

# Marine Le Pen and the Populist Radical Right

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MATTHEW BROADBENT, AUG 26 2014

The 'populist zeitgeist' has impacted upon liberal democracies far and wide across Europe. However, no other has seen the establishment of such an influential and politically successful party than that of the Front National in France. Upon her ascension to the leadership of the party in 2011, Marine Le Pen promised to evolve the Front National from a party of dogmatic rhetoric under her father, to a 'Great Republican political party' with herself at the helm (Le Pen 2011). Achieving a 17.9 per cent share of the vote at the 2012 Presidential Election, the highest ever for the Front National, it can certainly be argued that Marine has delivered on that promise (Mayer 2013, p.160). As with any populist political party, however, success owes to much more than simply electoral campaigns and poll-shares. With an increasing onus on interaction between the electorate and the party leader, populist tactics are founded on strong relations and identification between the leader and the represented. This essay will therefore examine Marine Le Pen's successful relations with her electorate and the tactics she uses to define it.

The term 'populist' is broadly attributed throughout literature referring to Marine and her party. While the definition of the term is greatly disputed among scholars, the presence of organised, populist tactics within the election campaigns of Marine is not. Prior to seeking to understand populism through the case study of the Front National, it is important to discuss the contrasting definitions of the term. The first of these, by Margaret Canovan, seeks to define populism as being "an appeal to 'the people' against both the established structure of power and the dominant ideas and values of the society" (Canovan 1999, p.3). The use of the term 'people', she states, is an intentional and fundamental ambiguity that exists in the populist framework. Populist movements, as she understands, capitalise on a 'mood' rather than a 'people' and, through the use of rhetoric and passionate political rallying, they often lack the legitimacy achieved when representing (Canovan 1999, p.5).

Although Canovan provides seven versions of populism in context, the only common themes – a distrust of elites and a representation of 'the people' – offer far too broad a definition. Consequently, parties from throughout Europe are guaranteed to fit such a mould.

Taggart, however, provides a much more specific taxonomy to define 'populism'. Populism in Taggart's eyes would require a movement to be compatible with the following six themes (Taggart 2000, p.2):

- A hostility to representative politics.
- An identification with an ideal, community-based heartland.
- A lack of ideological core values.
- A powerful reaction to a perceived crisis.
- A fundamental dilemma of self-limitation.
- A chameleonic nature based on its environment.

While this definition is not exhaustive, Taggart provides a more in-depth and comprehensive definition that could plausibly be used. Although more precise than Canovan's, very few European parties can actually fit all six criteria. Arguably one example that can be attributed to this taxonomy is the Five Star Movement led by Beppe Grillo in Italy. The party, or 'movement', as Grillo brands it, is founded on a strong reaction against the political system and corrupt elites he perceives to be running the country. Where the Front National holds strong, ideological values, the Five Star Movement allows members to vote digitally based on their values and motivations. The party can hence be described

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as having an 'empty heart' and no fixed ideological dogma. Contextualising the Front National to this framework, the party cannot be considered wholly populist despite their powerful reaction to what they perceive to be ethnic and political crises.

It is therefore necessary to consider Mudde's framework for the 'Populist Radical Right' to determine the party's agency. Mudde suggests that the Populist Radical Right is the only party family to have established itself throughout post-war Europe (Mudde 2007, p.1). While Europe saw a considerable resurgence in Populist Radical Right parties, a lack of coherent agendas and motivations led Mudde to seeking to define the phenomenon.

Attributing programmatic aspects to this 'ladder of abstraction' can effectively provide an understanding of a party's ideological alignment. To apply the Front National's political programme to this taxonomy would therefore contribute a clear definition of the party as one of the 'radical right'. The ladder can help to understand a much greater number of political parties spanning Europe. It is particularly relevant in labelling many populist parties in the East. Assessing the application of such ideologies, Mudde identifies many more populist parties where there are more likely to be disputes over borders and territories (Mudde 2007, p.307-308). Given that many Eastern European states are still in their infancy after the collapse of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, territorial and ethnic disputes are more likely to be on the political agenda.

As Mudde acknowledges, however, this framework is insufficient in extending the concept of populism to party agency. In his initial contribution to the implementation of the label 'populist' to a radical right party, he suggests that, although unsuitable, the term 'populism' may have a rung on the ideological ladder of abstraction (Mudde 2007, p.24). Attempting to position 'populism' within a framework on ideology is however a contradiction in terms.

Populism cannot be described as an ideology. Canovan successfully interprets this idea, stating, "It is no use trying to identify a definite ideology or a specific socioeconomic situation as characteristic of populism in all its forms" (Canovan 1981, p.294). Furthermore, she states (Canovan 1981, p.298):

"Where our last category, politicians' populism, is concerned, ideology is clearly not an important characteristic, since most versions of this kind of unifying campaign take care to avoid anything as divisive as specific ideological commitments."

