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The Front National and the 2017 Electoral Cycle: Mixed Fortunes

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The Front National and the 2017 Electoral Cycle: Mixed Fortunes

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Less than six months after accessing the second round of the presidential election and gathering more than 10 million votes in the second round, the Front National (FN) is in deep crisis. Some weeks ago, on the 21st of September, Florian Philippot announced his resignation from the vice-presidency of the FN as well as his decision to quit the party¹. Philippot was vice-president in charge of the communication and the strategy of the FN and consequently was considered as the architect of the “dédiabolisation” strategy² and the electoral successes of the FN since Marine Le Pen became chairwoman of the FN in 2011³. He was her closest advisor, directed her presidential campaign in 2012, and played a key role in the exclusion of Jean-Marie Le Pen from the party he founded. Philippot contributed to the diversification of the thematics addressed by the FN and elaborated the anti-EU and Eurozone framework. In summary, he was central in the transformation of the FN into a right-wing populist party instead of a marginalized, demonized far right party associated with the Vichy Regime and the nostalgia of the colonial empire.

After the defeat of the FN in the second round of the presidential election against Emmanuel Macron, Philippot decided to create an association, called “Les Patriotes” (the patriots) in order to defend his anti EU social-chauvinist political line. This tendency was blamed by several prominent figures of the party of being responsible for the defeat of the FN in the presidential and parliamentary elections. These accusations and critics started in May 2017, during the campaign for the parliamentary elections and polluted the FN campaign, but turned into an internal crisis when the electoral cycle ended, in June. During the summer, divisions and disagreements within the FN about the causes of the defeat were publicly exposed by polemics on social media or arguments developed in opinion columns and aggressive remarks on TV sets. And the political comeback after the summer break intensified the crisis which forced Marine Le Pen to intervene. Le Pen asked Philippot to quit

the presidency of his new association so that the debate would take place inside the FN and not publicly and thus preserve the integrity and unity of the FN. Philippot’s refusal caused his departure, which was greeted with much cheer by the identitarian-neoliberal wing of the FN.

In the days following his departure, Philippot decided to transform “Les Patriotes” into a political party and collected the rallying of elected representative (around 50 elected members from city councils and regional councils but also a few MEPs) and dozens of activists and members. This schism is firstly the consequence of the defeat in the electoral cycle, as the ideological division of the FN between two wings pre-existed for years. The Front National had high expectations for the 2017 elections including among other things the formation of a parliamentary group, the election of dozens of members of parliament, the accession to the second round and narrowing the gap in the second round compared to the 2002 election when Jean-Marie Le Pen was defeated by Jaques Chirac who gathered more than 82% of the votes. The ongoing crisis emerged from the failure to reach these objectives and therefore revitalised the ideological debate which turned into a dispute over the responsibilities and causes of this failure, thus leading to a witch hunt inside the party⁴. The current situation requires analysing thoroughly the electoral cycle for understanding the origins of the FN crisis but also for assessing the unprecedented successes of the FN and the efficiency of radical left strategies to counter the influence of the populist far right.

1 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/21/marine-le-pen-aide-florian-philippot-to-quit-france-front-national>

2 Dédiabolisation will be translated as normalization.

3 <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/21/world/europe/a-french-politician-who-has-helped-refine-the-national-front-party.html>

4 https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/09/21/frances-national-front-lost-big-in-the-last-two-elections-now-the-far-right-party-is-in-chaos/?utm_term=.35fd3c294139

THE INCAPACITY OF THE FRONT NATIONAL TO ACHIEVE ITS ELECTORAL GOALS GIVES AN OVERALL IMPRESSION OF FAILURE

In order to apprehend the current situation in France regarding the far right and the extent of its electoral defeat, it is important to revisit the whole last year. A year ago, the FN was in a very strong position: the political and media agenda was extremely favourable for the FN as the two main issues polarizing the public debate were terrorism (as a consequence of the July 2016 Nice terrorist attack) and the place of Islam in France (with the burkini controversy which was another headscarf-like polemic). The period from 2012 until 2016 was characterized by the rise of the FN. They increased their electorate and stabilized it around 5 to 6 million voters. The local elections which took place in 2014 and 2015 were the occasion for them to build a strong and unprecedented local implantation combining elected representatives in city councils and a dense network of activists. In addition, they increased their membership and took the lead of the 2014 European election. Finally, since 2013 all the opinion polls concerning the 2017 presidential election predicted the accession of Marine Le Pen in the second round of the election and many of them put her in first position.

