

Transformation of Radical Right-Wing Populist Parties: Reform of National Rally and its Political Influence

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Abstract. In April 2022, Marine Le Pen, the leader of the National Rally, not only entered the second round of the French presidential election again, but also achieved a new high in the election results of French far-right parties with 41.45% of the votes. Similarly, in the June parliamentary elections, the National Rally's seats increased from 9 to 89, which is undoubtedly a further affirmation of the National Rally reform. Since 2011, Marine Le Pen who has carried out top-down reform of the National Rally put forward a series of strategies, including anti-European integration, de-demonization, and networking, which made a breakthrough in the European parliament elections and French municipal elections, leaving a great impact on the political ecology of French political parties and European politics. Radical right-wing populist parties, represented by the French National Rally, have a voter base that should not be underestimated and become important in the political arena of Western Europe.

Keywords: National Rally; Right-Wing Populist Parties; Marine Le Pen; Political Party Reform.

1. Introduction

Facing economic globalization and the change in global political structure, western society is caught in systematic crisis and change. Right-wing populism, as a political trend of thought and force, has been on the rise around the world with the help of the refugee crisis, European debt crisis, and financial crisis. In recent years, right-wing populist parties have broken their marginalization and entered a stage of rapid development. As a model of far-right populist parties in Western Europe, the National Rally plays a vital role in French politics.[1] Under the changing political and economic situation in France, the National Rally has made continuous gains in the national parliament elections and presidential elections. At the same time, in order to further open up the development path inside and outside the political party and break through many obstacles, Marine Le Pen carried out top-down reform and adopted the strategy of "de-demonization", which had a far-reaching impact on the crisis-ridden French politics and even the whole European political arena.

2. Reform Background of the National Rally

Before changing its name, the National Rally was always active in the French political arena under the name of "Front National". In 1972, its predecessor, "New Order Party", established a political party in the name of "unifying the national front for defending France" (Front National) to gain political benefits in the next year's legislative council election and unite the far-right forces.[2] Meanwhile, Jean-Marie Le Pen, with his image as a moderate right-wing politician with rich political experience, was supported by party members and became the first chairman of the Front National.[3]

Since 2000, the negative effects of economic globalization and European integration have become increasingly prominent, and France is also facing many crises. The Front National and its development are deeply undercut by its demonized image, complicated organizational structure, and other negative factors. Encountering the crisis and challenge from inside and outside France as well as the Front National itself, Marine Le Pen, who inherited her father's legacy, began to reform the Front National drastically.

2.1 Macro Perspective

1) Highlighted Negative Impacts of Economic Globalization

Since the end of the Cold War, accelerating globalization has not only promoted the interactive circulation of manpower and capital in various countries, but also boosted economic growth and the development of productivity. At the same time, it intensified international competition to a certain extent. These changes have led to domestic economic crises in some countries, including France, which also suffered the worst economic recession since World War II. First of all, economic globalization has further aggravated the uneven distribution of social wealth and the differentiation of social strata, which increased the financial burden; Secondly, for Western European countries, the lack of national and regional identity as well as the aggravation of domestic economic problems make the negative impact of economic globalization more prominent, marginalizing Western European countries; [4] Thirdly, the recession of the global economy and the gradual saturation of the domestic market have caused the French economy to fall into a state of long-term stagflation, with a large number of workers unemployed, industrial decline, and various social problems accumulating. [5]

2) Challenges Brought by Deindustrialization

In the fourth industrial revolution, the development of innovative technology replaced most artificial labor, which triggered the serious polarization of the job market. Regular and repetitive job opportunities have been greatly reduced, which makes unemployment in French society more serious. This means that the middle class has been largely reduced and the unemployed have begun to fall to the bottom of society, thus changing the social class. In addition, immigrants from France also participate in the competition for jobs, so the public market environment has changed. All these series of factors have hit hard the unemployed. [6] However, these people will be dissatisfied because of the loss of their own interests and social status. Those who breed hatred will begin to support the far-right forces claiming to represent the people. At the same time, the development of science and technology also aggravates social contradictions. Workers who are poorly educated and lack vocational skills training are constantly marginalized and become the main victims of deindustrialization. The reduction of middle-class jobs and the pressure of employment competition make French people attribute immigrants to employment problems, deteriorating the contradiction between French people and immigrants.

3) European Integration in Crisis

After more than half a century of development, European integration has made great progress and achieved supranational governance to a certain extent. However, in the in-depth expansion, European integration is constantly facing crises and challenges. Firstly, in terms of economy, the financial crisis in 2008 and the economies of euro-zone countries in 2013 constantly exposed the institutional drawbacks of European integration, which made it difficult for Europe to unite on the international stage; Secondly, in terms of cultural identity, there are contradictions and estrangements between European cultural diversity and European identity in the interaction. Countries lack cultural identity and cohesion, and there is mutual prevarication when jointly resisting external difficulties. Therefore, EU member states have the intention of leaving the EU [7]; Thirdly, in the organizational construction of the European Union, political phenomena such as doubts about Europe and Brexit frequently appear. Events such as Brexit and Italy's referendum on a constitutional amendment in 2016 reflect the split tendency within the EU, which also makes other member states begin to waver about whether to leave the EU [8].

