more opposition than at any time since 1958. If she underperforms, intraparty debate about the FN’s future will probably break out again. The options will be to return to the Jean-Marie Le Pen model of an antisystem party without aspirations to govern, or to seek an unprecedented electoral coalition with the right that could lead to a share of power but also possibly to disappointed voters and a PCF-style fadeout.

The main barrier to forging an alliance with the right is the FN’s plans to organize a referendum on leaving the EU and the common currency. If the FN were to relinquish its Euroskepticism, it would risk losing a vital part of its identity and its electorate, but would also pave the way to a role in government. Such an alliance would be very risky for the mainstream right, as it would subject it to significant public hostility. Many of its voters and indeed its elected officeholders would never accept such cooperation with the FN. On the right, those most in favor of Europe, the market economy, devolution, civil rights, tolerance, and moderation in public debate would immediately reject such a coalition.

No one can predict how French society, Europe, and the world might react if Marine Le Pen wins the presidency in 2017. France has 5.3 million public employees—close to 8 percent of the population—and they mostly lean left. Strikes and huge demonstrations could break out. Unions could shut down or limit public transport (including airports) and even power generation. The media, academia, and the intelligentsia would enter a state of permanent protest. Areas that are home to
numerous immigrants or people of immigrant origin would likely be on a hair trigger, with insurrection a possibility. Law and order may prove particularly sensitive: In 2015, more than half (51.5 percent) of all police officers and active-duty military personnel (including members of the Gendarmerie Nationale) who cast ballots voted for the FN.8

Following the Greek crisis, Brexit, the 2016 Austrian presidential election, and a possible large-scale financial crisis in Italy, the election of a populist French president would shake Europe and the EU deeply. Yet the voting system under which the June 2017 parliamentary elections will be conducted will put an FN National Assembly majority out of reach. In France, the holder of the presidency needs such a majority in order to wield most of the office’s powers. The likeliest result of Marine Le Pen’s election, therefore, would be not dictatorship but chaos. And yet from chaos dictators have been known to emerge.

The FN has pledged to reinstate the franc and to take France out of the EU. With its statist, centralist, anti-American, pro-Russian, and anti-European positions, the FN is eerily reminiscent of the PCF. Yet the Communists steadily waned from a postwar peak, while the FN’s arc of influence so far has moved upward.

The possibility of an FN president can be traced to the unique nature of the French political system. France is the only established democracy whose head of state is invested with considerable powers while also being directly elected by the people (the U.S. president is chosen via the Electoral College, not direct election). France, in other words, has the most inviting electoral system for populists. A parliamentary system would leave the FN short of a majority despite its electoral clout. In the current climate of economic and social crisis, the French presidential election is providing a forum for protest votes in exactly the same way as have referendums such as Brexit and, a decade before that, the 2005 French vote that said no to the European constitution.

In a time of crisis, a French presidential election is just as dangerous as a referendum. In contrast to the British referendum, which was optional, the French presidential election is constitutionally mandated. While the reputedly pragmatic British opted to play Russian roulette once, the supposedly rational French play this dangerous game every five years. The consequences in 2017 may be ominous for both France and Europe.
NOTES


5. For a video of the speech, see www.frontnational.com/videos/11-septembre-acropolis-nice-%E2%80%93-discours-de-marine-le-pen-videos.

6. All quotes are from Marine Le Pen’s 11 September 2011 speech in Nice.


8. This figure is from Luc Rouban, “Les fonctionnaires et le Front national,” Center for Political Research (CEVIPOF), Sciences Po, December 2015, available as Note 3, Wave 1, Slide 3 at www.enef.fr/les-notes.