However, the electoral campaign for the 2017 presidential election turned out to be much more difficult for the FN than they anticipated. Les Républicains' primary elections, the conservative party, monopolized the media attention and the political agenda during the last months of 2016, as well as the rise of Macron's candidacy. The beginning of 2017 was filled by the Parti Socialiste primaries, the corruption affairs of François Fillon and also the Macron dynamic in polls. Even in the end of the campaign, Jean-Luc Mélenchon's successes eclipsed the FN campaign. During the whole campaign, the thematic and proposals of the FN have been almost invisible and inaudible in the political and media arena. In the polls, Le Pen moved from an interval of 26-30% to 22-25% from September 2016 to mid-April 2017. The campaign of the FN was aiming at giving Marine Le Pen a consensual image and a presidential stature. Therefore their campaign strategy was to rarefy her appearances and interventions, to soften the discourse and capitalize on the local implantation. However this invisibility was compensated in the media and political arena

by the European Parliament corruption affairs (several FN legislative assistants are accused of fictional work^{5,6}). In addition, Marine Le Pen was in competition with Fillon for catching the conservative right-wing voters and with Mélenchon for attracting the abstainers and the anti-system working classes voters, while Macron contested her anti-system image by claiming to embody a political wind of change. Within this framework, Marine Le Pen's campaign strategy was a disadvantage and explains her gradual decline in polls.

In the first round of the election, Marine Le Pen arrived second, after Macron, gathering 7.6 million votes and 21.3%. This was a relative failure as the opinion polls a year ago predicted Le Pen to arrive first. The 21.3% were considered as disappointing because of the discrepancy with the expectations but also because of the shortness of the gap with Marine Le Pen's adversary (Fillon ended at 20.1% and Mélenchon at 19.58%). During the time between the two rounds, Macron succeeded to catch all the attention, made a triumphal campaign and the traditional debate turned out to be a defeat for Le Pen, all the commentators (and even the sympathisers and several activists of the Front National) stated that Macron won the debate and deconstructed Le Pen's arguments and proposals. Macron's victory in the second round was overwhelming with more than 66% of the votes; Marine Le Pen lost the second round by far as she wasn't able to narrow the gap with Macron. At no time Le Pen was in position to threaten Macron and appear as a potential winner of the second round, which symbolically invalidated her campaign's strategy. Straight after the second round, polemics inside the FN emerged about the causes of the defeat, exposing publicly the divisions and cleavages of the party. Several leaders of the FN criticized in the medias Le Pen's campaign strategy and the arbitration made by her closest advisors, particularly Florian Philippot.

These divisions parasitized the FN's legislative campaign and filled almost completely the speaking time allowed to the FN in the media during the campaign. In addition the party structure and apparatus were paralyzed as they were too divided to lead a strong legislative campaign. Further-

5 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/10/france-front-national-eu-wages-fraud-allegation>

6 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/16/court-orders-front-national-meps-to-repay-600000-for-misuse-of-funds>

more, the context of the hegemony of Macron complicated their situation as the defeat of the presidential election demobilized the FN electorate. The legislative elections happened to be a huge defeat for the FN as they only gathered 2.9 million votes in the first round (instead of 3.5 million in 2012). The high level of abstention (more than 50%) explains that the percentage was almost similar (13.2% in 2017 instead of 13.6% in 2012). The only positive aspect for the FN in this first round of the parliamentary elections is the qualification of 119 candidates for the second round in 2017 instead of 61 in 2012. In the end, the FN got 8 members of Parliament (including Marine Le Pen), while they only had 2 in the 2012-2017 term of office. Even though

the FN quadrupled its number of MP, it is a sharp defeat for them as, prior to the first round of the legislative election, the polls predicted they would get between 40 and 60 MP. Moreover, with only 8 MP, the FN is unable to constitute a parliamentary group which requires 15 MP. Therefore, Marine Le Pen and her colleagues are considered as non-attached members, depriving them of financial means but also speaking time and mediatisation. The FN declared several times, publicly, that a parliamentary group was their main goal in the legislative elections and the current situation is weakening them as their influence and visibility in the political arena is already and will continue to decline in the next months.