2.2 Meso Perspective

1) Impact of Economic Crisis on the French Economy

With the further development of globalization in the 21st century, the already weak French economy becomes more fragile. After the financial crisis in 2008, the French economy is in trouble, facing the dilemma subsumed of high fiscal deficit, high trade deficit, high unemployment rate, and low growth. First of all, the French economic growth rate continues to be sluggish. After the European debt crisis, the French economy recovered slowly, but the social income fell into a stagnant state. The French GDP growth rate in 2013 and 2014 was only 0.3% and 0.4%, far lower than Germany's 1.3% growth rate; Secondly, the high unemployment rate is a major chronic illness in French economy. In

2011, the number of unemployed people in France reached about 2.84 million, an increase of 5.2% over the same period of 2012. The total number of unemployed people reached about 4.51 million. In 2014, the unemployment rate continued to rise by 10.4%, setting a new high in 15 years; Thirdly, social classes are polarized. The outbreak of the economic crisis and the weakness of French economy led to the widening gap between the rich and the poor, and the decline of the middle class due to unemployment. Thus, the polarization of French society is aggravated, that is, the children in the upper class can get elite education and continue to stay where they live, while the children in the lower class are obviously weak in education and employment opportunities.

2) French Refugee Crisis

France has the highest proportion of Muslim population among Western European countries, with a Muslim population of nearly 4.7 million, accounting for 7.5% of the total population. Since the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2010, a large number of refugees and economic migrants have entered EU countries from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, which has triggered a serious social and economic crisis in Europe.[9] According to statistics, the number of people who applied for asylum for the first time in France increased by 18% in 2015 compared with 2014, setting a new high for refugee growth. With the development of the new generation of immigrants in France, their children, as the second and third generations of immigrants, are dissatisfied with their living conditions. Without the firm belief of the first generation of immigrants, they can't integrate into French society, suffering discrimination and inequality, which increases their hatred of society. They are more vulnerable to extremism and become insecure factors in French society. However, the "republican model" implemented by the French government has not successfully solved the integration problem of immigrants[10]. According to a survey conducted by French polling agency Ifop in September 2016, as many as 56% of French people think that Islam is incompatible with the basic values of French society. The emergence of the refugee problem makes the security situation of French society more complicated. On the one hand, the refugee crisis has caused great harm to the French welfare system and slowed down the pace of French economic recovery; On the other hand, the influx of a large number of refugees caused dissatisfaction among French people and deepened the security dilemma in France[11].

3) Terrorism and National Security Crisis

In recent years, there have been successive terrorist attacks in France. In less than two years from 2015 to 2017, there were seven terrorist attacks and French President Hollande had to declare an extension of the national emergency for three months. Continuous terrorist attacks not only affected the economic recovery of various countries, but also had a direct impact on social stability and cause people to panic. In addition, terrorist attacks are closely related to immigration. Many air strikes are covered and met by Islamic immigrants around French cities. These immigrants also protect Islamic state members in the activities of arresting jihadists, which makes it more difficult for France to crack down on terrorist organizations. However, the French police's repeated anti-terrorism actions and confrontation with terrorists have not reduced the number of terrorist attacks. The relationship between France and Islamic extremist organizations is presented in the mode of "strike-retaliation-strike again-retaliation again". This has not only left a serious impact on the French economy, but also made French native people feel uneasy about their living environment and security, disappointed with the anti-terrorism ability of the authorities, and turned to support the Front National.

2.3 Micro Perspective

1) Poor Image of Political Parties

Before Marine Le Pen accepted the leadership of the party in 2011, the Front National was deeply labeled as a "fascist party". According to the results of the 1997 Ifop poll, 63% of the voters considered the Front National a party with radical racism, and 84% of the voters chose the Front National to express their opposition to other parties. The radical words and deeds of the Front National have shaped its "demonized" image. First of all, the Front National gained the attention of the media and the public by spreading a large number of pro-Nazi remarks in the early days. For example, Jean

Marie Le Pen publicly announced that the Nazi atrocity of poisoning Jews with gas chambers was just a “small thing” during World War II, which made the Front National labeled as “radical” and “extreme”, and the demonized image was deeply rooted in the public mind[12]; Secondly, the early Front National was curt in propaganda, emphasizing centralization, patriarchal feminism, and anti-immigrant thought, which was contrary to the mainstream thought of “freedom, equality, and fraternity”. The propaganda strategy had strong populist thought, emphasizing political activities by means of violence and struggle, which consolidated its demonized image[13]. At the same time, the demonized image of the Front National also comes from its support groups. Most of the early supporters are men engaged in manual labor or small-scale industrial and commercial production in the eastern border areas and river industrial areas. These people are poorly educated and weak in economic ability, with a prejudiced subjective image of being impulsive, irritable, and dissatisfied with society[14].