The lack of an ideology within the political programme of a populist movement thus ties in to the theory of populist parties' having an empty heart, considered by Paul Taggart. Given the nature of populist mobilisation across Contemporary Europe, Taggart states the populist's need for a central, core issue. Namely with the example of the Front National, he states that the party sees "immigration as the binding issue" (Taggart 2003). Populist politics' having an 'empty heart' would therefore raise the question as to whether this was a populist party at all. Again, the complexity and depth of Marine Le Pen's manifesto and her proposed solutions to the crises that the nation faces question the narrower definition recommended by Taggart.

Presenting the case of Marine this essay will therefore discuss the role of radical-right populism using Mudde's framework. Acknowledging the Front National as a radical right political party ensures that this essay will understand the role of core ideological motivations, namely xenophobia and ethno-nationalism. It is even more important to understand the populist tactics utilised by Le Pen in her attempts to frame issues. Actively referring to selective populist themes from Taggart's framework will also allow this essay to evaluate the importance of populism within the party without burdening it with the party label 'populist'.

Since Marine's arrival at the helm of the Front National in 2011, much has been made of her attempts to distance herself from the 'old-guard' leadership under her father, Jean-Marie. The dynastical passing of the mantle onto his daughter is a seemingly common theme among the leaderships of populist radical-right parties throughout Western Europe, argues Mudde (Mudde 2007, p.100). Although this move was seen as a largely symbolic gesture at the time, few expected considerable reforms in the Front National electoral approach.

This new path was, however, taken by Marine under her strategy of *dédiabolisation* (de-demonisation). This strategy

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was a defining attempt at modernising the party and becoming a credible actor beyond the immigration debate (Mayer 2013, p.161). For example, where her father commonly held anti-Semitic and homophobic attitudes, Marine has reached out to untouched sections of the electorate to maximise her appeal beyond the traditional radical-right voter. In a speech, Marine announced, “I hear witnesses more and more often stating that, in certain suburbs, it is not easy to be a woman, a homosexual or a Jew” (Lestrade 2012). This underlines Marine’s readiness to identify sections of the electorate previously marginalised by her father’s tough, conservative attitudes before seeking to woo them electorally.

The *dédiabolisation* strategy did not, however, seek to fundamentally reconstruct the core electorate but frame the issues of importance to the French people such as *l’insécurité* (insecurity) and *la laïcité* (secularism). Marine even featured in interviews on Beur FM and Al-Jazeera Television, both stations with an active, engaged Arab viewership in an electoral ploy to align with disaffected sections of the electorate (Shields 2013, p.191). Having targeted minorities in the fields of ethnicity and sexual orientation, Marine also sought to expand her base towards the middle-classes. Marine successfully identified with and engaged with those that “feared that their children would have a worse life than their own” and thus become the victims of “a social mobility that is dying out” (Forcari 2012, p.5).

Her electioneering has proved to be incredibly successful. With a vote share of 17.9 per cent in the first round of the 2012 Presidential Election, Marine used alternative methods of maximising her vote for the second round. This saw her attempt to distance herself from the Front National label in order to capitalise on the votes of the disaffected on the right using the umbrella label ‘*Rassemblement Bleu Marine*’ (Marine Blue Rally) in the lead-up to the legislative elections. The election was thus fought under a new guise in an attempt to connect with other forces, namely *Debout la République* (Arise the Republic) and fringe members of the *Union pour le Mouvement Populaire*. Although polling at 13.6 per cent, the coalition only managed to translate its success into 0.35 per cent of seats in the National Assembly (Le Monde 2012). While this may have been disappointing to the party, it showed Marine’s ability to rally a ‘movement’, breaking down political stigmas and capitalising on the notion of a mobilisation of a united common people irrespective of party affiliations.

Marine’s attempt to tone down rhetoric and appeal to new voters outside of her father’s homogenous base was all part of her master plan to ‘republicanise’ the party. In her fated speech in Paris, Marine declared her desire to pave the way for an evolution of the Front National into a “great Republican party” including six million French people of “all backgrounds, all ages and all origins” (Le Pen 2013). In the build up to the 2012 Presidential Election, Marine was also assisted in her strategy when President Nicolas Sarkozy stated that the Front National was no longer a party for whom it was “reprehensible” to vote and that Marine Le Pen and her politics were “compatible with the Republic” (Léchenet 2012). Sarkozy’s shift to the right prior to the election thus allowed Le Pen to de-stigmatise the Front National vote and reach out to voters right across the political spectrum.

It is important to note that throughout the discourse and rhetoric of Marine’s ‘republicanisation’ strategy, there is a resounding message of anti-elitism and a Manichean tendency to position ‘us vs. them’. Her references to “Presidents of the system replacing Presidents of the system” and a people that “no longer believes in the political class” portray a powerful opposition to the political elite (Le Pen 2013). This Manichean tendency is a core theme in the definition of populism used by Cas Mudde in which he describes populism’s desire to represent the ‘general will of a homogenous people against a corrupt elite’ (Mudde 2004, p.543). Le Pen’s ‘republicanisation’ of the Front National may therefore aim to moderate the image of the party and reach out to new sections of society, but this can clearly be defined as an incredibly effective populist tactic in mobilising the electorate against the ruling establishment.

