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## Original Article

# Europe's salience and 'owning' Euroscepticism: Explaining the Front National's victory in the 2014 European elections in France

Gabriel Goodliffe

Departamento de Estudios Internacionales, Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México, Río Hondo 1, Colonia Progreso Tizapán, DF 06140, México.

E-mail: gabriel.goodliffe@itam.mx

**Abstract** This article explains the victory of the Front National (FN) in the May 2014 European elections in France. Taking issue with standard academic accounts that conceive of the latter as 'second-order' elections, it argues that the FN won by harnessing voters' growing anxiety about European integration as an electoral issue. First, the article contends that, on the backdrop of worsening unemployment and social crisis, Europe assumed unprecedented salience in both national and European elections. In turn, it argues that by staking out a Europhobe position in contrast to the mainstream parties and the radical left, the FN claimed effective 'ownership' over the European issue, winning the bulk of the Eurosceptic vote to top the electoral field.

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## Introduction

In the May 2014 European elections, the Front National (FN) came first with 24.86 per cent of the vote in front of the Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (UMP) with 20.81 per cent and the Socialist Party (PS) with 13.98 per cent, giving the party an unprecedented 24 seats in the European Parliament (EP) (versus 3 in 2009). This outcome represented not only the FN's best result historically as a proportion of votes cast but the highest score ever achieved by a radical right party in a national election under the Fifth Republic. Nearly quadrupling the party's results from 2009 (24.86 versus 6.34 per cent), the FN capitalized on high abstention rates (57 per cent) among voters for the mainstream parties, most notably among the PS (58 per cent) and the left (56 per cent), to record strong electoral gains. FN candidate lists came first in 71 out of 101 departments, with the highest scores achieved in the party's traditional bastions in the northern, eastern and southeastern quadrants of the country



(Ipsos Public Affairs, 2014a). However, the party also recorded notable gains in areas hitherto impervious to its entreaties, winning in a number of western and south-western departments as well as the northern and eastern fringes of the Massif Central. Similarly, the FN came first among industrial workers (43 per cent), service sector workers (38 per cent), the unemployed (37 per cent) and among low-income voters (30 per cent) – that is, groups hardest hit by economic crisis. This was in striking contrast to the parties of the left, particularly the PS and the Front de Gauche (FdG), with the FN now consistently seen by lower class voters and the least well-off as the party most likely to address their concerns (ibid.). This article accounts for the FN's strong showing in the 2014 European election by linking it to the role that Europe and Euroscepticism played in its outcome. It argues that the second-order election model, according to which European election results have traditionally been interpreted, is inadequate to explain the FN's electoral victory and that it was able to capitalize on Europe's electoral salience by effectively claiming 'ownership' of the issue in the 2014 campaign.<sup>1</sup>

The article proceeds in four parts. First, it recapitulates the second-order election thesis and reviews the empirical literature showing that the latter is insufficient to explain European election results and that instead Europe 'matters' in such contests. Second, it illustrates the growing salience of Europe and Euroscepticism as electoral issues in French politics. Third, the article demonstrates that the FN was able to claim issue ownership over Euroscepticism to the detriment of its political competitors by staking out the sole Europhobe position in the 2014 European election campaign. Finally, it concludes by comparing this case to the experiences of Eurosceptic parties elsewhere in Europe and deliberates on what Europe's growing political salience means for the FN's prospects as well as the dynamics of party competition in France.

## Europe in European Elections

For most of the 35-year period since the recasting of the European Parliament (EP) as a popularly elected body, European elections have been unanimously regarded in the literature as second-order elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1980; Schmitt, 2005; Hix and Marsh, 2007). Holding by definition less interest for the average voter than first-order elections in which national executives and/or legislative representatives are selected, this thesis posits that (i) abstention rates in such elections will be much higher than in first-order electoral contests and (ii) that oppositional and fringe parties will be the principal beneficiaries of costless protest voting at the expense of the mainstream parties. Just as in the case of first-order elections, however, the second-order election thesis assumes that European elections are mainly contested around domestic political issues as well as the policy record of the governing parties and officeholders.

Beginning in the 1990s and particularly following the launch of European Monetary Union (EMU) in 1999, a growing number of academics began to question

the second-order election thesis and to argue that European integration also mattered in European elections. This occurred at the two empirical levels of the higher voter abstention and defection from the governing parties recorded in EP elections. Regarding voter abstention, a number of aggregate studies has shown that European factors affect turnout in EP elections, as well as account for variations across states. At one level, these include institutional and economic factors such as hosting a European institution and the proportion of the workforce tied to agriculture (that is, those likely to benefit from the Common Agricultural Policy) (Studlar *et al.*, 2003). At a second level, studies also indicate that attitudinal and cultural factors, such as holding a positive view, trusting in or identifying with the European Union (EU), affect aggregate voter turnout in European elections (*ibid.*; Mattila, 2003; Studlar and Flickinger, 2007; Stockemer, 2011). Member states whose citizens exhibited stronger expressions of these characteristics displayed higher turnout rates while those whose citizens evinced weaker expressions of these traits showed lower rates (Stockemer, 2011, pp. 37–41).

In turn, a number of studies show that European issues inform the choices of those who do vote in European elections and in part explain voters' defection from the governing parties in such elections. Europe-level factors were found to increasingly influence voter choice at the level of both political supply – party programs and politics – and political demand – voter attitudes and preferences. Beginning at the partisan level of political supply, Clark and Rohrschneider (2009) observed that parties' perceived performance at the EU level influences the extent to which voters defect from the governing party. Similarly, Hobolt and Wittrock (2011) determined that when voters were given more information on the issue of European integration, they used it to vote for a party close to them on this dimension. Conversely, when participants were exposed to more information regarding party placement with respect to the domestic left–right dimension, this made no discernible difference to this choice, suggesting parties' communications on Europe were determinative in influencing their vote (*ibid.*). In short, parties that 'have got their act together' on European issues – that is, that are most unified and clear in expressing a posture on Europe – tend to perform best in EP elections (Siaroff, 2001; Ferrara and Weishaupt, 2004).