2) Highlighted Financial Crisis

In the early days of the Front National, Jean-Marie Le Pen used his personal wealth to strengthen his power and position in the organization, which made him have great financial and political influence on the Front National. In 1988, Jean-Marie Le Pen founded a company called COTELEC to collect funds from party members, private fundraisers, and banks to provide financial support for the election activities of the Front National. Since the new membership dues legislation in 1990, the Front National had received direct state subsidies, supplementing income from membership fees, loans, and private donations. However, with the propaganda of the Front National, the campaign expenses were increasing day by day, and the party’s internal finances are also unable to make ends meet[15].

After the general election in 2007, there were financial problems within the Front National, which were manifested in two aspects. Firstly, the lack of funds, especially the lack of funds needed for the election. The Front National once applied for loans from banks in Europe and even around the world, and several French banks refused to provide loans to it for political reasons[16]. Secondly, there were problems in the internal fund management of the Front National. Le Pen had to sell some real estate including regional headquarters and his private bulletproof car to make up for the shortage of funds. At the same time, 20 “permanent employees” were also fired.

3) Declining Support Rate of Political Parties

In 2002, Jean-Marie Le Pen won the best result in the presidential election in history, that is, ranked second in the first round of voting and successfully entered the second round. However, in the second round of elections, Le Pen was unanimously boycotted by French society, and more than 1.5 million Parisians took to the streets to demonstrate. Finally, with the joint efforts of all walks of life, Chirac won more than 82% of the votes, overwhelming Le Pen. And in the second round, most voters voted for Chirac simply because they hated Le Pen. In the end, Le Pen suffered a fiasco and the reputation of the Front National also suffered a heavy blow. The election results show that the Front National has reached the upper limit of election results, which has also become a catalyst for the change of the Front National. Five years after losing the election, the Front National’s share of seats in parliament declined with the changes in the electoral system. Although Le Pen and Megley cooperated again, Le Pen lost 10.4% of the votes in the first round of the 2007 general election, losing 970,000 votes. In this election, the polls overestimated his ability for the first time, and the election results accelerated the transformation of the Front National[17].

4) Intra-Party Split and Intergenerational Replacement

With the withdrawal of a group of elders, the differences between the Forces Nouvelles and Jean-Marie Le Pen on the route also appeared. The complex and redundant organizational structure of the Front National not only dispersed Le Pen’s power, but also split the originally united Front National. Megley and his four supporters set up the “National Republican Movement” in 1999 to compete with the Front National led by Le Pen. The diversion of power led to poor results for the two parties in the election. In 2005, Frans Timmermans led some members to set up a new party, the Populist Party, and later joined the Front National, which seriously weakened the strength of the National Republican

Movement. In 2006, Le Pen called on all far-right parties to form an ally to cope with the next presidential election, and Megley provided 140 signatures of its members to show its response to the call.

In 2010, when Jean-Marie Le Pen thought that no one in the party threatened Marine Le Pen's succession. Le Pen, who was old, announced his intention to retire when the French regional elections were successful. At the Front National party meeting in January of the following year, Marine Le Pen became the new chairman of the Front National. At this point, the new and old leaders of the Front National completed the transition.

3. Transformation of Front National: From “Front National” to “National Ally”

In 2011, Marine Le Pen who took over the post of party chairman drastically adjusted and reformed the organization, propaganda strategy, and political discourse of the Front National. Despite opposition from many parties within the party, the reform promoted by Marine Le Pen has been implemented. In order to express her firm determination to reform, Marine Le Pen proposed to change the name of the party to “National Ally” at the Party Congress in March 2018, in order to reverse the public existing negative cognition of “Front National”[18].

3.1 Ideological Transformation

1) Moderate Extremist Positions

The primary goal of Marine Le Pen's reform is to draw a line with extremism. In 2011, after Marine Le Pen took over as the party chairman, she immediately denied her father's Nazi remarks and tried to separate herself from the pro-Nazi position many times. She put forward the idea of “demonization”. On the one hand, carry out a great purge of political parties and remove party members who hold anti-Semitic ideas and pro-Nazi attitudes from the party. In 2015, Marine Le Pen publicly stated that Jean-Marie Le Pen should not make untimely remarks in the name of the Front National and expelled her father from the party. In order to improve the image of the Front National in the public mind, Marine Le Pen made a series of actions to clear the party, which made the people see the determination of the Front National to soften its radical ideas; On the other hand, propaganda was carried out in a milder and more acceptable way. In addition to putting forward the idea of equal management of all religions, she also shifted the focus of propaganda discourse to freedom, equality, and secularism later, and recognized the separation of church and state as well as the fundamental difference between spiritual and secular order. Meanwhile, she downplayed xenophobia, targeted Islamic extremist terrorists, and avoided hostility to the whole Muslim community[19]. Today, the image of the National Ally has changed a lot compared with the early “demonization”. Marine Le Pen was deeply aware that decontamination is only the first step to gaining the support of the French people. For this reason, she also publicly stated in 2021 that the National Ally would not repeat the extreme image of the Front National before[20].

