The Belgian National Front
and the question of power

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Over the last twenty years several extreme right parties and right-wing populist parties have made a breakthrough in their national political system: the National Front in France, the Freedom Party (FPÖ) in Austria, the Progress Party in Norway, the Danish People's Party, the Slovak National Party, the Social Movement-National Alliance and Northern League in Italy, the Republikaner Party in Germany, the Pim Fortuyn List in the Netherlands, etc. This (re)emergence has attracted the attention of the scientific community and numerous studies have been devoted recently to this new political phenomenon.

What is the situation in Belgium? In Belgian and international scientific literature, the treatment devoted to the extreme right is important, but refers almost exclusively to a single political party: the *Vlaams Belang*, the former *Vlaams Blok* (Van Craen & Swyngedouw, 2002; Ivaldi & Swyngedouw, 2001; Swyngedouw, 2000; Spruyt, 1995; Billiet & De Witte, 1995), one of the most powerful extreme right groupings in Europe. On the other hand, the main French-speaking party of the extreme right is far less well-known and has been studied and analyzed far less frequently (Delwit, De Waele & Rea, 1998; Delwit, 2000; Faniel, 2000; Rea, 1997).

This lack of knowledge about the Belgian National Front (FN) cannot be explained simply by its electoral and political marginality. A brief examination of its electoral results reveals in fact that the FN was and is in a position to achieve significant scores in the polls. At the last federal elections (2003), the National Front obtained more than 5% of the votes in Wallonia. One year later, it made further headway in the regional elections, winning 8% of the votes in Wallonia and 5.4% in the Brussels Region. In the same elections, it obtained 16.86% of the votes in Charleroi and 8.04% in Liège, the two main cities in Wallonia.

Electoral Results of the National Front at General and Regional Elections

| | *General Elections* | *Regional Elections* | |
	Wallonia	Wallonia	Brussels
1989			3.87
1991	1.32		
1995	5.11	5.47	8.69
1999	3.95	4.09	3.06
2003	5.56		
2004	8.12		5.41

What, therefore, explains this lack of knowledge and analysis of the National Front? We shall revert to that question further on in this article, but three reasons are worth highlighting straightaway.

The first concerns the FN electoral curve. Although the party is, in certain circumstances, in a position to achieve notable electoral results, it is not however capable of translating such results into long-term gains. Its electoral curve is far from linear, which has led certain political actors and observers to relativize partially its ability to win votes and seats.

In radical contrast to its Flemish *alter ego*, the FN is an invisible and silent party. Except, and only partially, at times of elections, the National Front is a political formation which has no visibility and is evanescent on the ground. It is exceptional to meet National Front activists and party communications and tracts are rare.

Finally, and this is to a large extent the logical consequence of the second point, the National Front's capacity to put a certain number of problems on the political and media agenda is very limited. The National Front is ignored and receives almost no coverage in the written press and audiovisual media. Its capacity as an actor of a *social movement*, "taken in the broadest sense as a collective undertaking intended to promote or prevent social, cultural or political change, if necessary by means other than elections or political representation" (Klandermans & Mayer, 2001: 147) is almost non-existent. In this regard also, the contrast with the *Vlaams Belang* is striking.

In this article, we propose to present and analyze this party in the light of traditional theories concerning the extreme right and to consider in three phases its ambitions – if any – as regards exercizing power. In the first phase, we will describe the creation and transformations of the Belgian National Front. In a second phase, we will examine its relations with regard to the placement of its members in governmental office. Finally, we will analyze the electoral segments of the FN.

1.   Foundations of the extreme right in French-speaking Belgium

Historically, an initial extreme right-wing party emerged in French-speaking Belgium in the second half of the 1930s, led by Catholic party dissidents. The Rexist party was created in French-speaking Catholic circles around the University of Louvain. Léon Degrelle, who became the leader of this party in 1935 (Delwit & De Waele, 1998), was very critical of the Parliamentary system and a strong advocate

of corporative structures. The Rexist party's emblem was a broom, symbolizing the need to sweep away the "corrupt" (corrupt politicians and Jewish people). At the 1936 elections, the Rexist party had 21 MPS elected and became the fourth largest party in Belgium. The Rexist Party obtained 18% of the votes in Brussels and 16% in Wallonia. However, its success was short-lived. In the local elections of 1938, there was an important backlash (Balace, 1994), and in the 1939 national elections it won only 4 seats. The party entered into a phase of fascistization, which culminated in its collaboration with the Germans during the war. Degrelle brought the Rexist party into the orbit of the SS by declaring that Walloons were Germans. He also created the Walloon Legion and fought on the Eastern front. In 1943, he incorporated his legion into the German Waffen-SS. At the end of the war, he went into exile in Franco's Spain and then South America.

From the liberation to the mid-1970s, the extreme right was almost non-existent in Belgium (CRISP, 1962). The economic crisis of the 1970s and the debates on institutional and political transformations in Belgium favoured the emergence of parties with a Poujadist or extremist dimension. In French-speaking Belgium in particular, especially in the Brussels Region, this role was fulfilled above all by the *Union Démocratique pour le Respect du Travail* (UDRT). The creation of this party in April 1978 was closely linked to the feelings of unease and discontent among shopkeepers and people in the professions. The *Fédération Générale des Travailleurs Indépendants* (FGTI) undeniably favoured the creation of this formation. The main objectives of the UDRT were unequivocal: "the abolition of the fiscal penalization of work and initiative and the harmonization of pension schemes". However, the UDRT rapidly enlarged its demands and slogans. It was particularly scathing in its criticism of the world of politics and the trade unions. Politicians were described pejoratively as "schemers" or "political schemers" and accused of forming a veritable *nomenklatura*. In 1983, the UDRT published a white paper which concluded as follows: "The UDRT denounces the plot by political and trade union leaders. Under the pretext of defending our interests, they justify their actions by setting themselves up as the defenders of one or another category of citizens, but backstage they are manoeuvring to share out between them the fruits of our work and efforts" (Van Eesbeeck, 1985: 45).