Correlatively, at the cultural-attitudinal level of political demand, studies have shown that aggregate voter attitudes regarding the EU affect their vote in EP elections. Hobolt *et al.* (2009) demonstrated that voters are more likely to defect from the governing party if they have stronger Eurosceptic preferences than the governing parties. Likewise, Clark and Rohrschneider (2009) observed that voters' perceptions of party performance at the EU level influenced the extent to which they defected from the governing party in EP elections. In short, voters' views on Europe do not just affect whether they vote in European elections but also determine how they vote, with higher incidences of Euroscepticism among voters translating into more votes for anti-mainstream parties.



The rise of Euroscepticism within EU member states has opened up novel electoral opportunities at both the national and European levels. The fact that Europe was being fought over due to its increasing domestic resonance meant that even if these elections retained their second-order character, this was no longer so much because Europe did not matter but because it had grown into an increasingly salient domestic issue within their political systems. This suggests that the second-order election thesis needs to be modified to account for Europe-level factors when interpreting EP elections results.

### The Salience of Euroscepticism in France

In France, Europe's salience as a domestic electoral issue presents both political and economic aspects. At a first level, the growing encroachment of European integration over French national autonomy, particularly in matters of economic policy, increased Europe's political visibility among French voters. The Single European Act (SEA) of 1986, which established a unified European market in goods and services, and the Maastricht Treaty of 1992, which set the country on the course of EMU, were seen on both the radical right and radical left, as well as by minority dissidents within the governing Socialist and Gaullist parties, as an unacceptable impingement on France's political and economic sovereignty. This was reflected in the narrow approval – 51 per cent for, 49 per cent against – of the Maastricht Treaty in the September 1992 referendum.

In its initial guise, Euroscepticism emerged in a nationalist or sovereignist guise in France, which was more prevalent among right-wing voters concerned with safeguarding the country's national autonomy and *grandeur*. In the 1992 Maastricht Treaty referendum, 67 per cent of those who voted 'No' identified with the right (Perrineau, 2005, p. 243). These not only included voters on the radical right but also a sizeable majority of voters for the governing Gaullist Rassemblement pour la République (RPR) and a significant minority of the economically liberal and ostensibly pro-Europe Union pour la Démocratie Française (UDF) (Table 1).

Thus, already by the mid-1990s the traditional left–right cleavage was being blurred – particularly on the right – by the European question. When they were consulted on issues pertaining to European integration, French voters cleaved into pro- and anti-European blocs that did not clearly correspond to the left-right divide, implying greater polarization between sovereignist versus mainstream parties on the one hand<sup>2</sup> as well as new divisions within the mainstream parties themselves on the other (Guyomarch, 1995; Milner, 2000; Siaroff, 2001).

From the mid-1990s on, this primarily right-wing sovereignist opposition to Europe was overlaid by a new socioeconomically based Euroscepticism. This reflected the fact that, as the country liberalized its economy and slashed social spending under the single market and Maastricht criteria, European integration was

**Table 1:** The 'no' vote in European referenda by party affiliation (in percentage)

<i>Party affiliation</i>	<i>Maastricht Treaty (1992)</i>	<i>EU constitution (2005)</i>	<i>Maastricht+20 Poll (2012)<sup>a</sup></i>
Trotskyist Parties	70	94	–
PCF/FdG	81	98	81 (94)
PS	22	56	49 (53)
Verts/Europe Écologie	43	60	47 (51)
UDF/MoDem	39	24	31 (35)
RPR/UMP	59	20	36 (40)
MPF	—	75	—
FN	92	93	91 (93)
No Affiliation	55	69	59 (79)

<sup>a</sup>In this poll, respondents were given the third choice of 'I don't know'. For purposes of comparison, I broke down the undecided responses according to the proportion of 'Yes' and 'No' votes cast in the 1992 Maastricht Referendum. The adjusted figures appear in parentheses.

Sources: Grunberg (2005, p. 136); IFOP (2012a, p. 28).

increasingly associated with social and economic crisis by French voters. Since European economic integration began in earnest in the late 1980s, France has experienced a dramatic rise in unemployment among industrial and service workers. By the turn of the millennium, the aggregate unemployment rate had settled at between 9 and 10 per cent after spiking at 12.5 per cent in 1997. As a result of these high unemployment rates, French workers' living standards substantially declined (Smith, 2004, pp. 12, 76). Despite a slight improvement during the second half of the 1990s, wages as a proportion of national value added fell from an average of 72 per cent in the 1980s to a mean of 67 per cent during the 1990s and low of 65 per cent in 2007, before recovering somewhat at the end of the decade due to the devaluation of financial assets in the 2008 crash (*ibid.*, pp. 194–195; Heyer, 2011, p. 242).

The economic picture following the 2008 financial crisis was bleaker still. Unemployment, which had fallen to 7.4 per cent in 2008, jumped back up to 9.1 per cent in 2009, 9.4 per cent in 2010 and 9.2 per cent in 2011. In 2012, the situation worsened again with the jobless rate crossing the symbolic 10 per cent threshold for the first time since 1999, increasing to 10.3 per cent in 2013 and 10.5 per cent in 2014 (Insee, 2014). This surge in unemployment worsened poverty in the country, with recipients of the *Revenu de Solidarité Active* (formerly *Revenu Mensuel d'Insertion*) income support reaching a record 1 766 000 in 2010, an increase of over 60 per cent since 2002 and nearly 300 per cent since 1992 (Murard, 2011, p. 267).

Predictably, this economic and social crisis has translated into a steady but unmistakable rise of Euroscepticism since the 1990s. This can first be seen in the secular decline in support for European integration in France since the heyday of 70 per cent approval for the European Economic Community (EEC) in the late 1980s, down to around 40 per cent for the EU today. This rise of Euroscepticism



broadly tracked the country's worsening economic situation, reflecting the growing correlation drawn by voters between European integration and economic stagnation since the 1990s and especially the mid-2000s.

The drop in EU approval in France was particularly steep following the European sovereign debt crisis, with trust in the EU falling to a low of 30 per cent in fall 2011 before climbing back to 37 per cent in spring 2012. Meanwhile, in Spring 2012 only 13 per cent of French respondents believed that the national economy was in good shape versus 84 per cent in bad shape. This compared with 10 per cent who thought the economic situation in the EU was good versus 83 per cent bad (European Commission, 2012, pp. T49, T8, T9).