MEANWHILE, THE ELECTION RETURNS SHOWS UNPRECEDENTED SUCCESSES WHICH HAVE TO BE ACKNOWLEDGED

Even though the Front National is currently at a deadlock, its successes during the last electoral cycle should not be minimized as they constitute a quantum leap in the trajectory of the French populist far right. First of all, Marine Le Pen acceded to the second round of the presidential election, it is only the second time in French history and the first time was in 2002 when her father reached the second round. Symbolically this qualification for the second round is a major breakthrough for the FN, despite the fact that it has been anticipated due to the amount of opinion polls which predicted it. Nevertheless it gives to the FN a strong political credibility and positions them as one the key party of the political system, one that is able to disrupt the traditional second round contest between the right and the left. Secondly, unlike 2002, there has not been a strong popular mobilization against the accession of the FN in the second round. In 2002, the left in its entirety the unions and the social movement organized massive demonstrations during the time between the two rounds of the presidential election, gathering hundreds of thousands and even millions on Labour day. This year, only a few demonstrations were organized and they gathered only hundreds of activists. This implies that the normalization strategy of Marine Le Pen worked as the left and the social movement are not anymore able to mobilize the society against the electoral rise and the institutionalisation of the Front National. This normalization strategy was based on the eradication of the discourse and proposals con-

nected with the traditional far right including racist and anti-Semitic speeches as well as the links with neo-fascist groups and the support to the Vichy regime or the French colonization. In the last years, the FN succeeded in appearing more and more as a conservative party with proposals on societal issues similar to the classical right. The very low impact of the calls from the left and the unions to march against the qualification of the FN in the second round shows how successful this normalization strategy was in remodelling the perception of the FN in the public opinion.

Thirdly, the number of votes gathered by Le Pen in the presidential election is a record: previous to this election, the highest number of votes gathered by the FN was only 6 million in the 2015 regional elections and 6.4 million in 2012. In the first round, Marine Le Pen gathered 7.6 million and 10.6 in the second. This must not be minimized as it is the first time this party reaches these levels. Even in percentages, it is a record, with 21.3% in the first round and 33.9% in the second.

In addition, Le Pen managed in the time between the two rounds to obtain the rallying of a sovereigntist conservative right candidate, Nicolas Dupont-Aignan who gathered 1.7 million votes in the first round. It is the first time the FN succeeds in building alliances with the classical right. Also, 20% of the first-round voters of François Fillon, the candidate of the main right-wing party, voted for Le Pen in the second round⁷. This confirms the trend of the past local elections; the classical

⁷ <https://www.publicsenat.fr/article/politique/reports-des-voix-age-revenus-la-sociologie-du-vote-au-second-tour-60214>

right electorate is growingly voting for the FN in the second round. The extent of this porosity is a new phenomenon, so is its formalisation through an official alliance with a common electoral platform and a project of coalition government⁸. Furthermore, on several topics, the FN succeeded in shaping the political debate and forced the classical right as well as the social democracy to change their propositions and make them closer to the thesis of the FN. The stances of François Fil-

lon and even Manuel Valls on immigration, on security issues, on the migrant crisis, on the place of Islam in France and on posted workers, during the electoral campaign, were dangerously close to the propositions defended by the FN. The FN has conquered, years after years, a capacity to influence public debate on several topics and to impose its ideas and way of tackling issues in the public sphere, thus achieving a partial form of cultural hegemony.

THE MITIGATED PERSPECTIVES OF THE FRONT NATIONAL

The political perspectives for the FN and its future are not very enthusiastic: the party is going through a strong internal crisis which divides the party and already caused a scission while the political agenda tends to marginalize their discourse. In addition, for now, the reorganizing of the classical right leaves no room for any project of alliance with the Front National.