Having thus denounced the "system" and the "plot", the UDRT supported the principle of entrepreneurial freedom, the "veritable" free economy which should lift "the greatest number of people to the highest level possible". The State was held up to public obloquy and portrayed as the "determining instrument of the domination and confiscation of wealth of its citizens by the *nomenklatura*". In its brief electoral history the UDRT achieved significant results only in the Brussels Region where it obtained, in 1978, its only tangible result, 2.3% of the votes and the election of its president, Robert Hendrick, as a deputy. In 1981, its growth remained limited to that geographical area. With 7% of the votes, it had three deputies and one senator elected. However, that result fell far short of expectations and contributed to a drift towards xenophobic and racist type propaganda (see below). The party's failure in the 1985 elections marked the end of the UDRT as a real party; it was transformed into a form of pressure group, UDRT 2000. Robert Hendrick was elected in 1987 on the Christian Democratic list (PSC-APB). However, this movement had no political future. Several

Flemish political leaders even joined the *Vlaams Blok* in 1987, including the co-president of UDRT-RAD, Roger Frankinoulle.

The UDRT cannot readily be described as a party of the extreme right. It was part of the Poujadist tradition, with numerous political ambiguities covered by the relations with the ideology of the extreme right. However, the values and ideas communicated by the UDRT contributed to the dissemination of new views and themes: diehard liberalism, fanatical anti-trade unionism, fierce anti-State interventionism, the rejection of the new Belgian institutions and the denouncement of the "system". The idea of a plot by "politicians" and a rejection of immigration were also prominent themes. Moreover, these representations were taken up by personalities close to or members of the liberal (PRL) and Christian Social (PSC) and sometimes the socialist (PS) parties.

The first Francophone extreme right groupings emerged in a context which is well-known today: a period of economic, social and cultural crisis, a period when the guilt associated with expressing xenophobic ideas was "taken away", widespread criticisms of the State, etc. The groupings and parties of the extreme right were first set up in the urban area of Brussels, which concentrated all the problems of society. It was moreover the geographical area where the social management of the traditional political families was the weakest.

Several parties struggled along at the beginning of the 1980s. The Belgian National Party PNB-BNP), one of the oldest, obtained 0.4% of the votes in Brussels in the 1978 elections and even fewer in 1981: 0.1%. The National Union of Francophones (*Union Nationale des Francophones* – UNF) obtained 0.3% of the votes in the 1981 elections, while the National and Democratic Union (*Union Nationale et Démocratique* – UND) obtained 0.6% of the votes in 1985. The Christian liberal party then the Citizens Freedom Party (PLC) obtained respectively 0.5% and 0.6% at the polls in 1985 and 1987. But two parties competed in the second half of the 1980s to be recognized as the voice of the Francophone extreme right: the Party of New Forces (*Parti des Forces Nouvelles* – PFN) and the National Front (FN).

During its existence the Party of New Forces (PFN) underwent numerous transformations. Moreover, its candidates stood at elections with different labels. The PFN was spun off from the Youth Front (*Front de la Jeunesse* – FJ), which made a name for itself in the 1970s through a series of shock actions. New Forces was created in 1975 and was then transformed into the PFN. From the outset, the PFN adopted as its almost sole rallying call the combat against immigration, through several evocative slogans: "Immigration: we are not stopping anyone from leaving", "Absolute priority to work for Belgians and Europeans", "Send parasitic foreigners (delinquents, long-term unemployed people, etc.) home" [1]. Other ideological components were apparent in its confidential publications: a rabid anti-communism, vehement criticism of the trade union movement, extolling the family and the elite, promoting a "national European feeling which (should) lead to a true European government being put in place" and open anti-Semitism. The Party of New Forces never succeeded in extending its electoral base. At the local elections of 1988, it hoped to reap the rewards of an incontestable activism in certain districts of Brussels and Liège, but the results fell short of expectations. This failure led to the disappearance of the PFN. At the end

of the 1980s, several activists joined the National Front. Others, from Liège, created a new party: AGIR.

It was in the pivotal period of 1984-85 that the National Front was established. Daniel Féret created a not-for-profit association *Front National-Nationaal Front* in September 1985. This party was set up by a handful of devoted activists. Daniel Féret, a doctor from the region of Tournai, was not unknown on the Belgian political scene. At the beginning of the 1970s, he had joined the liberal party (PLP) before joining Young Europe (*Jeune Europe*), an organization managed by Jean Thiriart. Finally, in 1984, he had become a member of the UND of which he became vice-president (Brewaeys, Dahaut, & Tolbiac, 1992). This young party's aim was clear: to benefit from the media coverage given to the French National Front following the European elections of 1984. In this regard the Belgian National Front adopted the same effigy as that of the French National Front and the Italian Social Movement (MSI). During its first months of existence, the National Front was an obscure grouping of no more than a few dozen people. It was a party without either resources or any real ideological coherence.

At the 1985 legislative elections, it obtained 0.45% of the votes in the Brussels Region. The small number of documents available shows beyond doubt that the question of combating immigration was at the heart of the campaign. In 1987, the FN made some progress in terms of its structure. It penetrated certain districts in Brussels, as shown by its progress in the legislative elections of 1987. However, its first concrete success came in the local elections of 1988, when the first FN municipal councillor was elected in the commune of Molenbeek.

