Rebranding Populism
The Transformation of the Front National in France

Gilles Ivaldi
URMIS-Université de Nice
Overview

• Strategic transformation of the FN
• Electoral support
• Prospects
Incentives for party change

• 2002: ceiling effect, democratic legitimacy, policy credibility
• 2007: electoral defeat; right-wing competition

• Challenges:
  – Leadership
  – Strategy
  – Credibility
Institutionalization

• From niche to mainstream
• Final stage: institutionalization (Harmel & Svasand)
  – De-radicalization of policies
  – Pragmatic leadership
  – Accommodative strategies
  – Office-seeking
Dimensions of party change

- 4 main dimensions (Krouwel 2012):
  - Genetic
  - Organizational
  - Ideological
  - Electoral
Political culture continuity

• Absence of political aggiornamento (e.g. MSI)
• No formal condemnation of racism or holocaust denial
• Far right DNA still perceptible:
  – Mandela
  – Taubira
  – Dieudonné
Organizational aspects

• No symbolic ‘founding event’ (e.g. congress)
• No internal schism
• Limited elite replacement (Philippot, Collard, Maréchal-Le Pen)
• Old party’s grassroots + new inexperienced candidates locally
• Loosening of the links with more radical groups
Party strategy

• Substance vs. Packaging (Harmel et al 1995)
• Modernization and softening of the party’s image (‘de-demonization’)
• Policy credibility–office seeking
• Accommodative strategies
• Mégret in 1997/98 prior to split
Party ideology

• De-emphasizing of social conservative policies
• A new ‘republican’ agenda of laïcity / Islam
• No substantial alterations to core radical policies (Ivaldi 2012)
  – Immigration (ethno-pluralist policies)
  – Law and order (authoritarianism, death penalty)
  – Europe (Euro-reject)
A new economic agenda

• Shift to the left on the economy (Ivaldi 2013)
  – State intervention, public spending
  – Redistribution and welfare expansion
  – Public services and nationalizations

• Increase in salience

• ‘De-culturalization’
Economic positions

Figure 3. Socio-economic themes in the 2012 presidential manifesto*

*number of economic policy pledges in each category.
Competitive position

• Left-Authoritarianism
  – Economic redistribution (left on eco. Axis)
  – Authoritarian policies (right on cult. Axis)
  – Appeal to the ‘little people’ (populism)

• Conjuncture (crisis) or durable shift?

• Still policy flexibility (municipal agenda 2014)
The 2012 presidential election

• Electoral revival of the FN: 17.9%
• Return to party system complexity and polarization
• Economic crisis, unemployment
• Social pessimism
• Discontent with the Sarkozy Presidency
Crisis-ridden electoral constituency

• Strong working class support, lower salariat and the ‘new service proletariat’
• Economic hardship: precariousness, underemployment, unemployment
• Voters with lower skills, assets and education
• Social disintegration, peri-urban peripheries
• Globalization ‘losers’
New inroads

- Diversification of the radical right constituency
- Women (in the lower social strata, single parents, underemployed)
- Young voters < 35 yrs (unemployment)
- Public sector employees
FN voter preferences and attitudes

• Ethnocentrism++, Anti-establishment++, Anti-Europe+

• Heterogeneous economic preferences
  – ‘Centrist’ (equidistant from left-right) on economic issues
  – Shift from market to state, albeit limited
  – Economic nationalism++
  – Undeserving poor++
Conclusion and Prospects

• Early stage of the modernization process
• Popularity+, change in public attitudes
• Propitious context in 2014
• Challenges:
  – ‘Iron law’ of the Two-Ballot Majority system
  – Possible cost of ‘de-radicalization’
  – Policy distance with proximal parties of the right
  – Change in public policy mood: liberal, anti-tax