This pessimism in the wake of the Eurozone crisis was confirmed by a Pew Global Attitudes survey from March 2013, which showed that only 9 per cent of the French believed that their economy was performing well (a 21 per cent fall since 2007) and 12 per cent that it would improve over the next 12 months. Such economic pessimism translated into a substantial erosion of support for European economic integration. In 2013, 77 per cent of the French feared that integration would weaken national economic performance, a 33 per cent increase since 1991. Likewise, whereas in 2009 43 per cent of the French averred that European economic integration had strengthened the French economy, by 2013 only 22 per cent believed this. These measures were equaled only in the crisis-ridden states of the Eurozone's southern periphery (Pew Research Center, 2013, pp. 33, 35).

This growing anti-Europe sentiment traceable to the economic crisis that has gripped the country since the 1990s has fostered an economically anti-liberal and socially protectionist form of Euroscepticism driven by concerns that the Single Market and EMU were increasing unemployment in France whilst eviscerating the welfare state (Belot and Cautrès, 2004, pp. 123–124; Cautrès, 2005, pp. 150–155; Sauger, 2008, pp. 67–68). Initially, this new Euroscepticism assumed a left-wing coloration that most forcefully emerged in the referendum on the draft European Constitutional Treaty (ECT) of May 2005 (see Table 1). The debate over the ECT reflected the socioeconomic concerns described above, focusing on the Treaty's so-called 'social' chapter that was attacked for being too vague in the face of the EU's pursuit of further market reforms rather than its more explicitly political parts such as reforming EU governance and the Charter of Fundamental Rights (Perrineau, 2005, pp. 232–233).<sup>3</sup> Notwithstanding voters for the FN and the anti-Europe *Mouvement pour la France* (MPF) who overwhelmingly voted against, the majority of votes for the 'No' (55 per cent) came from the left rather than the right (45 per cent). (*ibid.*, p. 243) This trend was evident both on the radical left among Trotskyist party and Communist voters as well as on the mainstream left, first among the Greens and especially the PS.

Conversely, on the right and in marked contrast to the Maastricht Treaty referendum, mainstream party – RPR and UDF – voters overwhelmingly supported the ECT, testifying to these parties' conversion to the tenets of economic liberalism

embodied by European integration since the 1990s. The right-wing sovereignist vote that had fueled the anti-Maastricht 'No' flocked first and foremost to the FN (*ibid.*, pp. 239–240; Hainsworth *et al.*, 2004, p. 48; Cautrès, 2005, pp. 150–151). Meanwhile, as support for the party broadened to the working classes during the 1990s (Perrineau, 1997, pp. 100–111; Bihr, 1998, pp. 17–29; Mayer, 2002, pp. 98–103, 341–344), it too began to benefit from an anti-European socioeconomic vote<sup>4</sup> (Boy and Chiche, 2005, p. 104; Berezin, 2006, pp. 271–272). Thus, the issue of Europe served to further polarize the left and the right, with the radical parties on both extremes universally embracing Eurosceptic positions, while driving a new uncomfortable division within the governing parties.

Europe's salience as a domestic political issue was particularly apparent in the 2012 French presidential election campaign, reflecting the negative domestic fallout from the Eurozone crisis. An IFOP survey taken on the twentieth anniversary of the Maastricht Treaty referendum that asked eligible voters how, knowing what they know today, they would have voted in that referendum shows that, while the Eurosceptic parties more or less maintained their overwhelmingly (over 90 per cent) anti-European vote, the mainstream parties, particularly on the right, saw their proportion of Eurosceptic voters rise (see Table 1). In turn, suggesting the role that Europe itself assumed in the campaign, an EEC postelection survey showed that when voters were asked to choose between the four themes of nuclear energy, immigration, cutting the civil service and the powers of Europe, this last issue was uppermost in their minds (43 per cent followed by 27 per cent for immigration) (Dehousse and Tacea, 2015, pp. 160–161).

Similarly, underscoring the correlation drawn by voters between their worsening economic situation and European integration, seven of the top eight issues of concern to them on the eve of the first and second rounds of the 2012 election directly concerned European economic governance. The first two among them, unemployment (49 per cent in the first round/49 per cent in the second) and the national debt and budget deficit (31 per cent/35 per cent), were explicitly tied by François Hollande to the EU during the campaign, while the issues of crime (ninth issue of importance to voters at 14 per cent in the first round and 16 per cent in the second) and immigration (ranked tenth with 13 and 18 per cent) were linked to Europe by Nicolas Sarkozy (*ibid.*, p. 161). This could only raise Europe's salience among the electorate.

Finally, in post-election surveys, voters often associated Europe with changes that negatively impacted their lives, 67 per cent fearing that it would lead to an erosion of welfare protections in France and 53 per cent that it would undermine the country's national identity and culture. These sentiments gained in intensity during the election campaign, with the shortfall between those advocating a reinforcement of Europe versus those in favor of preserving French economic and political sovereignty increasing from 14 per cent in December 2011 to 32 per cent in April 2012 (*ibid.*, pp. 161–162). In short, if in previous presidential campaigns Europe had been 'invisible but omnipresent', by 2012 it emerged front and center on the electoral stage



(Belot and Cautrès, 2004). And though Euroscepticism did not translate into an out-and-out rejection of Europe, it became part of the domestic debate to a hitherto unprecedented degree in a French national election.

It was the FN that made the greatest effort to channel this Eurosceptic vote. A lexographic study of the 2012 campaign that compared the relative weight given to Europe by the principal candidates found that it was Marine Le Pen who accorded it the most importance. Europe accounted for 6.04 per cent of her communications, coming second behind the economy (6.47 per cent) and well ahead of the FN's traditional theme of predilection, immigration (3.89 per cent). This compared with Europe taking only fourth place in François Hollande's communications at 4.27 per cent, and fifth place for Nicolas Sarkozy (5.72 per cent) and François Bayrou (3.93 per cent), respectively (Dehousse and Tacea, 2015, pp. 153–154).

In turn, the internal debate over Europe in the 2012 presidential campaign carried over into the 2014 European elections. This could first be seen from general survey data showing how European issues informed the electoral choices of the French electorate as a whole in the 2014 elections and second, from more specific data illustrating how opposition to Europe disproportionately impelled FN voters compared with those for the other parties.