After this initial electoral breakthrough in the Brussels Region, the National Front's fortunes can be broken down into three political and electoral phases over the last fifteen years. The first period revolved around the three elections in the mid-1990s: the European elections of June 1994, the local elections of October 1994 and the federal and regional elections of May 1995. In these three elections, the National Front succeeded in penetrating the various Belgian political sub-systems and extending its electoral base in Wallonia. Unexpectedly, it won a seat in the European Parliament and followed up that success by obtaining a high score in the local elections in October (see below). A few months later, that success was confirmed in the national and regional elections. It succeeded in particular in winning two seats in the federal parliament. During this successful phase, the National Front failed however to achieve a major objective: gaining access to public financing for political parties. At that time, the law on public financing of political parties made such financing conditional on the party having at least one federal deputy's seat *and* one federal senator's seat. However, the list presented by the FN to the Senate was invalidated because of the dubious conditions in which the nomination signatures were collected.

The second phase also revolved around two electoral periods: the regional, federal and European elections of June 1999 and the local elections of October 2000. In this phase the National Front lost considerable electoral ground. It lost its European mandate, one of its two federal deputy mandates and did not obtain a sufficient number of votes to capture a senator's seat. In the local elections, where it was in

a position to present a list, the FN suffered severe setbacks. All the ground gained in 1994 and 1995 was lost.

Since May 2003, the climate has become once again favourable for the FN. At the federal elections, it won one parliamentary seat and two in the senate. This gave it access for the first time to public financing for political parties. One year later, it improved its scores in the regional elections in Brussels and Wallonia, with four MPs elected to the Brussels Parliament and four to the Walloon Parliament. The National Front's political and electoral life seems therefore to resemble a *soufflé*; it rises very quickly but then falls just as quickly. The party has been unable to build on its political successes and electoral positions. How can this situation be explained and what impact does it have on the party's ambitions in terms of power?

2.   The National Front and the question of power

An analysis of the National Front's programmes, its propaganda material collected over time and interviews with members of the party's council does not reveal any ambitions of acceding to power.

Nothing in the party's electoral programmes links the National Front, either directly or indirectly, with accession to the responsibilities of government or exercizing power at any level whatsoever. The party's programmes are succinct and focus on a small number of points.

The first and most important of those points relates to a very strong *law and order* position, coupled with an ongoing denouncement of the damaging effects of immigration and the multicultural society.

The second concerns the supposed weaknesses of liberal democracy, which must be overcome by establishing mechanisms of direct democracy. The National Front's approach involves clearly a negation of intermediary structures and promoting the *true voice of the people* and the *true expression of the people*. The people have had their right to voice their opinion confiscated and that right must be returned to the rightful holders.

On institutional questions, which is an important issue in Belgium, and crucial for the extreme right insofar as it refers to the dimensions of nationalism, the National Front's position has evolved considerably. Up to 1995, the National Front supported the principle of a Belgian federalism but on a provincial basis, more in keeping, in its opinion, with tradition. The province was the party's benchmark institution for restrained decentralization: "Federalism. Organizing Belgium on the basis of the provinces. Federating Belgium on the basis of provinces in accordance with our historical tradition. Reasserting provincial councils and permanent deputies. Entrusting provincial authorities with responsibility for: education, culture, security, the environment, employment, local economic development, the use of languages" [2]. Without specifying such explicitly, the two federated entities of Belgium, the Regions and the Communities, were intended to disappear from the institutional scene. The position adopted by the FN corresponded to asserting a *Belgian national* approach, based on the values embodied by the monarchy. Since its creation, the National Front has advocated a monarchist proselytism. Moreover, in July 1997, the National Front reiterated its faith in the Belgian sovereign via a letter addressed by Daniel

Féret to King Albert II, following a royal speech which he had not particularly appreciated: "The leaders and activists of my party are naturally very attached to our monarchy" [3]. A major change occurred in the National Front's institutional position in the presentation of its programme for the 1999 elections. The party called for the establishment of a "geographical" Senate, which would be composed of an equal number of elected representatives by regions. In this way, the National Front abandoned its advocacy of provincial federalism. The FN indicated in fact that it wanted to endorse the evolution that had occurred in the 1990s and accept it as such: "the FN is not unaware of the institutional evolution of Belgium and agrees to submit to it loyally" [4]. At the same time, it relegated to the background its *Belgicanism*. More generally, it rejected any community, regionalist or national thrust or focus, henceforward placing "*Flamingants*", "*Wallingants*" and "Belgicists" on the same footing, presenting them as anachronistic in the context of the construction of Europe. In its programme for the federal elections of May 2003, the FN even proposed to "integrate the principle of national *and European* (underlined by us) preference" in the Belgian Constitution [5].

More generally, the Belgian National Front has adopted an anti-system or anti-political establishment strategy, as well as positioning itself a *victim* of the supposed attacks of the actors in the *system*. This is reflected in several recent speeches of Daniel Féret:

> "I would remind you, our party and its leaders have been subjected to numerous attacks by those in power who want to see our party disappear. Several elements: the programme "*Au Nom de la Loi*" broadcast on RTBF (1994). More recently "Actuel" on RTBF (2005). The unbelievable legal proceedings instituted against me for racism. Elected representatives manipulated by the government in order to destroy the FN from within. Laws intended to withdraw public financing from the FN. Laws intended to prohibit FN candidates from standing in elections. Laws which prevent our elected representatives from expressing their views. Laws and regulations which are changed as and when it suits those in power depending on the electoral successes of the National Front. Measures which prevent our elected representatives from exercizing the slightest control over intercommunal organizations. Misleading, defamatory press articles orchestrated by the government. The exclusion of our candidates and elected representatives from their trade unions. The unimaginable relentless administrative and fiscal harassment of certain of our representatives. Subsidies of more than 100 million old francs to finance propaganda against the FN. Pressure on our fellow citizens who reply to our surveys, in particular as regards local authority housing. This list is obviously an open list. The government has huge resources. The political parties of the system. The trade unions. The "leagues", "centres" and not-for-profit associations. The media. The police and security services. Lobbies, lodges, sets and "services clubs". Certain financial groups, etc.".