2) Anti-immigrant Claims Highlighted

In the early days, the Front National focused on immigration, with its firm anti-immigration proposition originating from early ethnic nationalism. Jean-Marie Le Pen believed that living together between two different ethnic groups would inevitably diminish the characteristics of each ethnic group, and the superior position of this ethnic group must be guaranteed and emphasized. Therefore, the Front National highly proposed a slogan of “defending France”, which also became a major proposition of the Front National's political program[21].

Under the increasingly prominent “Islamic threat”, Marine Le Pen positioned the new immigrant force as Muslims and Islam. She explained this move that because this group has its own doctrine and development, it was difficult to integrate. When they failed to integrate into French society for a long time and became a social instability factor, they would pose a threat to social order. The Daech incident in Syria and the terrorist attacks in France have led to an increase in the anger of the French

people, and many terrorist attacks launched by Islamic State militants have also led to an increase in the xenophobic and anti-Islamic sentiment of the French people. However, the National Ally believed that immigrants were the root of these problems, and most immigrants should be punished and sent back to their original places[22]. This move echoed the feelings of the French people, aroused their resonance of the French people, and increases the people's recognition of the Front National. In addition to strengthening the legitimacy of French culture and opposing the spread and invasion of Islamic extreme doctrines, the National Ally proposed to take secularism and Republicanism as important weapons to oppose Islamic demonstrations, guard against the "invasion" of Islamic extreme doctrines in public space, and then defend Western nationalist thoughts and values[23].

3) Civilized Populism Advocated

The National Ally began to express civilized populist views, whose attitude towards sensitive topics such as abortion and homosexuality is more moderate, and its extreme expressions are gradually reduced. In addition, from the perspective of civilization development, the National Ally emphasizes the protection of the purity and national identity of French culture, opposing the invasion of Islamic civilization. At the same time, unlike the absolute anti-Semitism in Le Pen's time, Marine Le Pen targeted "terrorists" in the "Muslim" group, raising the Islamic issue to a national security issue. All these propositions reflect the transformation of the "de-demonization" of the National Ally under the leadership of Marine Le Pen. On other issues, the National Ally further expanded the scope of its policies, gradually paid more attention to ecological and environmental protection issues, and took the strengths of the left wing to make up for its weaknesses. The changes in the National Ally's positions and viewpoints, as well as its positive attitude in responding to social problems, are all aimed at creating a normal political party image, responding to voters' demands, and accumulating more voters to gain more support in the transition.

3.2 Adjustment of Economic Proposition

1) Constructing a "Patriotic Economic System"

Different from the two labels of "market power" and "private sector" advocated by traditional right-wing parties, Marine Le Pen adjusted her economic proposition from the standpoint of defending French sovereignty and expanding the local economy. In foreign trade, she put forward a "patriotic economic system", advocated "France first", and opposed the liberal economic model and economic globalization. Marine Le Pen advocated strengthening the supervision of import trade, deleting the law of "seconded workers", and reducing the connection with the European market. On the domestic economy, she emphasized the role of the government in the economy, strengthened macro-control, focused on adjusting the distribution mode, and reduced the gap between the rich and the poor. Besides, she advocated repealing the *Gormley Act*, and increasing pensions and maternity allowances for French families, while reducing inheritance taxes, 5% gas taxes, and immigration allowances. This series of economic propositions put forward by Marine Le Pen was supported by a large number of people.

2) Against EU Economies

After the 1990s, terms such as anti-European integration and anti-globalization entered the discourse system of the Front National. Jean-Marie Le Pen advocated resolutely opposing European integration, abolishing the euro, restoring the franc, and establishing a French economic model under the protectionist model[24].