Another important aspect in defining her political and electoral appeal throughout France is gender. The role of gender has been paramount in defining the ‘new’ Front National under Marine and her surge in popularity relative to other radical right populists. While some scholars suggest that such parties are fundamentally male, a question remains over what makes female voters less likely to elect a populist radical right leader. Marine has, however, proved to be a clear exception. In 2012, the gender gap as good as vanished with as much as 17 per cent of female registered voters opting for the Front National with 19 per cent of males voting for the party (Mayer 2013, p.172). While much literature has attributed the role of violence as the reason behind the gender gap, statistics on male to

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female voters for the Front National quash these theories. Firstly, considering the percentage of female and male voters for the party prior to Marine Le Pen, a sizeable gap exists with the female vote as low as 9 per cent of total registered female votes in 2007 compared to 12 per cent of male votes and an even greater gap of 12 per cent compared with 19 per cent in 2002 (Mayer 2013, p.172). The shrinking of the broad divide between male-female voters shows a correlation between the gender of the candidate and the identification of voters with that particular candidate.

Many theories have been proposed for the reasons behind a greater identification of females with Marine. Mayer argues that the leader's image has been a key contributor to her political success. Having previously been divorced and living out-of-wedlock with her partner and children, Marine presents herself as a modern, more acceptable face of the party (Mayer 2013, p.180). Furthermore, her manifesto's focus on social issues such as civil partnerships and her sympathy with women having abortions, although she still opposed it, should be considered a key reason behind the increase of female voters of the Front National given the greater salience of social issues among women voters. The role of the family dynasty within the populist radical right is also an important aspect leading to the electoral success of parties among female voters. The Le Pen family and the Front National being a perfect example, a family relation and dynastical element to the populist party is appealing. This is an increasingly common feature among the populist radical right, suggests Mudde, as authoritarian and closely tied parties often seek continuity over change. Karel Dillen of Vlaam's Blok, the Flemish radical right populist party, is most notable for this as his three daughters later became active representatives of the Flemish party (Mudde 2007, p.100).

The final essential component of Marine Le Pen's identification with her electorate relates to her core value of ethnonationalism. Within populist agendas, leaders often explain their legitimacy and credibility based on their representation of 'the people'. Within ethnonationalist parties such as the Front National, leaders successfully utilise the idea of 'our people'. Dividing the "ethnic kith or kin" from those that do not belong, such as immigrants, is a tactic used by Marine to interact with her electorate (Canovan 1999, p.5). This notion is particularly common among ethnonationalist leaders such as Geert Wilders and his radical right 'Party for Freedom' in the Netherlands who has framed immigration as a threat to the national and cultural identity of the Netherlands (Mudde 2011). In order to mobilise the 'people', Marine manipulates powerful imagery and rhetoric relating to the nation state and the French Republic. Just as the Austrian Freedom Party uses the *Heimat* ('Homeland') as a means of mobilisation, the Front National has used the symbol of Joan of Arc on the campaign trail representing the idea of a French victory against 'the other'. Symbolism and rhetoric semantically attached to the image of 'battle' are, furthermore, a strong component of Marine Le Pen's emotional connection to her electorate. The leader has spoken sentimentally of "winning the battle of the ideas" and "taking back the Republic" (Le Pen 2013). The 'historical struggle' is often a focal point of the populist radical right mantra. Parties across Europe have framed the 'threat' of invasion from an external force to facilitate mobilisation behind the leader. This has become particularly common among Eurosceptic parties in Western Europe with the development of the European Union (Mudde 2007, p.66). For example, Eastern European parties such as Bulgarian Partija Ataka hold "national traitors" responsible for 'gypsies', 'Turks' and 'minorities' leading to the discrimination against homogenous Bulgarians (Mudde 2007, p.66).

To conclude, Marine Le Pen has successfully brought the Front National in line with new sections of the electorate. In framing the fundamental issues at the heart of her programme, she has effectively appealed to new demographics and, using populist tactics, has evolved her party from the fringes of the political system to a dangerous electoral force. With the exception of parties such as the League of Polish Families, Le Pen has broken down the gender gap in radical right voting patterns and has successfully courted the female vote to become a party representing the disaffected across the political spectrum. As per Taggart's typology, Marine has reacted powerfully to the political and ethnic crises she perceives to be gripping France and has used both clever rhetoric and imagery to rally support. With the role of the leader being more important than ever within populist parties, Marine Le Pen has capitalised on the political 'mood' and, alongside European populist leaders such as Geert Wilders of the Dutch Party for Freedom and Frank Vanhecke of the Flemish Vlaam's Blok, has emotively connected her electorate with the image of their homogenous 'heartland' free from the chains of the political elite. While the spectre of populism is nothing new to the European people, Le Pen has effectively established an unbreakable rapport with her electorate to evolve a radical-right party on the fringes into a mainstream electoral menace.

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