This unimagined relationship with power and the party's positioning, portraying itself as an expiatory victim of the system in the name of the defence of the people, are not necessarily original for a extreme right party. However, the issue of exercizing responsibilities is *nowhere* on the agenda; neither in the party nor outside it as a theme of the programme whereas several extreme right parties in Europe have now exercized responsibilities at different levels – the French National Front, the Danish People's

Party, the Austrian Freedom Party, the Italian Northern League, the Slovak National Party, etc. – or their accession to power is regularly evoked – *Vlaams Belang*.

Three main elements undoubtedly help to explain why this hypothesis is totally ignored.

A.   *A political party without any ideological or organizational framework*

First of all, as we mentioned briefly, the National Front is a political party which is totally evanescent from an organizational point of view. The party has a very low profile national identity. Its life president, Daniel Féret, is little known and has appeared only very rarely in the barometer of popular political personalities. That happened only twice, in 1995, and only in the Brussels region. Féret twice obtained a score of 9% among residents in Brussels wanting him to play a role in the future. At regional and local level, the FN personalities are more often than not unknown. The number of activists has never exceeded, at most, a few hundred members. In short, the National Front benefits from the effect of a French label and incarnation of the movement: Jean-Marie Le Pen, who is the true standard bearer of the Belgian FN, even if there are no longer any contacts between the two organizations.

In addition, there is a constant climate of micro-disputes and micro-disagreements within the party. From the foundation of the National Front to the current time, the party has been continually rocked by departures and recurring tensions. Several organizations have been set up: the Social-Democratic Party, the New Front of Belgium (*Front Nouveau de Belgique* – FNB), National Force (*Force Nationale*), etc. More often than not their existence has been short-lived and they have always been unsuccessful. The party's few elected deputies have also been affected by these centrifugal trends. In September 1995, its second deputy, Marguerite Bastien, was expelled from the party. This expulsion "was accompanied", to use the words of Daniel Féret, "by the departure of the last black sheep of the movement who have finally found their shepherdess" [6]. In January 1996, she created the New Front of Belgium (*Front Nouveau de Belgique*), by capitalizing on the support of Jean-Marie Le Pen. A few weeks later, Jacques Hubert, an FN member of the Walloon Parliament left the party, citing "management shortcomings, the lack of internal democracy and dubious accounting practices". He joined, but only for several months, the Party of the National Community (*Parti communautaire national*) [7]. Shortly afterwards, the Brussels deputies Juan Lemmens and Roland Frippiat also resigned from the FN considering that the FN had "entrusted its management to criminals" [8]. Their resignation was followed rapidly by that of Emile Eloy. History has repeated itself in the contemporary period. In January 2005, the senator Francis Detraux and the Brussels deputy Paul Arku left the National Front. They were joined by the Walloon deputy Charles Pire, who stigmatized Daniel Féret in the following terms: "he continues to want to run the whole show even though a collegial management system was introduced in December. He continues to block the expansion of the FN by keeping alive perpetual disputes with deputies and activists and by opposing the creation of local sections" [9].

B. *Lack of institutionalization*

A second element must be highlighted: the weak presence of the FN in the institutions, which blocks any possible *institutionalization* process. This applies first of all to the number of deputies. Except for the federal elections of 1995, the FN has never won more than one federal deputy's seat in the national elections. As regards the Senate, the Francophone party of the extreme right had to wait until the elections of 2003 before it won a seat in the Senate. The number of members of regional, Walloon and Brussels Parliaments is higher but is still nevertheless low. The impact of the penetration of the institutions, the *iron law of institutionalization* in the words of Ignazi (1998), on the party has remained limited; especially given that when there is more than one elected parliamentary representative disagreements have rapidly appeared.

Number of MPs of the National Front

	Chamber		Senate		Brussels Assemble		Walloon Assembly	
1985	0	212	0	106				
1987	0	212	0	106				
1989					2	64		
1991	1	212	0	106				
1995	2	150	0	71	6	65	2	75
1999	1	150	0	71	2	64	1	75
2003	1	150	2	71				
2004					4	72	4	75

What is the situation at local level? First of all, it is important to note the low continuity of the FN in terms of establishing a local presence. An analysis of the lists presented by it reveals important ruptures. Thus, in the Brussels Region, the heart of the National Front's original development, the party of the extreme right was capable of presenting a list at the municipal elections of 1988, 1994 and 2000 in only three communes: Brussels City, Anderlecht and Molenbeek. If the comparison is restricted solely to the elections of 1994 and 2000, only five additional communes were integrated into the list: Ixelles, Jette, Koekelberg, Saint-Gilles and Uccle.