In order to grasp the FN crisis, we need to analyze this situation as the outcome of a long term dynamic opposing within the FN different points of view and political orientations. The divisions among the Front National have historically taken place inside the party and were kept among the leadership of the party, namely the political office. The party's structure never included any structure or instrument to organize internal debate or consultation, hence the characterization of the FN as a form of undemocratic centralism⁹. In the FN congresses, there is not any vote on texts or documents or resolutions but only the election of the leadership. Every member of the party whose contributions are up to date can vote and this internal election is the only estimation of the balances of forces inside the FN. Since the 1980s, the political office gathered people from various political backgrounds (neofascist groupuscule as well as the classical right) but the party leader (Jean-Marie Le Pen until 2011 and then Marine Le Pen) had an uncon-

tested authority and organized the plurality of the leadership while preserving its domination on the party¹⁰. The exclusion of Jean-Marie Le Pen by his daughter in 2015¹¹ went along with the weakening of the weight of the traditional far right-wing and neofascist activists, which were already marginalized by the normalization strategy¹². Two main orientations, pre-existing informally for a few years, remained inside the leadership of the party and among the activists. The first one is Philippot's strategy, which was implemented after Marine Le Pen took the leadership of the FN in 2011. This positioning is based on a populist neither left neither right strategic position and emphasizes the defence of sovereignty and of the welfare state as well as the need of State intervention in economy to defend popular classes from the neoliberal deregulation and the unrestrained immigration¹³. In this framework immigration and deregulation are characterising the EU, thus explaining why Le Pen was putting forward the exit of Eurozone and the threat of Frexit. This discourse goes along with anti-establishment arguments consisting in denouncing the betrayal of the people by the cosmopolitan elites and a diversification of the thematics addressed by the Front National in order to expand its electorate. The other political orientation is opposed to this Bismarckian, illiberal vision and the strong role of the State in the economy as well as the proposition of Frexit and leaving the euro for returning

8 <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/29/world/europe/marine-le-pen-nicolas-dupont-aignan.html>

9 Gombin, Joël, *Le Front National*, Eyrolles, 2016.

10 Igounet, Valérie, *Le Front national de 1972 à nos jours. Le parti, les hommes, les idées*, Seuil, 2014.

11 <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/21/world/europe/jean-marie-le-pen-france-national-front-party.html>

12 Most of them had already left the party previous to this episode and joined the radical far right groups gravitating around the FN. Lebourg, Nicolas, 'Le Front National et la galaxie des extrêmes droites radicales', in Crépon Sylvain, Dézé Alexandre et Mayer Nonna, *Les Faux-Semblants du Front National. Sociologie d'un parti politique*, Presses de Sciences Po, 2015.

13 Bischoff Joachim, Gauthier Elisabeth, Müller Bernhard, *Droites Populistes en Europe : les raisons d'un succès*, Editions du Croquant, 2015.

to the Franc. They defend a more liberal program on economic issues and want to focus the FN's discourse on the identity issue, to emphasize xenophobic culturalist and islamophobic propositions. This divide is ideological and strategic at the same time, as it targets very different electoral basis in order to expand the FN's electorate. Philippot's position was aiming at rallying the lower and working classes which are victims of high level of unemployment and precariousness and present a strong social downgrading feeling. The core idea was to aggregate workers and employees, especially non-voters and former left or radical left voters, through a discourse combining the classical xenophobic stances with a social and illiberal discourse (a form of renewal of the protectionist and "poujadist"^{14,15} discourse). The opposite position insists on the necessity to attract voters from the classical right by being more radical on the identity issue than the right while reassuring these voters on the economic issues with a national-liberal program. Such strategy would therefore gain the votes of people from the upper class belonging to the xenophobic and nationalist component of the right as well as people from the middle class (artisans and storekeepers) frightened by the decline of the French national identity.

The second round of the presidential election was in a sense a test, an assessment of the Philippot's strategy which ambitioned to attract the votes of the workers and employees who voted Mélenchon or abstained in the first round. The electoral transfer from Mélenchon's electorate invalidated this bet: only 7% of them voted for Marine Le Pen while 52% voted Macron (the remainders abstained). On the other hand, Philippot's opponents pointed out that, even with a frightening second round campaign for the classical right voters¹⁶, 20% of Fillon's voters choose Marine Le Pen in the second round. The origin of the divisions of the FN since last