After taking over as party chairman, Marine Le Pen made abandoning the euro an important issue, even putting forward the views of "currency freedom" and restoring the franc. She believed that in the deteriorating situation of the European Union, the use of the euro would only drag down the French economy, so it was necessary to reuse the franc and let France make monetary policy flexibly according to its own economic situation. Marine Le Pen also constantly emphasized this idea in her propaganda and took "regaining monetary freedom" as the political slogan of her campaign. In addition, her attitude towards the EU has changed from "France leaving the EU" at the beginning of her succession to proposing "internal reform of the EU". In her 2011 economic policy plan, Marine

Le Pen firmly proposed to “break away from the shackles of the European Union”. She held that the French market should be digested by French local enterprises, rather than dispersed to other EU countries, so as to maximize the economic achievements of France. In 2013, Marine Le Pen further called for organizing a referendum on French withdrawal from the European Union and advocated withdrawing from the *Schengen Agreement* and NATO. Anti-Europe became the main slogan of the Front National. However, after losing the presidential election and facing the changes in the political situation in France and Europe, Marine Le Pen finally chose to propose “internal reform of the EU” instead of “France leaving the EU”. It can be seen that her concession on Brexit was also a manifestation of the extremism of the National Ally, which was conducive to winning the support of allies and voters to play a good role in building momentum for the National Ally.

3.3 Reform of Personnel Organization of Political Parties

1) Cleaning Up Personnel Within the Party

Marine Le Pen defined the National Ally as a populist party rather than a far-right party, trying to improve the “demonized” and extremist image of the Front National in previous decades. In order to decontaminate the image of the political party, she also made corresponding changes in the personnel within the party. First, she eliminated the extreme radicals in the party. The most typical incident is that Marine Le Pen announced the suspension of her father’s party membership because of his racist and anti-Semitic remarks, depriving him of his lifelong honorary chairman of the Front National[25]. Secondly, many young members have been recruited to change the structure of party members, break through the right-wing groups, and expand their support base. The recruitment targets have expanded from blue-collar groups with low education and income to the middle class, young people, and women. Thirdly, the number of party members has continuously expanded from 22,000 members of the Front National in January 2011 to more than 40,000 members in February 2012. And the number of party members has almost doubled in the three months after Le Pen took over. As of December 2014, the Front National had about 83,000 party members[26]. The increase in the number of party members and the expansion of the scope of support groups make the Front National an important third-party force in French politics.

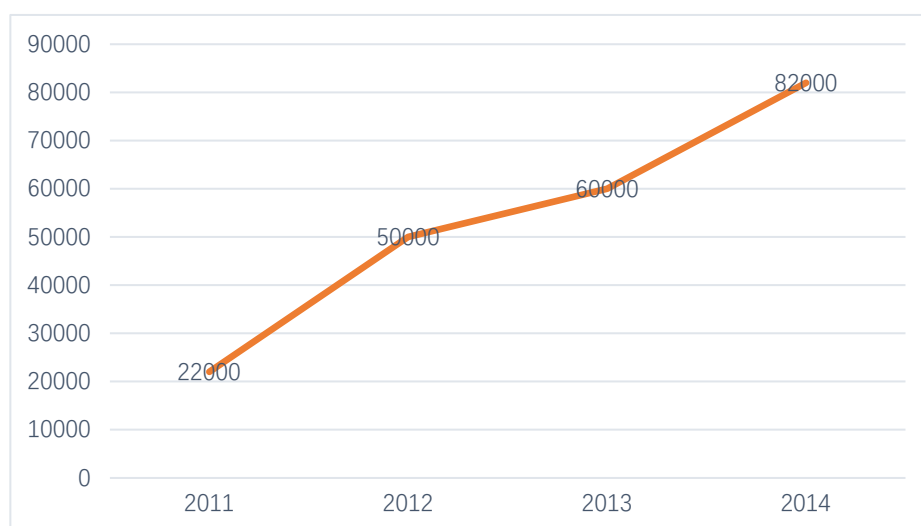


Fig 1. Number of Members of the Front National (2011-2014)

(Data Source: *Le Figaro* 2014, quoted from Daniel Stockemer. *The Front National in France- Continuity and Change Under Jean-Marie Le Pen and Marine Le Pen*. Springer International Publishing AG 2017, p. 58.)

2) Organizational Structure Reconstruction

Because the original organizational structure of the Front National is very complicated, Marine Le Pen began to adjust the number and position of the organization after becoming the party chairman.

First of all, she newly established a “national spokesperson” as the party’s external propaganda organization, which is composed of dozens of members with high political status. They use public social activities, speeches, and propaganda to tell the political goals of the Front National with facts; Secondly, Marine Le Pen abolished the “General Representative Office” to strengthen the core leadership power and control over the whole party, so as to prevent the recurrence of the “Megley Incident”; Thirdly, she reduced the number of core leaders and redundant members to strengthen the concentration of power, reduce expenses, and improve efficiency, forming the organizational operation system of the Front National.