At a general level, we see that the 2014 European election campaign comparatively captured the public's interest and that those who turned out to vote did so in part based on European issues. Although remaining much lower than for national elections, turnout in France (42.43 per cent) did increase from the record low set in 2009 (40.63 per cent) and nearly matched the 2004 level (42.76 per cent). In keeping with previous studies of voter turnout, one-quarter (24 per cent) of abstainers stated that their non-participation was motivated by their disapproval of the way Europe is governed (versus 31 per cent who claimed a lack of interest in the campaign and 26 per cent who felt their vote would not change anything) (OpinionWay, 2014a, p. 6). Similarly, abstentionist voters expressed the strongest anti-European feelings, 66 per cent of them considering French membership a bad thing, 76 per cent that it should be abandoned and 66 per cent that France should exit the euro (OpinionWay, 2014b, p. 10).

In turn, the fact that interest in or concerns about Europe animated voters in the EP elections was confirmed by a national exit poll which showed that overall, 63 per cent of the French cast their votes based on their appreciation of European issues versus 37 per cent on national issues. Forty-two per cent of these claimed that the most important issue determining their vote on the day was the actions taken by the EU to resolve the economic crisis, followed by 40 per cent who were motivated by the unemployment crisis and immigration, respectively, and 39 per cent by France's place in the EU (OpinionWay, 2014a, pp. 14, 16). Correlatively, the Eurobarometer Standard Spring Poll for 2014 taken the same month as the election indicated that this overall preoccupation with Europe in France assumed a strongly pessimistic tinge. Fifty-five per cent of the French (versus 38 per cent for the EU as whole) felt that



Europe was moving in the wrong direction versus only 16 per cent (compared with 25 per cent for the EU) in the right direction. Meanwhile, overall trust of the EU in France was at only 34 per cent at the time of the poll versus 56 per cent overall distrust (European Commission, 2014, pp. 70, 94). This wariness was confirmed by an EP post-election survey, which found that only 36 per cent of the French trusted the EU's institutions (compared with 43 per cent for the EU as a whole), marking a 10 per cent drop from the 2009 European elections, while approximately 6 in 10 (58 per cent) did not trust them (versus an EU average of 52 per cent), a 13 per cent increase since 2009 (EP, 2014, p. 57).

However, the French felt the greatest pessimism regarding the EU at the economic level, with 78 per cent of the French disagreeing with the statement that the latter had made the cost of living cheaper (versus 68 per cent for the whole EU) while 67 per cent disagreed with the statement that the EU created more jobs in Europe (versus 49 per cent for the EU), the most negative opinion among all the member states. Correlatively, the French expressed strong pessimism regarding the EU's handling of the Eurozone crisis, with 54 per cent of them disagreeing with the statement that the EU is making the financial sector pay its fair share through its policies to resolve the crisis (versus 48 per cent for the EU.) Meanwhile, half of the French disagreed with the statement that the EU would emerge fairer from the crisis while only 28 per cent agreed (versus 41 per cent and 35 per cent for the EU, respectively) (European Commission, 2014, pp. 110–115). Thus, although a healthy majority of the French (64 per cent) continued to support membership in the EU and the euro (68 per cent), these broad expressions of support concealed more specific anxieties about Europe that could be mobilized by Eurosceptic parties in the 2014 EP elections (*ibid.*, pp. 85, 143).

And on this score, we see that FN voters represented the largest and most resolutely anti-EU fraction of the Eurosceptic voters depicted above. Thus, an exit poll following the 2014 European elections showed that the FN captured 68 per cent of voters who felt that France's membership in Europe was a bad thing compared with 7 per cent for the FdG, the party with the second highest proportion of these voters. Likewise, a whopping 76 per cent of voters who thought that Europe should be abandoned voted for the FN versus only 7 per cent who chose in favor of the FdG, the party with the second highest tally (OpinionWay, 2014b, p. 10). Another survey taken in the days immediately preceding the election found that 78 per cent of FN supporters thought the EU a threat to French national identity versus 36 per cent, respectively, for the FdG, UMP and MoDem. Meanwhile, 90 per cent of FN supporters believed that France's decision-making powers should be reinforced even if this meant limiting those of the EU versus 75 per cent of FdG, 66 per cent of UMP and 65 per cent of MoDem supporters (Ipsos Public Affairs, 2014b, pp. 11, 13).

Finally, FN voters also expressed the greatest animus against EMU, with the party capturing 64 per cent of voters who were in favor of France exiting the euro versus only 8 per cent for the FdG, the party with the second highest percentage.



Confirming this sentiment, FN supporters presented the strongest level of opposition to the euro, with 65 per cent wishing that France jettison the single currency versus 23 per cent for the FdG, 20 per cent for the MoDem and only 13 per cent for the UMP (Ipsos, 2014b, p. 14; OpinionWay, 2014b, p. 10).

In short, though the highest proportion of FN voters stated that they privileged national over European issues (68 per cent versus 32 per cent) in casting their vote in the 2014 EP elections, the strong animus they registered toward Europe both generally and on specific policies also informed their choice (OpinionWay, 2014a, p. 15). Of the four ostensibly domestic issues cited by FN voters as the most important determinants of their vote, three of these – immigration, unemployment and the cost of living (the fourth being security) – were connected in their minds to European policies (ibid., p. 17). Thus, opposition to Europe played a central role in the 2014 European elections in France not only in terms of determining turnout, but also in affecting the choices of those who did vote in general and of the plurality who chose for the FN specifically.

Yet, the growth of Euroscepticism in France is in and of itself insufficient to explain the FN's victory in the 2014 European elections. Specifically, how was it able to capture the bulk of the Eurosceptic vote – particularly among the lower classes – to the detriment of the other parties? In this connection, one needs to examine the actions – or as the case may be, inaction – of the other actors in the French party system regarding European integration generally and European economic policy in particular. Then we can determine what about the FN's political program and campaign strategy – that is, the factors of political supply it deployed – rendered it more effective in winning over Eurosceptic voters compared to its partisan rivals.

## **Owning Euroscepticism: Europhobia versus Europessimism**

The political parties that contested the European elections alongside the FN can be broken down into two categories. First are the governing parties – PS, UMP, UDI-MoDem and, to a lesser extent, the Greens – who displayed a fundamental convergence around the *ordo-liberal*<sup>5</sup> tenets underlying European economic integration and the institutions – European Commission, European Central Bank (ECB) and European Court of Justice – that oversee its function. Second come Europessimist parties which, situated on the radical left, hope to correct the present trajectory of European economic integration by reforming the institutions and mechanisms that preside over the latter.