In the Walloon Region, the National Front's capacity is hardly any more convincing. In the two hundred and sixty-two communes in Wallonia, the FN was in a position to present a list at the 1988, 1994 and 2000 elections in only two communes, the main two cities: Charleroi and Liège. The result is hardly better if only the municipal elections of 1994 and 2000 are taken into consideration. The list contains four additional communes: Dour, Fosses-la-Ville, La Louvière and Namur. The initial data testify at the same time to the low partisan support and organizational capacities of the FN, and its limited and non-continuous relations with local institutions. From

this point of view, one of the indicators highlighted by Laurent (1997: 21) to define a *small party* applies completely: "A party can be said to be small if it is not capable of presenting candidates regularly and in a large number of places".

In terms of results, we have highlighted the series of highs and lows. Results at local level corroborate fully our observations. In Belgium, as at other levels, local elections are organized on a proportional basis. Even if seats are allocated with the help of an Imperiali divisor, the electoral formula is not unfavourable to newcomers or small parties, in particular those of the extreme right (Carter, 2002; Müller-Rommel, 1997). The ability to win is still however very limited. In 1988, the National Front had no local councillors elected in the Walloon communes, where it was in a position to present a list. Six years later, in a more favourable electoral climate, it obtained twenty-six seats, including five in Charleroi, six in La Louvière and three in Namur. In 2000, the reversal of its fortunes in the federal, regional and European elections of 1999 was confirmed when the FN was only able to hold on to four communal mandates throughout the Walloon Region (three in Charleroi and one in Farciennes).

The National Front and local elections in Wallonia: 1988, 1994 and 2000

	1988		1994		2000	
	%	*Seats*	*%*	*Seats*	*%*	*Seats*
Nivelles			6.8	1		
Ottignies Louvain-La-Neuve			3.9			
Perwez			1.9			
Tubize			4.6			
Waterloo			3.5			
Charleroi	0.4		10.5	5	6.3	3
Farciennes					6.6	1
Manage			10.2	2		
Seneffe			5.5			
Dour			7.4	1	3.3	0
Mons			7	2		
Mouscron	1.2					
La Louvière			14.4	6	2.9	0
Lobbes			1.8			
Tournai	0.8					
Herstal			3.5			
Liège	0.9		5	2	3	0
Seraing			4.4	1		
Dison			7.8	1		
Spa			4.5			
Verviers			7.5	2		
Saint-Ode			1.1			
Anhee			3.4			

	1998		1994		2000	
	%	*Seats*	*%*	*Seats*	*%*	*Seats*
Dinant			3.4			
Gedinne			1.7			
Havelange			2.3			
Yvoir			2.4			
Andenne			3.5			
Fosses-La-Ville			4.8		2.2	0
Gembloux			2.8			
Gesves			2.9			
Jemeppe-sur-Sambre					2.1	0
Namur			7.2	3	2.7	0
Profondville			3.4			
Sombreffe			3.6			
Cerfontaine			1.4			
Couvin			1.9			
Florennes			2.8			
Philippeville			2.2			
Walcourt			4.1			
Wallonia		0		26		4

In the Brussels Region, the electoral phases were similar. Their impact was slightly different given the urban character of all the communes concerned and the higher average magnitude than in the Walloon municipalities, an element which tends to favour new and small parties (Willey, 1998: 651).

In 1988, the FN obtained only one mandate, in the commune of Molenbeek. Six years later, on the other hand, it increased the number of FN municipal councillors to no fewer than forty-six, including seven in Molenbeek, six in Schaerbeek and six in Anderlecht. However, this undeniable success was short-lived. A number of its municipal councillors resigned during their term of office and at the local elections in 2000 the National Front held on to only two local mandates in the commune of Molenbeek.

The National Front and local elections in Brussels: 1988, 1994 and 2000

	1988		1994		2000	
	%	*Seats*	*%*	*Seats*	*%*	*Seats*
Anderlecht	3.1		13.2	6	3.1	0
Auderghem			5.8	1		
Berchem-Sainte-Agathe			8.8	2		
Brussels	1.0		9.3	4	2.8	0

	1988		1994		2000	
	%	*Seats*	*%*	*Seats*	*%*	*Seats*
Etterbeek			8.8	2		
Forest			9.6	3		
Ganshoren			9.4	2		
Ixelles			8.0	3	1.7	0
Jette			9.6	3	2.7	0
Koekelberg			12.6	3	3.6	
Molenbeek	4.0	1	16.6	7	5.7	2
Saint-Gilles			6.9	2	2.7	0
Saint-Josse	2.4					
Schaerbeek	1.2		9.6	5		
Uccle			5.7	2	1.3	0
Watermael-Boitsfort			3.8			
Woluwe-Saint-Lambert			5.5	1		
Woluwe-Saint-Pierre			2.8			
Brussels Region		*1*		*46*		*2*

This short presentation of the vicissitudes of the local representation of the National Front highlights clearly its extremely inconstant relations with the institutions of representative democracy. Without continuity as regards locally elected representatives, the FN does not have either the means or any real ambition to develop possible niches of competence in local public life. It cannot even act as a Tribune in the council. The local members of the FN have not acquired any new competences, either in governance or in political coordination, given the absence of continuity in exercizing their mandate(s), either as result of the departure of their elected representatives of their failure to win re-election. Above all, in such a context, the question of power, independently of the actions of the other social and political actors or of the party's leadership, simply does not arise. How can this phenomenon be explained when extreme right parties are frequently depicted as formations based around the charismatic power of their leader(s) (Wattenberg, 2002: 67; Perrineau, 2005; Diamanti, 2004: 48; Eatwell, 2003: 65)? In our view, this organizational evanescence is closely linked to its doctrinal and ideological evanescence. The traditional aspects of the rhetoric of the extreme right are very much apparent in the case of the FN – law and order, the rejection of immigrants, criticism of the system, etc. The tract for the 1987 elections was explicit: "Are you ready to accept our schools, kindergartens and hospitals being taken over by third world immigrants?

