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THE FAR RIGHT IN FRANCE AND THE CRISIS

Paper by

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The aim of this paper is to show the recent evolutions of the radical right in French Politics. The media, along with a certain number of political actors have made numerous warnings concerning the ascension of the main radical right party, the Front national (FN). Such success of extremist ideologies must however not be exaggerated. However it is worth mentioning that a significant amount of internal changes have recently taken place. Before these changes took place the FN's ideology and political message was considered by many as simply unacceptable and outrageous, however the FN has shifted towards the center of the political spectrum and is thus more likely to win elections.

Nevertheless the fact that the FN earned success as a contestation party may not be forgotten. Gathering many people and many movements who felt a loss of social status, the strength of its creator, and now former president, Jean-Marie le Pen was to bring together all kinds of different groups from OAS (supporters of French Algeria) to Lefebvrists (traditionalist Catholics). His daughter has now succeeded him a head of the party; this has brought up questions that have not been relevant for years. A new leadership also means a new discourse, and a new reception of this discourse in context of the recent economic crisis. This might also have the effect of inducing in the near future a concrete problem for the party itself: the cohesion of different movements. Throughout this paper, the main theme will be the reception of the economic crisis by the French radical right party, its transposition into its discourse and programs, and finally the impact of this discourse on the popularity of the party and the sociological composition of its supporters. It is worth noting that this paper has been written before Marine Le Pen took office at the head of the party.

First part: From one crisis to another, the strength of a discourse based on exclusion

Analyzing the Front national's discourse boils down to analyzing a way of doing politics on the basis of different themes, more than to underline the continuity of this discourse and position. Does this mean that the party is purely opportunistic, without any real doctrine? This is a simplistic view, as its discourse keeps a certain consistency despite its variations. Economic problems are relatively new in the FN's discourse and show a tendency to be opportunistic in the choice the themes. In addition to the fact that the FN tends to adopt

the very much the same style as mainstream parties, this attitude can be explained by the interest of the electorate.

Beyond the ideological variations and blatant differences between the various movements within the party, the FN succeeds in gathering support and bringing together people to “hold the front”. The previously mentioned differences and occasionally opposed social origins of FN voters do not play in favor of unity. The unity presented by the FN seems to be built around a common feeling of exclusion. This is illustrated in a significant way by the *topos* “Us versus Them”. Moreover, the party benefits from a special position within the political scene. The fact that it is excluded from the thus said scene by a good deal of other parties allows it to more efficiently criticize other parties because it believes it does so with good reason. Furthermore, the crisis has given the party an opportunity to exploit the theme of economic and financial exclusion.

The Front national is above all a party that plays on violence of words and of its discourse; the feeling that this party presents a violent nature is widespread in public opinion. Intuitively, its rhetoric seems to be what is responsible for the fact that people tend to associate the FN with a certain amount of violence. More than just a common front, the notion of a permanent struggle is used abundantly in its rhetoric. However, electoral objectives require a certain credibility that can be achieved only through a precise program that has been put together with these objectives in mind. This new economic debate without a doubt brings up another social debate, thus directly asking questions to other parties on the political spectrum that are in competition with the Front national.

Second part: FN vote, new tribune for social protest

The FN vote has become a means of protest during elections, perhaps at a lesser extent than abstention but with stronger implications. This protest vote is firstly marked by different receptions of the party discourse by the electorate, thereby legitimizing the vote despite significant differences of opinion; on the other hand, the theoretical unity the party tries to maintain throughout its discourse is reinforced in by the common and concrete action of its

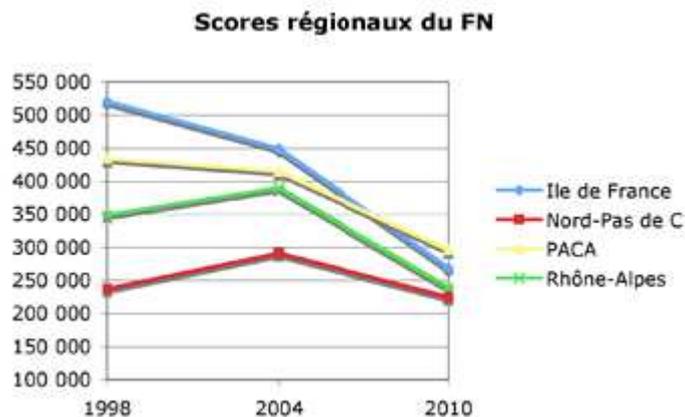
supporters. Finally, some ideological divergences exist between the different levels of involvement in the support of the FN.

The social profile of Front national voters is meant to change, gathering more and more votes of people that previously voted for other parties. This part of the electorate will sometimes be attracted purely by political sensibility, sometimes by a far more personal perception of one's own condition. This last point will create a sentimental vote, based on reaction, somehow distanced from a rational calculation based strictly on the party's program. In light of this phenomenon, the social profile of FN voters turns out to be different from one election to another.