In contrast to these pro-EU and Europessimist party blocs, the FN has occupied an exclusive position of unconditional opposition to the European project from 1989 on. By presenting itself as the sole Europhobe actor in the French party system, it has most effectively mobilized the Eurosceptic sentiments not only of traditionally sovereignist voters, but also of those hardest hit by economic liberalization and social retrenchment.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, the FN has been increasingly able to claim issue ‘ownership’ over Euroscepticism in France, particularly since Marine Le Pen assumed the party leadership in January 2011. In this section, we examine how the FN was able to do this and specifically, how it distinguished itself from its competitors, particularly on the radical left, in order to mobilize this reservoir of Euroscepticism in its favor.

Before 1989, the FN was pro-Europe on the grounds that the latter served in its eyes as a bulwark against Communism. The collapse of the Soviet Union, however, combined with the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, brought the party to reverse course and adopt a position of increasingly unconditional opposition to European integration (Bastow, 1997, pp. 64–67; Davies, 1999, pp. 96–105; Hainsworth *et al.*, 2004, pp. 45–49; Vassilopoulou, 2011, pp. 236–238; Williams, 2013, pp. 135–136). From the campaign preceding the Maastricht Treaty referendum, in which Jean-Marie Le Pen qualified the latter as signifying ‘the end of France, the French people, its language and culture’ (Hainsworth *et al.*, 2004, p. 46), through the 1994 European election campaign in which the FN portrayed Europe as a stalking horse for a ‘federalizing’ project ‘open to the winds of globalization and thus to all manners of economic, demographic, social and cultural forms of aggression that threaten [France’s] identity and prosperity’ (Bastow, 1997, p. 66), followed by its embrace of a populist economic program marrying protectionism and welfare chauvinism following the great strike wave of 1995 (Bastow, 1998, p. 60), to Le Pen’s call for France to restore the franc and leave the EU during the 2002 presidential election campaign (Hainsworth *et al.*, 2004, p. 48), the party has progressively hardened its Eurosceptic stance.

However, through the 1990s and 2000s the FN’s position on Europe was incoherent and inchoate. For example, whereas in its program for the 2002 parliamentary elections the FN claimed that the only way to ‘reestablish French sovereignty [was] to take France out of the EU’, this stance was strikingly absent from its 2007 parliamentary election manifesto (Williams, 2013, p. 136). This reflected the fact that for most of its development under Jean-Marie Le Pen the FN had remained a primarily anti-immigrant party, with immigration serving as an ‘omnibus’ issue for broader societal, economic and European concerns (Taguieff, 1998, pp. 37–63; Hainsworth, 2004, pp. 105–107; Monnot and Mestre, 2011, pp. 116–117; Crépon, 2012, pp. 38–41; Perrineau, 2014, p. 99).

This changed when Marine Le Pen succeeded her father as FN president. Her assumption of the party leadership heralded a significant strategic shift in its development, with the FN moving from playing its traditional role as an anti-system protest party to recasting itself as a ‘normal’ party seeking to exercise power.<sup>7</sup> This evolution in turn occasioned a substantive inflection in its discourse and program in which the opposition to Europe assumed thematic pride of place.

At a discursive level, the ‘new’ FN has toned down the racialized anti-immigrant and anti-Semitic rhetoric that characterized it in the past in order to couch its rejection of immigration within a broader, normatively neutral opposition to neoliberal



globalization (Monnot and Mestre, 2011, pp. 110–120; Crépon, 2012, pp. 177–181; Perrineau, 2014, pp. 90–95). The central element underpinning this shift has been the rejection of the EU combined with a reaffirmation of French economic and political sovereignty. While the governing parties in France were busy facilitating Europe's neoliberal economic integration, so this new line goes, the FN has erected itself as the sole true opponent of this project and defender of its sectoral victims.

The critique of the EU is advanced at several levels. In the first place, its baleful impact is to be seen in terms of its socioeconomic costs. Because of the single market and EMU, small- and medium-sized French firms are incapable of competing with the cheaper goods produced by multinational firms, condemning them to bankruptcy and their workers to unemployment (Le Pen, 2012, pp. 76–77). In turn, rising unemployment facilitated by EU-driven economic liberalization has occasioned a fall in public revenues, fueling yawning budget deficits and giving EU and national elites a pretext to slash social spending and cut public services. Meanwhile, under the Union's free trade orientation, French workers are placed into direct competition with low-wage labor in developing countries, hastening the country's deindustrialization by facilitating the outsourcing of its industry (*ibid.*, pp. 36–37, 76–77, 82).

By the same token, the free movement of goods and capital enacted under the EU's free trade policy finds its demographic corollary in the phenomenon of third world immigration – particularly from the Islamic world – which is portrayed as economically disastrous for native workers, culturally threatening to French national identity, and politically antithetical to the country's republican heritage (*ibid.*, pp. 82, 85–86). By presenting opposition to Third World immigration in terms of the imperatives of economic, cultural and republican self-defense, the FN has repackaged its opposition to immigration by situating it in a holistic critique of neoliberal globalization. Thus, it is able to deflect the accusations of racism and xenophobia while continuing to oppose immigration in the name of preserving France's economic sovereignty, cultural identity and republican tradition (Crépon, 2012, pp. 209–222; Perrineau, 2014, pp. 80–82, 99–100; Monnot and Mestre, 2011, pp. 129–134).

Second, the fiscal and monetary strictures of EMU have deprived the French state of control over economic policy. Instead, the latter defers to the ECB and the European Commission to set macroeconomic policy and direct French economic development (Le Pen, 2012, p. 57). From this perspective, participation in the euro is judged to be economically ruinous for French industry and workers. At one level, monetary convergence around the deutschmark yielded an overvalued euro that hurt French exports while forcing national firms to lay off workers in order to remain competitive. In turn, the strict fiscal criteria governing the euro have forced the French state to reduce social spending and eliminate state services in order to remain within the 3 per cent of GDP annual spending limit imposed by the Stability Pact (*ibid.*, pp. 58–59, 77). Thus, in addition to preventing the country from regaining competitiveness by devaluing its currency and shackling it to economic policies crafted in Berlin, the euro has imposed increasing hardships on a growing number of

workers and unemployed left behind by economic liberalization. Conversely, the greatest beneficiaries of the euro have been globally mobile French multinationals that have used its deflationary strictures to downsize their workforces or outsource production, and financial institutions that have benefited from windfall portfolio investment in the single currency (*ibid.*, pp. 59–60, 119–120).