May is a strong disagreement about the adequate strategy for the populist far right to access to power in France and the defeat in the electoral cycle is only the materialisation of this disagreement into a confrontation between the two orientations. The co-existence of these two positions on how to gain power is not a French specificity, it also exists among other populist far right parties in Europe¹⁷, thus underlining the importance of such debate for the populist far right. The intensity of the ongoing crisis is the direct consequence of the high level of expectations within the FN about the electoral cycle but also the result of the structure of the party which prevented the ideological and strategic debate to take place, among the members and publicly, in the medias. In a sense, the second round results gave the opportunity to the identitarian-liberal wing to put pressure on Philippot and in the end, through his resignation, to make their ideological and strategic option prevail. The extent of the FN's divisions and crisis forced Marine Le Pen to convoke an exceptional congress, which is planned for March 2018. In this "reconstruction congress", everything will be on the table from the strategic and tactic questions (including the potentiality of alliances with the right-wing parties) to the party's name and the leadership¹⁸. Until then the FN will most likely be paralyzed by internal debates and confrontations, while it will endure the concurrence of Philippot's new movement. The FN's deputy director already announced that joining "Les Patriotes" equates to being excluded from the FN. Nevertheless, since the Front National's foundation, several of its high rank leaders left the party and created new organizations; however all these previous scissions of the Front National ended in forming insignificant small radical parties which were not able to challenge the hegemony of the FN on the far right political field^{19,20}. Nonetheless, Philippot's de-

14 Poujadist or poujadism refers to the political and ideological framework developed by Pierre Poujade, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/poujadism>

15 <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-38370962>

16 Macron denounced several times the disastrous propositions of Marine Le Pen for the economy, particularly the Frexit and the exit of the Eurozone, the increase of public debt, the protectionist measures. This denunciation was very similar to Fillon's critics of the FN electoral platform.

17 Mainly Ukip in the UK, the AfD in Germany, the FPÖ in Austria and the PVV in the Netherlands.

18 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/07/04/french-front-national-should-change-name-says-marine-le-pen/>

19 Beauregard Joseph, Lebourg Nicolas, *Dans l'ombre des Le Pen*, Nouveau Monde, 2012.

20 The most prominent case was the scission initiated by Megret in 1998. Bruno Megret was deputy of FN and he left the FN with hundreds of members and almost half of the elected representatives, creating a new political organization. The cause of the scission was Jean-Marie Le Pen's opposition to Megret's proposition of making alliances with the right in order to form coalition government in city and regional councils. Less than 4 years later, Le Pen accessed to the second round of the presidential election while Megret gathered only 2.33%. A few years later, Megret's movement disappeared.

parture already led to a realignment of the Front National's political line regarding the EU and the euro as Marine Le Pen announced that her propositions could be implemented "without quitting Europe or the euro currency"²¹, thereby endorsing the liberal-culturalist wing of the FN.

The reorganization of the classical right in the wake of Macron's victory in the legislative and presidential elections is also weakening the possibilities for the Front National to extend its influence in the following months. Ideologically, the main right-wing political party, Les Républicains (LR) is torn apart since the nomination, in Macron's government, of prominent figures of the moderate wing of the party²². The moderate wing decided to stand with these ministers and to create a separate parliamentary group with some centrists, in order to cautiously support the government and approve on a case by case basis Macron's policy. In addition to this split, the severe defeat in the presidential and legislative election of the right means a significant decrease in financial means and a loss of credibility as a government party, thus increasing the weakening of the party. However the situation benefited to the radical wing of LR which is ideologically much closer to the FN on the identity and immigration issues. The party is currently in an ongoing process for designating its new president and the favourite candidate is Laurent Wauquiez, the leader of the hardliners. The polls predict a large victory of Wauquiez in the December internal vote, which can be explained by the non-existence of an opposition inside the party as the moderate wing is preparing its leave from the party. Wauquiez and the radical wing of LR are proposing a very conservative platform on societal issues, immigration, the place of Islam in France, which is in various aspects extremely similar to the FN's propositions. Yet, whatever the ideological closeness between the FN and LR, the party is not deviating from the "cordon sanitaire" strategy, which states that the classical right will not make any alliance with the FN, at any level. Furthermore on the economic issues, Wauquiez's position is a classic form of neoliberalism, following on from Sarkozy and Fillon's positioning. Therefore, LR is already and will most likely continue to be in competition with the FN for the hegemony over the xenophobic,

culturalist and islamophobic part of the political field. Such a competition between two weakened and divided parties is probably going to prevent both of them from expanding their electoral basis and increasing their political influence. In addition, Nicolas Dupont-Aignan and its sovereigntist Gaullist party broke their alliance with the FN, adding another political organization in the competition for catching radical right-wing electorate.

