

The historians' view...

Can the National Front storm the Élysée Palace?

Far-right candidate Marine Le Pen has emerged as a frontrunner for the French presidential election. With the dust settling on Donald Trump's victory in America, two historians assess the prospects of another political outsider surging to power

Interviews by **Chris Bowlby**, a BBC journalist specialising in history

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DR EMILE CHABAL

The best way to describe the National Front, or FN, is as a permanent protest party. There is little doubt that the FN now has a significant presence in France's political landscape. In almost any election, it will receive more than 15 per cent of votes and it regularly scores 30 per cent or more in specific parts of northern, north-eastern and southern France.

At the same time, the FN is still not a party of government. Some of the most respected surveys have shown that the majority of French electors do not consider a number of FN policy proposals workable or even desirable. While FN presidential candidate Marine Le Pen is seen as one of the few candidates who really wants to change things, she is also widely perceived to be dangerous.

Economic factors have helped the FN's growth. For instance, the unravelling of the industrial working class contributed to the collapse of the Communist Party and the rise of the FN. Economic insecurity also helps explain FN penetration in small towns and villages where people often feel the state has neglected them and that public services are under threat.

But other issues are important too. The crisis of the French left highlights the role of political fragmentation in the rise of the FN. The Parti Socialiste (PS) – founded in 1969 – is not primarily a workers' party, but a party of the urban middle classes, with additional strong local and rural roots. This means it has often been outflanked to the left, first by the communists in the 1970s and now by the Front de Gauche (Left Front). This inability on the part of the PS to unite the entire left has always been a problem. It led to the shock success for the FN – under Marine Le Pen's father, Jean-Marie Le Pen – in 2002, and may well ensure Marine Le Pen makes the second round of the presidential elections this year.

Of course, it is not necessary for a party to win an election in order to have a political impact. The influence of the FN was visible, for example, in Nicolas Sarkozy's security-orientated presidential term. But it is easy to overstate the power of the FN to shape political discourse. Even in relation to immigration and protectionism – the two issues with

which the FN is today most closely associated – its role is uncertain. Immigration has been a major electoral issue across Europe since the 1990s, including in places with weak far-right movements. And a number of different parties and movements in Europe have defended protectionist economic policies since the 2008 financial crisis. I would say the FN has succeeded not so much in changing the agenda of mainstream parties, as in forcing them to discuss issues they would rather have ignored.

Resistance to the FN is still strong and the electoral system encourages consensus. The regional elections in 2015 demonstrated the power of what the French call 'republican discipline', where mainstream voters cast their second-round votes in favour of whichever candidate is not on the extreme right. For Marine Le Pen to win the run-off and become president, she would have to achieve a feat that has eluded all past French extreme-right movements – from the anti-German militarism of the Boulangists in the 1880s and 1890s to the populism of the Poujadists in the 1950s. This is not impossible, but it seems unlikely.



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Marine Le Pen addresses a National Front conference in Lyon on 5 February. The FN leader regularly rails against immigration, globalisation and the European Union



Flag-wielding National Front supporters sing at a rally staged by party founder Jean-Marie Le Pen in Paris, 2002



French firebrand Pierre Poujade, pictured in his populist pomp. “His shadow hangs heavy over France today,” says Jim Shields

“The FN has given its policies a left-leaning, anti-capitalist, protectionist orientation. It can now claim to be the party of the working class in France

JIM SHIELDS

The shadow of Pierre Poujade hangs heavy over France today. As a template for grievance politics and electoral insurgency, Poujadism – the movement he led – might claim a patent on modern-day political populism.

Representing a provincial – and, for them, quintessential – ‘France profonde’ undergoing postwar economic restructuring, the Poujadists staged a popular uprising in the mid-1950s against government, tax authorities, big business, banks, industry, intellectuals and the media. They won 52 National Assembly seats in 1956 with a party fielding butchers, bakers, a bicycle repair man and other traders – or, as Poujade called them, “my sausage merchants”.

National decline and cultural pessimism added to a potent brew of discontent

directed at ineffectual elites and a ‘system’ indifferent to the needs of ordinary people. Poujadism styled itself as the first postwar French anti-globalisation movement, defending “the France of crowing cocks” against “the France of Coca Cola”.

Sixty years on, the spirit of Poujade is finding new expression in the populist anger that characterises so much of contemporary politics. The dread spectre is no longer the American-style supermarket with its ‘cellophaned bread’ but economic recession, globalisation, immigration, a borderless Europe, and a growing Islamist terrorist threat. And again hostility towards establishment elites runs high.

It is little surprise that Jean-Marie Le Pen launched his political career as a Poujadist parliamentary deputy in 1956 – or that the far-right National Front (FN) he led for four decades before his daughter, Marine, reprised tunes from the Poujadist playbook.

The early FN was defined by its xenophobic nationalism and its social and economic conservatism. As the party has broadened its appeal, it has given its policies an anti-capitalist, protectionist, markedly left-leaning orientation. The FN can now claim to be the party of the working class in France, while retaining strong support among its traditional Poujadist base of small shopkeepers and self-employed – a rare combination of normally distinct constituencies.

Like the movement in which the young

Jean-Marie Le Pen learned his trade, the FN boasts another major asset: its mastery of communication. Poujade disseminated his message through newspapers, memorabilia, gramophone records and even, innovatively, film. Forty years later, the FN was the first French political party to harness the internet by creating a website. Since then, it has invested heavily in developing an extensive social media reach. Starved of favourable coverage in traditional media, Marine Le Pen boasts the highest online profile of all presidential candidates. And an invisible army of followers relay her every message.

We won’t know what edge this digital prowess has given Le Pen until the polls close. What is clear, however, is that a new way of doing politics is emerging. And the assumptions on which alternating centre-right and centre-left parties have long governed France may one day soon

need to be radically reviewed. **REVIEWED**



Jim Shields is professor of French politics and modern history at Aston University

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BOOK

► **The Extreme Right in France: From Pétain to Le Pen** by Jim Shields (Routledge, 2007)