Are you willing to tolerate the fact that they are granted the right to all kinds of lavish benefits? Do you claim the right to work for our compatriots? Are you one of those honest people who simply want to LIVE AND WORK IN SECURITY, respecting the principle of freedom. The National Front offers you a FUTURE OF HOPE" [10]. However, there is no vaunting of nationalist values, which represents a fundamental difference with parties such as the French National Front, the *Vlaams Belang* and the Danish People's Party. There is no longer a Belgian national pride (Stengers & Gubin, 2002) and there is no Francophone, Walloon or Brussels based nationalism. There is therefore no close interweaving of the traditional rhetoric and a nationalist aspect, which impedes the development of a coherent and "dynamic" structure and leaders with extreme right ideological profiles. However, the importance of the nationalist dimension as regards the European extreme right has been highlighted by numerous authors (Hagtvet, 1994). Mudde (1999: 187) even considers that to be the nucleus of the extreme right: "The nucleus of the extreme right ideology is nationalism, the belief that the state (the political unit) and the nation (the cultural unit) should be congruent. Extreme Right Parties are first and foremost nationalist, though they can be divided into state and ethnic nationalist Extreme Right Parties". This fact is therefore crucial since it is undoubtedly the focal point in understanding the paradox and asymmetry of the extreme right in Belgium: the *Vlaams Belang* is very powerful in a prosperous society, but where the question of nationalism is prominent, while the National Front is evanescent in an area with socio-economic difficulties, but which are not evoked in relation to the issue of nationalism.

C. *An unknown actor*

Thirdly, it is important to evoke the actions of the other political actors. Their attitude to the issues mainly evoked by the National Front, especially as regards questions of migration and Belgian populations of foreign origin, has changed considerably. In the 1980s, at the time when the structural character of the *economic crisis* and of the installation of a certain number of migrants was integrated, several political personalities and parties seized on the question of *immigration* as a *problem*, more often than not from a xenophobic point of view. The most famous case was undoubtedly that of the mayor of the commune of Schaerbeek – the seventh largest commune in Belgium – Roger Nols, who embarked on an unbridled xenophobic campaign. In 1982, he stood in the municipal election under the NOLS (New Orientations for Freedom in Schaerbeek) banner. He set himself up as the champion of the fight against foreigners: "It is not enough to warn of the danger, it is also necessary to try to overcome it. It is obvious that the real solution lies in an immediate, radical, definitive and effective end to immigration, accompanied by a massive repatriation of immigrants who are already residents. That is the objective to be achieved" (Nols, 1987: 115). His increasingly overt anti-immigrant positions led him to break away from his political party, the Democratic Front of Francophones (*Front Démocratique des Francophones* – FDF) in April 1983 and to stand as an independent candidate on liberal lists up to the national election of 1991. In the European elections of June 1984 he obtained 92,969 preference votes, mainly in the urban area of Brussels. Symbolically, he invited Jean-Marie Le Pen to a dinner-debate in his commune on 28 September

1984. This extreme attitude was however not isolated. Several candidates expressed feelings and views that were xenophobic, if not frankly racist. As noted, in 1982, the Democratic Union for the Respect of Work made the ardent fight against immigration a key issue, as confirmed by one of the tracts distributed in the local elections of 1982: "Mr Simonet, mayor of Anderlecht and a socialist like you (Mr Cudell) has understood what the French socialists have understood: it is necessary to put one's own house in order before attempting to take care of Russians or immigrants. (...) As regards immigration, Mr Nols whose commune, had, in the area of immigration, the same problems as Saint-Josse, has understood what the UDRT elected representatives have repeated over and over again in communal meetings: we must impose limits so that Belgians still feel that they are in control of their own country. Are you Belgian? We too" [11]. But more generally, except for the small Belgian communist party and the ecologists, no party was really spared. In the Brussels commune of Forest, the deputy mayor Henri Lismonde (FDF) distributed on a massive scale a tract entitled "Open letter to the riffraff", explicitly categorized as the North African community.

From the point of view of the political parties, the Liberal Reformist Party (*Parti Réformateur Libéral* – PRL) undoubtedly helped to legitimize the xenophobic current by the views expressed by several of its personalities and by the place given to Roger Nols, which moreover caused a certain stir within its ranks (Delwit, 2002a). This attitude certainly curbed the emergence of electorally important extreme right-wing movements. The success of Roger Nols can be explained to a large extent by his image as a notable, mayor of a large Brussels commune. He allowed people to express racist feelings without the guilt of an extreme right vote.

As we have seen, the PRL was not the only party which attempted to capitalize on the increase in xenophobic feelings among part of the population. However, it was the only formation which made it one of the elements of its electoral strategy. In the other parties, it was more a question of isolated cases or ambiguous positions. In this context, the position adopted by the Brussels federation of the socialist party in 1987 caused a stir within the party. The Brussels socialists declared that "we must listen attentively to the views expressed by citizens in Brussels and reassure a Belgian population which, left without a reply or solution to the problem of immigration, will inevitably be tempted by the mirage of extremist views, which are moreover misleading and unrealistic" [12]. To that end, the Brussels federation proposed six main principles, including the negation of political rights for foreigners in favour of a policy of naturalization: "A person cannot be granted the right to vote unless he or she has demonstrated a formal desire to be a citizen in his or her own right which establishes the existence of the same rights and same duties for each citizen. That is the important choice which is particularly relevant for second and third generation immigrants" [13].