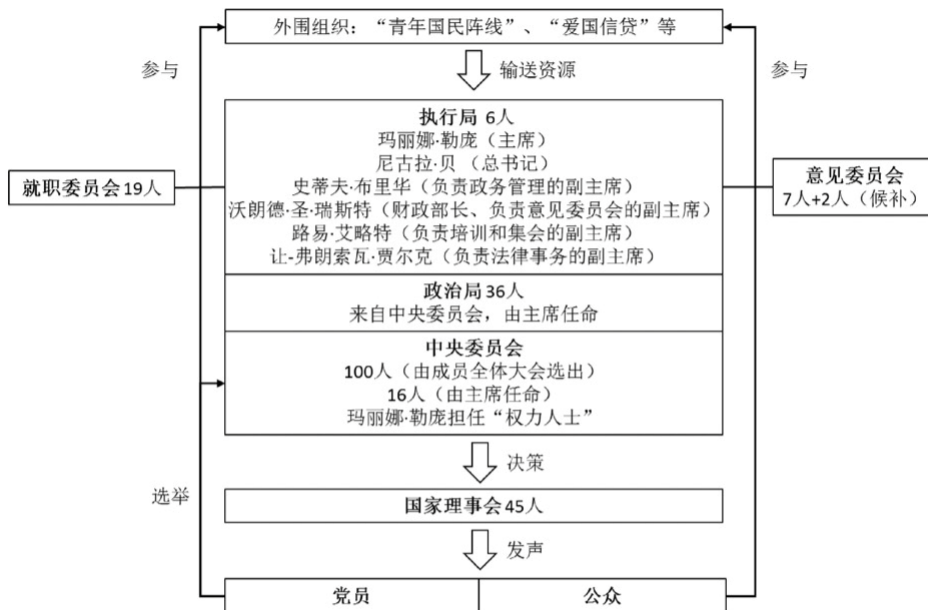


Fig 2. Organizational Operation System of the Front National

(Source: Research on the Development, Reform, and Influence of the French Front National–Wang Naiyi)

After the reform, the organization and operation system of the National Ally mainly consists of the Executive Board, the Political Bureau, the Central Committee, and the National Council. Meanwhile, the Opinion Committee becomes a staff body directly under the Executive Board. Since the Front National participated heavily in the presidential and local elections, the inaugural committee set up separately became a crucial institution for planning the campaign strategy. The peripheral organizations including “Youth Front National” and “Patriotic Credit” play the role of transporting talents and resources for the main operation system.

3) Expansion of Grass-roots Organizations

In the late 1980s, the number of Front National members was estimated at 15,000, and in the late 1990s, the number of party members increased to about 40,000. However, in 1999, the inner-party split, about half of the grass-roots party members were lost, and the number of party members dropped to about 20,000. In 2011, when Marine Le Pen took over the Front National, the official number of party members was 22,400[27]. Despite the relatively small number of members and concentrated power, the Front National has always been highly participatory and politically motivated. The Front National has expanded its outreach to civil society through the establishment of a number of flanking organizations and newspaper advocacy, which has always seen non-professional activists within the party as its ambassadors playing a key role in the community. At the same time, the Front National promotes political progressivism and expands grass-roots forces for potential support groups, such as public transport workers, small business owners, or police. According to SOFRE poll data in February 2015, 47% of workers believe that the Front National plays an important role in politics, and 35% of middle and lower-income people are also aware of the power of the Front National[28].

The Front National has set up a “Youth Front National” in its organizational structure, expanding its sphere of influence in the form of young people. The “Youth Front National” has more than 25,000 French youths aged 16-30, providing young talents for the growth of the organization. In addition, Marine Le Pen has established some novel institutions and systems to attract those who do not want to join the Front National. Although the “Ocean Blue Organization” has been dissolved, it has played an important role in attracting supporters and dispersing sensitive topics. In addition, Marine Le Pen also set up a think tank to attract elites and senior intellectuals from all walks of life, so as to make the Front National a legal and scientific political party image. These measures help to achieve its goal of “de-demonizing”, improving the authority and credibility of political parties and attracting more people’s attention.

4) Application of New Media and New Technology

The Front National has always attached great importance to online propaganda and the use of new media. As early as 1996, it established the official website of the Front National, and registered a Facebook account in 2006 to establish contact with the people. After Marine Le Pen took over the political party, she made full use of the network. First of all, she redid the official website of the Front National and improved the political party information such as the purpose, development history, and election policy of the Front National on the official website to attract more supporters and let them know about it; Secondly, she clearly listed the political strategies on the domestic economy, welfare system, immigration policy, foreign trade, national security, etc. in the official website, strengthened the linkage between the official website and the “national spokesperson” to enhance people’s trust in political parties; Thirdly, Marine Le Pen used the new media platform and made full use of social software frequently used by French youth, such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp, to attract fans and form network groups, which was recognized by the public and favored by young people[29].

With the help of the official website, social platforms, and other media, the reformed National Ally has increased the investment of the Front National in online propaganda. On the one hand, it expands its political influence, leads public opinion, and creates topics; On the other hand, the National Ally’s use of the Internet complements its “de-demonization” strategy, making full use of the new network media to create a modern image of a big party, which achieved multiple purposes of expressing political views, mobilizing the public, raising funds, and attracting young people. In addition, Marine Le Pen also made full use of the network platform to “attract supporters”, which not only enhanced her personal charm, but also expanded her potential public base.