Finally, politically, the EU is excoriated for its un- or even anti-democratic character because it strips the French people of sovereign control over their economic, social and cultural destiny. Instead, it forces laws upon them over the formulation of which they have no say. Directives issued by the Commission are rubberstamped by national parliaments, effectively leaving the design and adoption of economic and social policies to unaccountable Brussels technocrats, absent any democratic debate. This disregard for democracy was particularly underscored by the February 2008 vote in which the National Assembly passed the Lisbon Treaty, an abridged version of the ECT that had been categorically rejected by the French electorate in the May 2005 referendum, with 560 out of 741 votes (*ibid.*, pp. 78–79).

Marine Le Pen denounces the political and economic elites who are seen to benefit from EU-driven globalization and have exposed the country to financial deregulation, market liberalization and uncontrolled immigration to the benefit of oligarchical capital (*ibid.*, pp. 116–120). At the forefront of this anti-democratic collusion are the mainstream political parties which, while engaging in a simulacrum of democratic competition every 5 years, share a deep ideological and financial stake in the advance of neoliberal globalization and European economic integration. These parties converged in support of the agreements that underpin the latter and to override any popular opposition to them (*ibid.*, pp. 124–128; 134–142).

Programmatically, the critique of EU-driven globalization provides the basis for the FN's muscular assertion of the principle of national sovereignty, leading it to call for a middle path between the 'savage' liberalism advocated by the mainstream parties of the left and the right, the UMP and PS, on the one hand, and the anti-capitalism of the 'internationalist parties' on the other (Monnot and Mestre, 2011, pp. 29–30, 114). This implies articulating French economic life around two principles. First, it translates into a reaffirmation of *Étatisme*: the resurrection of a strategic role for the state in coordinating the country's economic development and presiding over its social stability (*ibid.*, pp. 114–115, 155; Le Pen, 2012, pp. 218–223; Perrineau, 2014, pp. 79–80). Second, such a strategy implies the recourse to economic and social protectionism: enacting commercial policies in order to protect French enterprises and workers against foreign competition while supporting nationally bound *patrons responsables* (*petits indépendants* and SME owners) against rootless *patrons commis* (multinational corporations traded on the Paris bourse) (Monnot and Mestre, 2011, p. 118; Le Pen, 2012, pp. 203–209; Perrineau, 2014, p. 93). Both entail reasserting France's monetary sovereignty and leaving the euro to reestablish the franc (Le Pen, 2012, pp. 210–212; 230–231). Correlatively, protectionism is to be extended to the social realm under the principle



of *la préférence nationale* (national preference). This requires stopping the inflow of immigrants who compete with French workers for jobs and push down their wages and living standards on the one hand, while predicating access to jobs, benefits and housing on the criterion of national appurtenance to prevent foreigners from taking advantage of the country's welfare system on the other (ibid., pp. 231–232; Monnot and Mestre, 2011, p. 158; Crépon, 2012, pp. 222–224).

Of course, such prescriptions are totally incompatible with the economic and political principles governing the EU and the treaties and institutions that enshrine them. State intervention and the nationalization of 'strategic' sectors and assets run afoul of the commitment to free market principles that ground the SEA and every subsequent advance of European economic integration. Similarly, protectionism in terms of limiting trade and migrant labor contravenes the EU's commitment to free trade within the single market while violating the clause on the free movement of persons inside its borders. Likewise, increasing social protections, particularly according to the criterion of national preference, would run aground of the budgetary restrictions imposed by EMU, not to mention EU human rights law. Finally, withdrawal from the euro would mark such a radical break with the process of European economic integration that it would likely end France's participation in the EU.

By taking these positions, Marine Le Pen has staked out the most radically anti-EU position in the French political debate. She has cast the FN as the sole Europhobe party within the French party system as opposed to the Europessimist parties and actors – the left-wing of the PS, Greens, FdG, Trotskyist parties and a small number of sovereignists on the right – who, though troubled with the current trajectory of European integration, still hope to correct it from within the existing EU institutions and treaties. Capitalizing on resistance to European integration as a 'touchstone of domestic dissent' and harnessing it as a powerful 'tool of contestation' within a broadly pro-integration partisan environment (Taggart, 1998, p. 384), the FN has thus successfully claimed discursive and programmatic 'ownership' over Euroscepticism as a domestic political issue.

Having detailed the FN's Europhobe critique of Europe, we now turn to analyzing the political opportunity structure in which this critique was deployed. Accordingly, it is necessary to recall the various approaches to Europe developed by its political rivals, first among the governing parties and then on the radical left.

Since the 1980s, both governing party blocs – the PS and Greens on the one hand, the RPR/UMP and Center Right (the UDF and its inheritors, the Union des Démocrates Indépendants and the Mouvement Démocrate (MoDem)) on the other – have been complicit in liberalizing the French economy. As a consequence, both have supported the course of European economic integration pursued through the SEA, the Maastricht Treaty and EMU.

If it is not surprising that this should have been the case on the right, which broadly effected its conversion to economic liberalism in the 1970s, more unexpected has

been the consistent support for European integration that has been demonstrated by parties of the left and in particular, the PS. Ever since the policy U-turn effected by the Mitterrand administration in March 1983 away from reflationary Keynesianism toward budgetary *rigueur* to maintain France in the European Monetary System, the PS's leadership has almost unanimously supported European economic integration. In 1986, it embraced the SEA as a means of legitimizing the policy of privatization and state disengagement from the economy that had been initiated by prime ministers Pierre Mauroy and Laurent Fabius. In 1992, the PS championed the Maastricht Treaty which prepared the ground for EMU, with prime minister Lionel Jospin validating the deflationary Stability Pact that underpinned the single currency when he signed the 1997 Amsterdam Treaty. Then, in 2005 the party, whose president was none other than François Hollande, came out in support of the ECT in the May 2005 referendum called by Jacques Chirac. Despite the victory of the 'No' in which 56 per cent of Socialist voters pronounced themselves against the Treaty, in February 2008 a majority of Socialist deputies in the National Assembly voted to approve the Lisbon Treaty, essentially a condensed version of the latter. Finally, in September 2012 the Hollande administration and Socialist majority signed off on the European Fiscal Compact that stiffened the penalties against violators of the Stability Pact while forcing Eurozone bailout recipients to agree to a constitutionally mandated 'golden rule' which forces them to balance their budgets. In short, despite its formal commitment to social democracy, the PS has effectively embraced the ordo-liberal tenor of European economic integration, much to the dismay of a sizeable part of its electorate (Guyomarch, 1995; Milner, 2004, 2000; Ross, 2004; Sauger, 2008; Bernier, 2014, Chapter 2).