The breakthrough by the FN in the Brussels Region in the local elections and that of the *Vlaams Blok* in Antwerp led to a gradual modulation of their position by the Francophone parties. A tacit agreement was reached to the effect that they would no longer make immigration a theme of electoral campaigns from the perspective of higher scores by the extreme right in the south and north of the country. Silence prevailed even as regards policies put in place to combat exclusion and promote the integration of young immigrants [14]. This strategy of silence was questioned following

the fresh successes of the extreme right in the elections of 1991, 1994 and 1995. The parties and governments therefore gradually abandoned it. At the level of the federal government a fund was created to support immigration policy. Its creation initiated a new phase in the policy of integrating immigrants while aiming to provide a solution to social problems. It was characterized by four aspects:

"– the high amount of financing allocated to integration policy,
– the actions are part of a policy of localization and even communalization of social policies,
– they are carried out on the basis of partnerships between the communes and private associations,
– the actions supported concern first and foremost the prevention of petty crime, dropping out of school, professional integration and improved citizenship" (Rea, 1997a).

However, as regards communication, the main parties remained silent on the question of immigration. This strategy had another pernicious effect. The extreme right was the only political force to treat this problem, which, in another way, legitimated it. The breaking of this silence was also linked to a developing socio-demographic phenomenon: Belgians of foreign origin were seen increasingly as an electoral segment that needed to be taken into account, especially as it is compulsory to vote in Belgium. This fact became evident with the local elections of 1994 in certain communes in Brussels and became even more important in the regional elections of 1999 and 2004, and the local elections of 2000. From that point, all rhetoric on this point was strictly prohibited among the democratic parties. All the Francophone democratic parties backed the policy of giving the vote at local level to non-EU nationals and all of them ensured henceforth that the composition of their lists reflected the sociological reality of the population.

In this context, no attempt to reach an agreement with the National Front was conceivable. Other than its intrinsic weakness, the views of the FN smacking of xenophobia inevitably clashed with the (relatively) new approach of the democratic parties and their electoral and political strategy.

On 8 May 1993, the Francophone democratic parties, except for the Greens, signed a charter to counter and isolate the extreme right. It was updated in May 1998 and signed by all the presidents of the parties. In this charter, the democratic parties promised not to form an alliance with parties "which advocate ideologies or proposals likely to undermine democratic principles". Moreover, the parties undertook to "refuse any mandate which might have been obtained thanks to the support or abstention of the representatives" of extreme right parties [15].

This helps to understand the very limited possibilities for the National Front to put on the agenda political or social problems relative to the traditional themes of its programme, such as *law and order*, the rejection of immigration and asylum, while such topics are an important concern of part of the French-speaking population.

The possibilities of the FN in this regard have been further limited by the way in which it has been ostracized by the other parties in the political system, as well as by the written press and audiovisual media. At the time when the National Front made its first two breakthroughs, several newspapers and audiovisual media hesitated about

the attitude to adopt. In certain circumstances, public and private television channels and certain regional channels reported briefly the FN point of view, more often than not expressed by Daniel Féret. In these circumstances, the FN president, in the same way as certain speeches of Jean-Marie Le Pen, attempted to use extravagant language to exist. On the evening of the Brussels regional elections in June 1989, he attacked the liberal mayor of Brussels in the following terms: "In that case, after all is said and done, the Germans behaved like idiots when they invaded us in 1940. They should have arrived in rags, with oriental slippers on their feet and holding out their hands. Charles Picqué [leader of the socialist party in the Brussels Region, PD] would have found a "*Berlin Désir*", children in schools would have worn badges saying "*Touche pas à mon Boche*" ("Get you hands off my Kraut") and we would still be occupied today" [16]. In 1994, he participated in a debate with the president of the Christian Democrats on the private channel, but from the mid-1990s, the press adopted a common attitude of no longer giving FN representatives the opportunity to express their views. The public channel, obliged in principle to respect proportional viewing time for the electoral results, took refuge behind the European Convention on Human Rights and its own bylaws, which prohibit it from broadcasting programmes against the *general interest* [17], in order to circumvent this rule with regard to the National Front.

3.   The National Front electorate

Having regard to these elements, how can the occasional electoral successes of the Belgian National Front be explained?

Since the mid 1980s, questions and studies of the extreme right electorate in Europe have developed. The emergence of the extreme right in French-speaking Belgium has inevitably given rise to questions regarding the electoral sociology of the National Front. However the data in this area are extremely limited, for several reasons.

First, it is important to point out that the first breakthrough of the Belgian National Front is a recent phenomenon. In fact it was only in the European elections of June 1994 and the legislative elections of May 1995 that the results of the FN occasionally achieved a certain consistency across French-speaking Belgium (Delwit, De Waele & Rea, 1998). Moreover, the tradition of in-depth and regular public opinion polls is more recent in Belgium than in other European countries; France and Great Britain in particular have well-known research institutes which are used by university research centres, the parties and the media. Belgium is something of the poor relation in this regard. The Institute of Social and Political Opinion Research (PIOP-ISPO) seems to be somewhat isolated. Finally, over and above the scarcity of research into electoral sociology, research teams are faced with a recurring problem as regards the extreme right electorate: its statistical insignificance.

With between 4 and 9% of voting intentions in Francophone opinion, it is extremely difficult to obtain a representative basis with a low margin of error for the FN electorate. For a sample of 500 to 1,000 people, that represents in the best possible case – which never arises – 20 to 40 people. The biases are too important for serious scientific credit to be given to such a sample.

Finally, there is another crucial problem, which concerns precisely one of these determining biases. Part of the electorate does not find it easy to reveal extreme right voting intentions. Moreover, in general, opinion polls underestimate the reality of the extreme right vote. In addition, certain social categories are reluctant to answer several questions. Consequently, it is far from certain that we have an exact representation of the profile of National Front voters through the limited data available to us.