Last but not least, the political agenda of the government put the radical left in position to be perceived as the main opposition to Macron, instead of the Front National who is inaudible and invisibilized in the parliamentary and political debate. Macron's political agenda is primarily composed of socio-economic neoliberal reforms, mainly the new Labour Law, which favours social mobilizations. The FN is traditionally inaudible and invisible when the social movement takes the streets, while the left and the trade unions appear as the main opposition to neoliberal reforms. Indeed, it is the radical left which is considered as the main opposition to Macron, and particularly the France Insoumise which organized a major demonstration against the Labour Law²³. In the Medias, Mélenchon and the other MPs are incarnating the sole opposition to Macron's policy while in the National Assembly the France Insoumise and the Parti Communiste Français (PCF) parliamentary groups are protesting against the destruction of the employment law and the deterioration of the working conditions. Electorally the FN is the main opposition to Macron as Marine Le Pen confronted him in the second round of the election although it is not the case in Parliament or in the political arena due to the successes of the radical left and the absence of a Front National's parliamentary group. The radical left is therefore monopolizing the contest of the government's policy and embodying the true and unique opposition to Macron, depriving the FN of its "anti-system" rhetoric and anti-establishment arguments.

21 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-politics-lepen/with-far-right-in-turmoil-frances-le-pen-softens-anti-eu-stance-idUSKBN1CG1PU>

22 Three members of the cabinet are members of the conservative Republicans party, including the Prime Minister (Edouard Philippe), the Minister of Economy (Bruno Le Maire) and the Budget Minister (Gérald Darmanin).

23 <http://www.france24.com/en/20170923-far-left-melenchon-rallies-protesters-paris-against-macron-labour-reforms>

EVALUATING THE RADICAL LEFT STRATEGIES AGAINST THE FAR RIGHT, WITH A PARTICULAR LOOK TO MÉLENCHON AND THE FRANCE INSOUMISE

The 2017 electoral cycle constitutes a radical reconfiguration of the French political spectrum and an exacerbation of the fragmentation of the political field between four main ideological blocs (the radical left, a neoliberal dominant bloc with Macron and his party, what's left of the classical right and the populist far right). If at the national level, in the first round of the presidential election, all of these four blocs are making close scores²⁴, this distribution changes radically if we look at the votes by socio-professional categories. The key battlefield for the radical left and the Front National are the working classes: since 2011-2012, the share of the working classes voting either for the radical left or for the populist far right has significantly increased while the share voting for the classical right or the centrists or social democrats decreased sharply. Philippot's strategy established the workers and employees as central target for expanding the FN electorate while Mélenchon aimed at collecting the votes of the left-wing workers and employees, including the disappointed socialist voters and the former voters who abstained in the recent years. The popular classes and the youth were the main electoral targets of both Mélenchon and Marine Le Pen, especially as and these groups had a huge electoral potential as these electoral segments are traditionally characterized by high abstention hence increasing the stake of mobilizing them. The results of the election was a deepening of the polarization of the working classes between the radical left and the populist far right: 24% of the employees voted for Mélenchon while 30% voted for Marine Le Pen, 25% of the workers voted for Mélenchon and 39% voted for Le Pen²⁵. Among the voters aged from 18 to 24 years old, 29% voted for Mélenchon and 21% for Le Pen. The levels reached by the Front National in the working classes are very high but similar to the regional and local elections of 2014 and 2015;