Even more striking than the PS's acquiescence in European economic integration, however, has been the support shown for the latter by parties of the radical left which, while claiming to want to alter its liberalizing and deflationary trajectory, have continued to argue – in stark contrast to the FN – that France is better off within the EU and Eurozone than outside them. From the ratification of the European Treaty in 1957 through the mid-1990s, the PCF opposed French participation in the EEC on the grounds that the principles of free trade and monetary coordination it enshrined ran against the interests of French workers. However, following the Soviet Union's collapse that saw electoral support for the PCF plummet, the Communist leadership softened its anti-European line in the name of modernizing the party. Although it claimed to oppose the neoliberal and deflationary terms of the single market and monetary integration, henceforth the party called for reforming the EU in a social democratic direction rather than unconditionally opposing it to preserve the nation's economic autonomy<sup>8</sup> (Milner, 2004; Bernier, 2014, pp. 100–106).

Paradoxically given their doctrinal antipathy to the PCF, a similar perspective also emerged among the Trotskyist Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (later Nouveau Parti Anti-Capitaliste (NPA)) and Lutte Ouvrière. This reflected their core belief that a revolutionary overthrow of capitalism could only occur at the international level



rather than within the individual nation states. Accordingly, these parties came to view the development of a liberal capitalist Europe as an essential precondition for achieving this revolutionary outcome, with the struggle for an alternative, anti-capitalist Europe needing to be pursued from within the existing European structures. The practical upshot was that the Trotskyist parties adopted the same intra-European reformism as that espoused by the PCF since the mid-1990s (Milner, 2004; Bernier, 2014, pp. 106–107).

Finally, a similar perspective was espoused by the anti-globalization movement which has called for an alternative – *alter-mondialiste* – path of globalization that would move away from its current shareholder-oriented, free trade-based course of economic integration to one privileging stakeholders. On European economic integration, this has led the *alter-mondialistes* to call for *une autre Europe* representing the rights of all stakeholders rather than the sole prerogatives of big business. Thus, instead of adopting a Europhobe posture, anti-globalization groups such as ATTAC have espoused a legalistic reform agenda to amend the existing European treaties in this direction (Bernier, 2014, pp. 107–108).

This reformist posture has been adopted by the FdG which, launched in anticipation of the 2009 European elections, represents a radical left-wing coalition comprised of the Parti de Gauche (PdG), the PCF, the NPA and members of ATTAC. In 2009, its European election campaign slogan replicated the PCF's 1999 slogan of 'Bouge l'Europe!' (Move Europe!), underscoring the FdG's desire to achieve 'a new vision for society and Europe founded on the general interest and popular sovereignty conceived at both the national and European levels' (*ibid.*, pp. 105, 109). To achieve this aim, the new movement called for asserting greater democratic control over the ECB by Eurozone member states, abandoning the 'productivist logic' of European agriculture so that small farmers could secure higher prices for their crops, and making all future steps toward greater EU integration contingent upon the democratic consent of the Union's peoples. In turn, in the run-up to the 2012 presidential and parliamentary elections, the FdG advocated that the ECB be rendered accountable to the Council of Ministers and the EP and that the Stability Pact be loosened, adopting a strategy of 'European disobedience' until its goal of amending the European treaties is fulfilled. Underlining the limits of this disobedience, however, the party has refused to countenance, as the FN does, a French exit from these EU institutions. Likewise, it categorically rejects any prospective withdrawal from the euro (*ibid.*, pp. 111–112).

Apart from a handful of intellectuals and economists, then, the overwhelming majority of the EU's left-wing critics espouse a Europessimist position which, though critical of the current course of European integration, calls for the latter to be corrected by amending the existing European treaties and relying on extant EU institutions to achieve this. Consequently, they have effectively forfeited the position of unconditional opposition to the EU to the FN. That this ambivalence toward Europe has redounded to the FN's benefit can be seen from the rising levels of



Euroscepticism among mainstream and radical left voters since the 1992 Maastricht Referendum (see Table 1). Given the disappointment by the governing left-wing parties (PS and Greens) of large numbers of their voters on Europe, and the irresoluteness displayed by the radical left parties toward European economic integration despite its overwhelming rejection by their own electorates, the FN was well placed to capture a preponderance of the Eurosceptic vote in the 2014 European elections.

## Conclusion

As the French case demonstrates, Europe's growing salience means that it is no longer absent from the domestic political debate but has instead emerged as an important electoral issue within the EU member states. Accordingly, EP elections can no longer simply be viewed as second-order contests in which arguments over European integration play no role. This is suggested by the broader successes registered by Eurosceptic (that is, Europhobe and Europessimist) parties in the 2014 European elections, which won 28 per cent of the vote Europe-wide (versus 20 per cent in 2009) and claimed 212 of the 751 seats in the EP. In addition to France, such parties came first in Greece, Britain and Denmark, while coming second in Poland and Hungary. This would imply that, as in the FN's case, those political actors who were able to fashion the clearest message of opposition to Europe came to effectively 'own' the issue and mobilize the Eurosceptic vote to their advantage. Further research is needed to determine why Eurosceptic parties did not perform as well as expected in some countries, such as Italy and the Netherlands, as well as why in some cases, such as Greece, Europessimists ended up winning over Europhobes. However, Europe's new salience due to the economic crisis, combined with its comparative 'ownership' by Eurosceptic opposition parties versus Europhile mainstream ones, appears to have proven decisive in fueling this anti-EU groundswell.