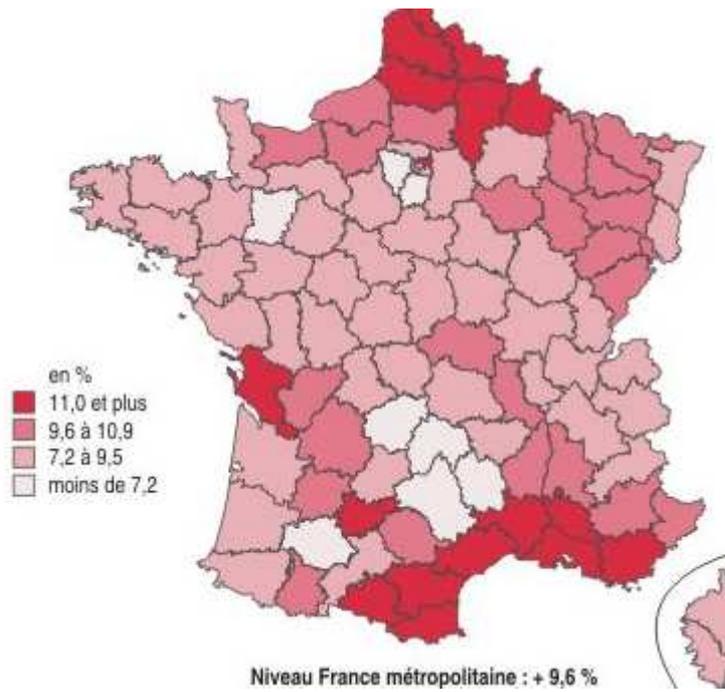
After the analysis of the shift from the discourse to the vote, one has to look at the party's election results, more precisely at those of the last election, and confront them with the impact that the 2008 crisis has on the population at different scales, thus enabling to identify some territorial logics between the extremist vote, the crisis and the strategy of the FN.

DOCUMENTS

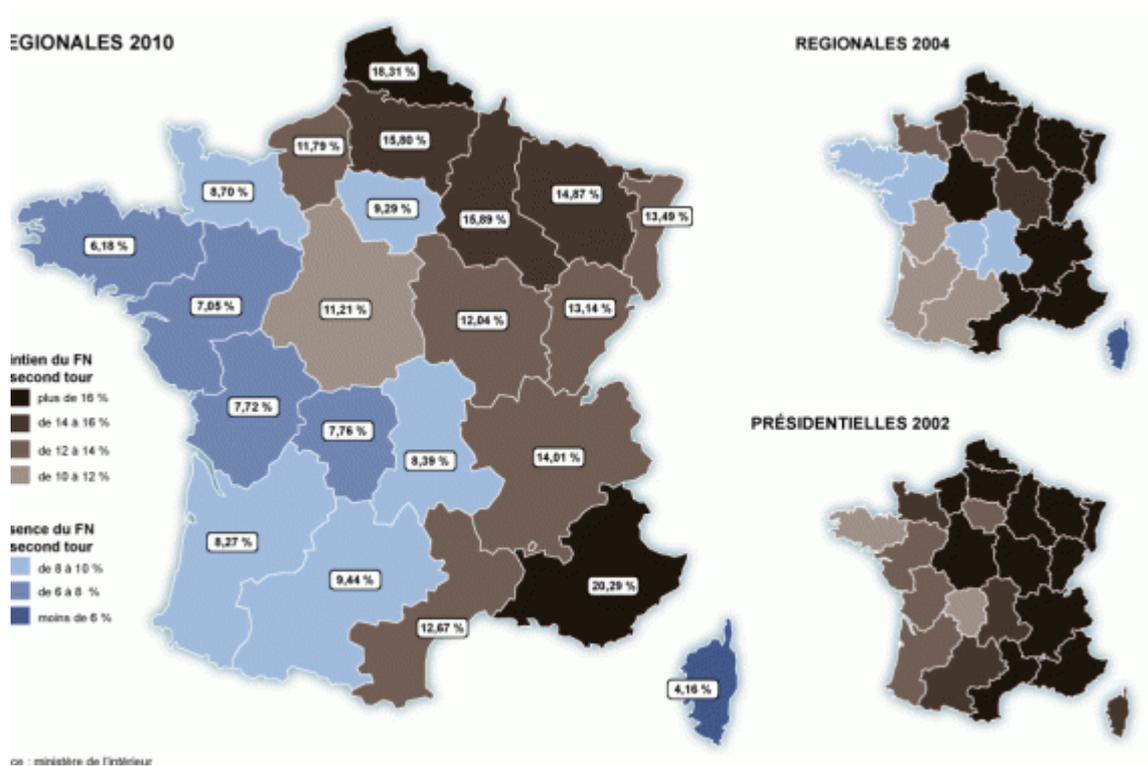
Regional scores of the Front national from 1998 to 2010



Unemployment rate in France during the 4th trimester of 2009...



... and its correspondence with the FN vote in the regional elections of 2010



(source: INSEE)