on the other hand the levels reached by the radical left are a novelty, these levels were unseen since the decline of the PCF. Closing the gap with the populist far right among the working classes and halting its electoral progression in these electoral segments is a huge victory of the radical left and particularly of Mélenchon and France Insoumise. Generally, the gap between the radical left and the Front National has been reduced from 6.8 percentage points in the first round of the 2012 presidential election²⁶ to less than 1.8 percentage point; such a close gap is unprecedented since the beginning of the 1980s. In addition, in the legislative election, the radical left (PCF and France Insoumise) gathered more votes than the Front National and had enough MP elected for forming each a parliamentary group²⁷. Furthermore, several studies and polls showed that there is almost no porosity between Mélenchon's electorate and Marine Le Pen's electorate, thus invalidating the theory of several editorial writers whereby the radical left and the FN are ideologically similar and they share a same electorate out. Firstly the electoral transfer from Mélenchon to Le Pen in the second round of the presidential election is among the smallest in percentage (7%). Secondly the survey about the electoral behaviour and values of the voters shows very strong oppositions between the two electorates, with deep cleavages among the relation towards immigration, religious tolerance, the perception of the Welfare State and redistribution²⁸. Among the working classes, the FN succeeded in attracting the workers and employees who were voting for the classical right while most of the left-wing workers and employees growingly abstained²⁹; Mélenchon brought these abstainers back in the electoral game thus recreating a political prospect for the left and radical left oriented share of the working classes. The key challenge for the radical left as a whole in the 2017 presidential and

24 Macron arrived first with 24.01% of the votes, Le Pen in second position with 21.3 followed by Fillon (20.01%) and Mélenchon (19.58).

25 IFOP, le profil des électeurs et les clés de l'élection présidentielle, 23 avril 2017.

26 Mélenchon stood at 11.1% and Marine Le Pen at 17.9%.

27 The PCF gathered 2.72% in the first round (615 503 votes), France Insoumise gathered 11.01% (2 479 622 votes) while the FN got only 13.20% (2 990 592 votes). The PCF have 11 MP, France Insoumise have 17 MP while the FN have only 8.

28 Finchelstein Gilles, Teinturier Brice, *Entre France Insoumise et Front National, de solides divergences*, Fondation Jean Jaurès, juillet 2017.

29 Mauger Gérard, Pelletier Willy, *Les classes populaires et le FN*, Editions du Croquant, 2017.

legislative election was the following: mobilizing the low income social groups who traditionally abstained a lot, in other words the youth, the employees and the workers, in order to contain the Front National's progression. Mélenchon succeeded in doing so thanks to an elaborated strategy composed of 3 main dimensions.

First of all, Mélenchon decided to abandon the "front républicain" tactic and to position his candidacy and political approach as a radical contest of the political and socio-economic system. The "front républicain" is a tactic common to the left and the centre and consists in systematically giving the voting instruction to choose the candidate opposed to the FN, in the second round of the election, even if it is a right-wing, or neoliberal candidate. Such tactic creates a gathering of the entire political spectrum against the FN, with the opposition to the FN as only purpose with no common program or platform. This tactic helped the FN present himself as anti-system and assimilate the radical left as part of the establishment, as allies of the neoliberal forces (the social democracy and the right-wing parties). Mélenchon decided to break off with this outdated electoral tactic in order to appear as a credible and uncompromising opposition to the neoliberal policies implemented by Sarkozy and then Hollande and the Parti Socialiste during the last five years. This refusal of any form of compromise with the neoliberal forces gave him credibility and invalidated the far right critics. Nevertheless, in the time between the two rounds of the presidential election, Mélenchon publicly stated that "no votes for him should go the FN" but he did not give the instruction either to abstain or vote Macron or cast a blank ballot³⁰. The coherence and credibility Mélenchon and France Insoumise gained with this inflexible and uncompromising posture helped him challenge the FN's hegemony among the working classes and attract abstainers.

The second dimension lies in the abutment of his campaign on the struggles and mobilisations against the Front National that took place in the last years. Mélenchon elaborated a defensive strategy against the far right consisting in a rational deconstruction of the discourse, practices and