4. Political Influence of the Reform of the National Ally

4.1 Rising Voter Support Rate

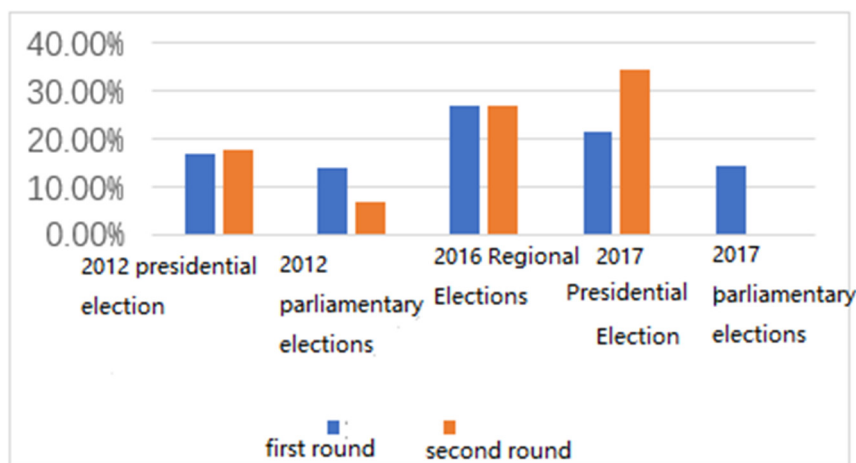


Fig 3. Vote Rate of Front National Voters from 2012 to 2017

(Source: Mondon A. Popularity, the people and the illusion of democracy-the Front National and UKIP in a comparative context.) [31]

After Marine Le Pen took over the Front National, the voters’ support rate kept rising, which was also noticed by the French political circles. The younger voter structure in the 2017 general election and its successful entry into the second round proved the rapid development of the Front National. In the first round of the 2012 presidential election, the support rate was 16.9%, and in the second round was 17.8%. In the 2016 regional elections, the Front National achieved 27% in the first round and 27.1% in the second round. In addition, in 2014 the Front National won more than 30% of the votes in the municipal elections and won 11 towns and 1,546 municipal senate seats. Then, among the 13 regions in the first round of regional elections in 2015, the Front National maintained an absolute advantage in 6 regions [30].

Furthermore, the constituencies occupied by the Front National are also expanding. The far-right divided the low-income class votes in the right-wing alliance, but there were more far-right voters in northern and southern France where the unemployment rate was higher. The Front National became the most important party in northern and southern France in the 1990s through elections, propaganda, and other activities. The electoral reform in the early 21st century greatly strengthened the regional advantages of the Front National, which won the voters of northern and southern regions more easily in 2012 and 2017, with its influence covering other regions [32].

4.2 Change of People’s Political Attitude

In the process of extreme immigration and inducing the spread of the “cultural difference theory”, the Front National deepened the sensitivity of the French people to immigration issues. Both French citizens and immigrants have intensified their emotions, deepened their contradictions, and increased violent incidents, which led to the spread of the idea that puts safety first and rejects outsiders in French society. The Front National took this opportunity to vigorously publicize its anti-immigration and anti-European integration ideas. Meanwhile, it used the forces of the French parliament and the European parliament to further reduce its trust in the EU.

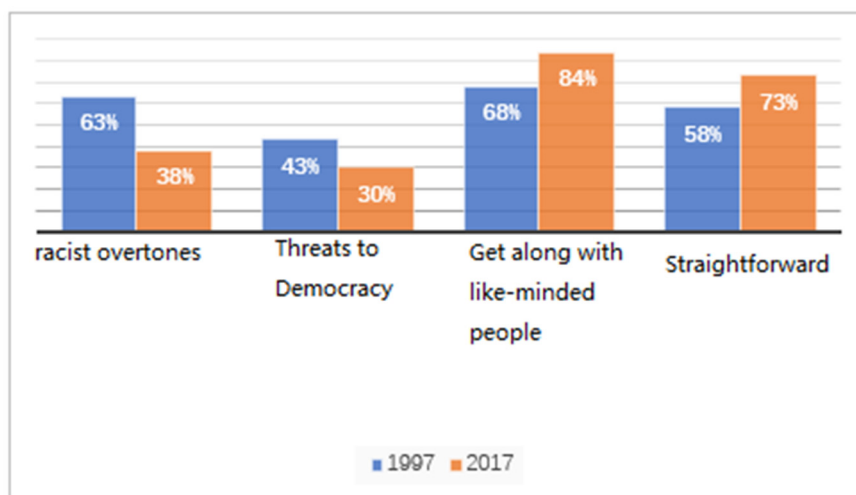


Fig 4. Survey Data on the Image of Front National Political Parties From 1997 to 2017
 (Source: Ifop, Survey responses of Front National Voters in 1997 and 2017)