In terms of the FN's prospects following the 2014 European elections, the economic and political conditions that have fueled its resurgence under Marine Le Pen's leadership – and which are crystallized by its critique of EU-driven globalization – are not going to dissipate any time soon. On the left, the PS shows no sign of breaking with the *ordo-liberal* consensus underpinning European economic governance. The persistent stagnation and unemployment associated with the latter remain the principal reasons for François Hollande's record level of unpopularity, with only 12 per cent of the French crediting him with doing a good job in November 2014 (Clavel, 2014). In particular, his administration's about-face with respect to the German-inspired deflationary policies to resolve the European debt crisis against which he had campaigned in the run-up to the 2012 elections, followed by the deep spending cuts – €50 billion over 3 years – that were pushed through by prime minister Manuel Valls in the 2014 annual budget, have gravely disappointed Hollande's voters (Roger, 2014).



Similarly, on the radical left, the FdG continues to offer muddled prescriptions in its approach to Europe, calling for *désobéissance européenne* and a French withdrawal from the Treaty of Lisbon if the latter is not reformed, while simultaneously advocating institutional solutions such as increasing member state control over the ECB and ruling out abandoning the euro. Such ambivalence facilitates the FN's capacity to capture the Eurosceptic vote since, contrary to the FdG, it stands in categorical opposition to the EU and the euro. Meanwhile, the right's continued commitment to maintaining the *ordo-liberal* terms of the euro, combined with persistent ideological and personnel divides within and between the UMP, UDI and MoDem, also inevitably redound to the party's advantage. By appealing to voters disappointed with the left's indolence in the face of the crisis and to disillusioned right-wing voters who agree with its nationally and culturally exclusionary prescriptions, the FN appears ideally placed to widen its electoral appeal beyond 2014.

In particular, the 2014 European elections set the party nicely up for the 2017 presidential and parliamentary elections. In terms of the presidential contest, Marine Le Pen will likely square off against the most unpopular president in the Fifth Republic's history and the candidate of an ideologically and organizationally divided right, putting her in a strong position to improve on her 2012 performance. This was most recently underscored by a January 2015 poll that predicted that, depending on the mainstream party candidates, she would come first with between 31 and 29 per cent in the first round of the 2017 presidential election. However, the 2017 parliamentary elections are likely to be politically determinative for the FN. Should it win more than a handful of seats, this would give the party the capacity to exert a direct policy-making role for the first time in its history, thus heralding a seminal reconfiguration of political competition in France and bringing the FN closer to its goal of exercising power than ever before.

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## Notes

- 1 By issue ownership we mean a political candidate's or party's capacity to frame the vote choice according to her/its capacity to address and resolve problems of concern to voters as a function of 'a history of attention, initiative and innovation toward these problems, which leads [them] to believe that [she/it] is more sincere and committed to doing something about them. (Petrocik, 1996, p. 826; Bélanger and Meguid, 2008; Green and Hobolt, 2008).
- 2 Although such anti-European sovereigntism was predominantly to be found on the right, it also appeared on the left, particularly among Communist voters as well as supporters of Jean-Pierre Chevènement's *Mouvement des Citoyens*, which campaigned against Maastricht on economic sovereignty grounds.

- 3 These socioeconomic concerns were crystallized by the mobilization of the ‘No’ campaign against the Bolkestein Directive, which sought to reduce non-tariff barriers by allowing service providers to operate across the EU under the regulation of their home countries. Portrayed as a lever for engaging an EU-wide regulatory race to the bottom, opposition to the Bolkestein Directive thus galvanized the campaign against the ECT by channeling broader social concerns over the trajectory of European economic integration (see Grossman and Woll, 2011).
- 4 A debate has emerged regarding the partisan provenance of this working class FN vote which opposes the tenants of *gaucho-lepénisme*, who construe it as a transfer of electoral allegiances on the part of formerly left-wing – specifically Communist – voters, to those who argue that this vote was fueled by formerly apolitical (*niniste*) or conservative working class voters (*ouvriéro-lepénisme*). That the party has seen a steady increase in working class support since the 1990s is indisputable, however; by the 2012 presidential election, the FN had become the leading party among industrial and service sector workers (Perrineau, 1997, pp. 80–84, 230–232; Bihl, 1998, Chapter 3; Mayer, 2002, pp. 107–109, 169–176, 251–256; IFOP, 2012b, pp. 9–10).
- 5 Traceable to the Freiburg School of law and economics, *ordo-liberalism* refers to the rules-based market economy and policy paradigm targeting price stability and budgetary equilibrium that has held sway in (West) Germany through the post-war period and which currently underpins EMU.
- 6 This distinction between Europhobia and Europessimism, or ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ Euroscepticism, has been theorized in a number of ways. For the original definition – which is used here – see Kopecký and Mudde (2002). For more recent formulations, see Taggart and Szczerbiak (2013), Szczerbiak and Taggart (2008) and Mair (2007).
- 7 A debate has arisen about whether this strategy of normalization marks an authentic break with the FN’s political program when it was led by Jean-Marie Le Pen. Specifically, some have argued that it was under party *délégué général* Bruno Mégret’s stewardship in the 1990s that the FN first set about professionalizing itself, developing a national structure, and detoxifying its image to demonstrate that it could responsibly exercise power in collaboration with the mainstream right. However, Mégret’s normalizing strategy never sat well with Jean-Marie Le Pen. Combined with his suspicion that the former was seeking to displace him as FN president, Le Pen refused to countenance power-sharing with the mainstream right and instead remained much more comfortable in maintaining the FN’s ‘tribunary’ status as a fringe protest party. And though he toned down his rhetoric prior to the 2002 and especially 2007 presidential election campaigns, it was not until Marine Le Pen assumed the party leadership that the FN embraced an unambiguous strategy of normalization (Camus, 1997, pp. 56–74; Perrineau, 1997, pp. 64–100, 2014, pp. 67–82; DeClair, 1999, Chapters 5–6, Afterword; Mayer, 2002, pp. 177–196, 245–251; Crépon, 2012, pp. 60–63, 71–82; Shields, 2013).
- 8 In this vein, one should point out that the PCF abandoned its previous Europhobe line at roughly the same time that the FN came to espouse its own uncompromisingly anti-EU stance, thereby positioning itself as the sole party unambiguously opposed to European integration.

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