ways of ruling of the FN, instead of a moralist condemnation. This deconstruction was based upon the work done for years by trade unions³¹ or social movement's activists and relies on a methodical demystification of the anti-system discourse of the FN through pointing out the contradictions in their electoral platform and the inanity of their political "miracle" solutions. One key topic was the Front National's fanciful estimations of the costs of immigration and their frightening discourses about the risks of an islamisation of France by the migrants and refugees. In the North-East district of Paris, several migrant encampments have precariously been settled by associations and charities since 2015; the FN's activists denounced these camps and asked for their dismantling while the radical left's activists organized a campaign of solidarity with the refugees, through food distribution and blankets collection but also through conferences about migrations in order to defuse the irrational fears exploited by the Front National. France Insoumise's activists were actively involved in this campaign and Mélenchon relied on such campaigns in order to counteract the FN's xenophobic, demagogic, racist and islamophobic discourse. In the legislative election, this district elected a France Insoumise MP, demonstrating the efficiency of the deconstruction and demystification work done by the radical left and the social movement, that Mélenchon successfully included in his election campaign. Finally, the most important dimension is the articulation of this defensive strategy with a political dynamic based on the eventuality of victory. Succeeding in creating and communicating to the working classes the hope of victory of a credible and legitimate opposition to the neoliberal order, coming from the left, is the best tool for pushing back the FN and mobilizing the workers, employees and the young. The strong political dynamic of Mélenchon's campaign³² generated the impression, widely spread even among the neoliberal and right-wing editorial writers that he might access to the second round and realize the alternative to the current political and economic system³³. The offensive strategy against the FN consists in giving credibility to a radical progressive alternative in order to mobilize the seg-

30 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/26/melenchons-team-urge-not-one-vote-for-le-pen-but-stop-short-of-backing-macron>

31 VISA (Vigilances et Initiatives Syndicales Antifascistes) is an association formed by the left-wing unions in order to fight the far-right, <http://www.visa-isa.org/>

32 <https://theconversation.com/profile-jean-luc-melenchon-the-far-left-candidate-shaking-up-the-french-election-76384>

33 <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/04/jean-luc-melenchon-france-insoumise-elections-socialist-party-fn-le-pen/>

ments of population tempted by a desperate vote for the FN in order to contest the system. When the radical left is able to create a political dynamic based on the possibility of victory, of realizing the alternative to the current political and economic system, the FN electorally retreats, especially in the working classes.

The implementation of this 3-dimensions strategy was a huge success for the radical left and a complete novelty

in the French political field. In the presidential elections a radical left candidate narrowed the gap with Le Pen at a level unseen in the last thirty years and in the legislative elections; for the first time since the 1980s, the radical left as a whole (France Insoumise and the PCF) succeeded in overtaking the Front National electorally.

THE NEED FOR AN IN DEPTH SCIENTIFIC ANALYSIS OF THE ELECTORAL DYNAMICS IN ORDER TO GIVE INPUTS TO THE STRATEGIC DEBATE

In conclusion, the Front National in the 2017 electoral sequence obtained its best electoral performances ever, achieved to increase its electorate as well as the porosity with the classical right. Even though their access to Parliament is much smaller than anticipated, Marine Le Pen herself has been elected as MP and the normalization of the FN is progressing as it is much more accepted by the French society to see the FN qualifying in second round and gaining representatives in Parliament. However their relative failure in light of their declared objectives, transformed a latent division of the party on ideological and strategic issues into a conflict leading to a schism and causing a crisis paralyzing the party since the second round of the election. For now, the FN is almost invisible in the Medias and does not have any influence on the political agenda; this invisibility helped the radical left to gain and monopolize the status of main opposition to Macron's neoliberal policies, thus worsening the populist far right dry period.

However, the situation requires a more thorough analysis on two aspects which are linked. The first one is the composition of the electorate of the FN, in fact the structuration and the articulation of their different electoral segments, and the various determinants of the choice made by electors to vote for Le Pen. Simultaneously we need to build the same analysis on the radical left electorate (which reached an exceptional level in the presidential election, 19.3%, unseen since 1969) in order to understand how to further push back the FN and to consolidate our electoral basis among the youth and the popular classes. The 2017 electoral cycle is complete reconfiguration of the French political spectrum and the lessons and knowledge from these elections will be central in the elaboration of a medium term, accurate and relevant, strategy of the radical left against the far right. Such knowledge requires a thor-

ough understanding of the socio-economic and political dynamics that took place during this electoral cycle, at a micro and macro level. In order to tackle such an important issue, Espaces Marx is currently working on a project combining quantitative and qualitative field surveys and electoral sociology, which will provide a full understanding of the various aspects of the polarization of the working classes and the youth between the populist far right and the radical left.

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