In addition, after a series of “de-demonization” measures of the Front National, its public image and its leaders has changed. According to poll data, comparing the attitudes of supporters of the Front National in Jean-Marie Le Pen in 1997 and Marine Le Pen in 2017, its image has changed from a political party with radical racism to that trusted and recognized by the people. Even in the eyes of supporters of the Front National in 1997, the party was basically regarded as a “racist” [33]. However, since Marine Le Pen took over the party power, this view has gradually faded. The number of voters who hold this view has dropped by 25 percentage over the past two decades, suggesting that Marine Le Pen’s efforts to change the party’s image are working, attracting voters from wider French society.

Apart from its support rate with wide attention in various poll data, Marine Le Pen's influence on policy-making is also increasing. Voters' favor for the Front National in the election reflects the loss of voters in mainstream French political parties and the rising populism of the people.

4.3 Impact on the Traditional Political Pattern of France

With the rise of the Front National, the traditional French political structure was broken. The National Ally still occupies an imperative position in the French political situation. After the general election in 2017, the Front National has become one of the three major political parties in France and has been a typical representative of the French opposition party. As a non-mainstream populist party, the Front National has achieved great success in politics and shaken the traditional left and right-wing parties to occupy the mainstream political situation. French politics has changed from the polarized political pattern dominated by the middle-left and middle-right parties in the past to the tripartite confrontation among the middle-left, middle-right, and far-right parties, breaking the political party pattern dominated by two major factions and three major political parties in France after the war.

At the same time, its strength has also had a certain impact on the development of mainstream political parties in France. In order to win votes, it also began to pay attention to security, immigration, employment, and other issues, beginning to cooperate with the Front National to a certain extent locally. For example, the radical left-wing party "unyielding France" put forward the propositions of "opposing free trade", "nationalizing public utility companies", and "restoring French industrial protection" in the 2017 general election, which are similar to the Front National. This series of measures further strengthens the legitimacy of the Front National and enhances the influence of far-right ideas. In addition, the discourse system of the National Ally has also penetrated into the mainstream political system. Mainstream political parties inevitably use words such as "we" and "people" to publicize their policies. Even if there is no ordinary integration between mainstream political parties and populist political parties, these phenomena are enough to show that the mainstream political system is also influenced by populism.

4.4 Political Ally of Far-right Parties in Europe Established

As the leading force of far-right parties in Europe, the National Ally began to actively establish a network of far-right parties in Europe and even the whole world after its rise and development. After the parliamentary elections in 2014, the far-right political parties in France, Italy, Belgium, the Czech Republic, and Austria established the "European National and Freedom Movement", which occupied 16% of the European seats. In March 2018, the Italian Five Star Movement Party came to power, which made European far-right parties spread rapidly in European politics. In October of the same year, Marine Le Pen held a meeting with Salvini, the leader of the Italian Union Party, which was regarded as the beginning of the European far-right alliance[34]. The National Ally has always been a vanguard against European integration and globalization. Marine Le Pen advocates that European countries should form a loose but mutually negotiated national ally. She proposed that if she won the French election and took the presidency, she would launch a referendum on "Brexit" like Britain and leave it to public opinion to decide whether to leave the EU or not[35].

In 2019, before the European Parliament election, the far-right forces in Europe changed their previous practice of fighting their own battles and began to "connect in series", hoping to unify their forces and expand their influence in the European Parliament. Far-right parties in Europe have achieved unprecedented development and gained advantages in the European Parliament in 2019. The collective right-leaning political ecology of EU powers, represented by France and Italy, echoes Brexit and American anti-establishment doctrine, setting off a wave of anti-integration and anti-globalization in the world[36].

5. Future Development of the National Ally

Faced with many crises since 2021, such as the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, the outbreak of the Ukrainian war, the triple killing of European stocks, debts and foreign exchange, and the rising oil and gas prices, France and other European countries are bearing increasingly heavy economic and social burdens. European far-right forces, including the National Ally, linked the epidemic with anti-globalization and anti-EU demands, attributing the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe and the social as well as economic problems brought by Ukrainian refugees to the immigration policies of globalization and European integration.

Although the National Ally did not win the 2022 general election, the achievements made by Marine Le Pen in the presidential election and the National Ally in the parliamentary election are a historic breakthrough. Since 2017, the political innovation of the National Ally under the leadership of Marine Le Pen has further promoted the expansion of its influence and the construction of the legitimacy of political parties. At the same time, it made French party politics show the characteristics of “fragmentation” and pluralism. However, if the National Ally wants to make greater progress in the French political arena, it still needs to reform its political stance again, turn to a more moderate and open political stance, and complete the transformation from anti-establishment extreme right forces to political parties with system established.

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