To try and overcome these difficulties, we have used two surveys carried out in territorial areas where the National Front has its most substantial presence. The first is an "exit poll" carried out at the time of the regional elections in Brussels on 13 June 2004. The second poll was carried out in April 2006 in the main city in Wallonia, Charleroi, where the National Front obtained 17% of the votes in June 2004 in the Walloon regional elections. When the results of these two polls are cross referenced certain similarities appear, but there are also certain differences between the two territories.

In the Brussels Region, the FN electorate tends to be composed of middle-aged voters. Only 28% of its voters are aged under 40, while more than a quarter of them are aged 60 and over. *A contrario*, National Front voters are far younger and masculine in Charleroi, where 53% of the FN electorate is aged under 40 and seven out of ten are men.

Gender and age among National Front voters

	Charleroi			Brussels		
	Men	Women	Global	Men	Women	Global
18-29	21.05	29.41	23.64	5.56	14.29	10.26
30-39	7.89	23.53	12.73	22.22	14.29	17.95
40-49	31.58	17.65	27.27	27.78	33.33	30.77
50-59	23.68	11.76	20.00	11.11	19.05	15.38
60 and more	15.79	17.65	16.36	33.33	19.05	25.64
Total	69.09	30.91		46.15	53.85	

This differing age and gender structure reveals in reality an electorate with a different social status. In Charleroi, an industrial city in a period of restructuring, three out of 10 FN voters are blue-collar workers, while the corresponding proportion is less than 10% in the Brussels Region. On the other hand, the number of white-collar workers, people in the professions and pensioners is proportionally far more important in the Brussels Region. The significant presence of a working-class segment in the National Front electorate corroborates analyses carried out among the electorates of other extreme right parties. For example, in France, Perrineau (1997) emphasizes the advent of a "left-wing-Lepenism" whereas Mayer (1999) suggests rather a "working-class-Lepenism".

Socio-professional status of the National Front voters at Charleroi and Brussels

	Charleroi	*Brussels*
Working-class	27.78	7.50
Employee	14.81	20.00
Civil servant	12.96	15.00
Manager	1.85	5.00
Liberal Profession	0.00	10.00
Trades people	5.56	5.00
Unemployed	11.11	7.50
Housewife-Househusband	5.56	2.50
Student	1.85	0.00
Pensioner	16.67	20.00
Handicapped person	0.00	7.50
Indefinite	1.85	0.00

Also, and not surprisingly, there is a difference in terms of the level of education. In the main Walloon city, only 12% of the National Front voters have completed university or higher education courses, while 10% of them have obtained only a primary school certificate and 30% a lower secondary school certificate. In the case of the vast majority of those who have obtained an upper secondary school diploma it is a technical diploma. This low level of education is a notable fact which confirms the general analyses of Norris (2005: 141-142). Several studies have highlighted its importance in social and political behaviour, in particular in ethnocentrist type positions (Mayer, 1990).

Highest diploma obtained among FN voters at Charleroi

None	0.00
Primary school certificate	9.26
Lower secondary school – general	16.67
Lower secondary school – technical	5.56
Lower secondary school – professional	7.41
Upper secondary school – general	14.81
Upper secondary school – technical	27.78
Upper secondary school – professional	5.56
Higher Education	11.11
University	1.85

An analysis of the level of education of the party's electorate in Brussels reveals another reality: 34% of the FN electorate have a university or higher education

diploma, i.e. a difference of 22 points with the National Front electorate in Charleroi. On the other hand, "only" 22% of them obtained only a lower secondary school certificate. However, it is necessary to point out the important proportion of voters having completed technical studies.

Highest diploma obtained among FN voters at Brussels

None	2.44
Primary school certificate	4.88
Lower secondary school	14.63
Upper secondary school	17.07
Technical	9.76
Professional	17.07
Higher Education	14.63
University	19.51

Although the profile of the extreme right electorate in Charleroi and Brussels differs in part, there are nevertheless certain areas of convergence. We have constructed indexes to test to what extent the FN electorate stands out in relation to that of democratic political formations. For that purpose, we have developed three indexes. The first refers to the left-right positioning on questions that are essentially socio-economic. The second refers to positions on questions of society, from the most conservative to the most liberal positions. The third concerns questions of *law and order* and tolerance towards others. The construction of the indexes is not based on the same number of questions in the survey carried out in Brussels and that conducted in Charleroi. It is therefore important to treat comparisons with circumspection.

As regards socio-economic questions, the positions of the electorates are in line with expectations. The electorates of parties of the left, the socialist party and the green party Ecolo, have the index the furthest to the left and vice versa for the liberals (MR) and the Christian-Democrats (CDH). In the two surveys, the MR electorate has the most liberal profile on socio-economic themes. The FN electorate does not stand out from the other political formations. In Charleroi, it could even be classified as left-wing (but not in Brussels), which is linked to its working class component.

Typology on socio-economic questions of the electorates in Brussels and Charleroi
(-10 is the most rightist score and 10 the most leftist one)

	Charleroi	Brussels
PS	5.22	2.77
MR	2.44	-0.49
CDH	3.74	1.62
Ecolo	4.01	3.36
FN	4.97	0.18

On questions regarding society, the differences in the indexes between parties seem small. Once again, not surprisingly, the green voters tend to be the most liberal while Christian-Democrats tend to be the most conservative (except for the FN in Brussels). In both surveys, the FN electorate appears as conservative but on a basis that is more or less identical with that of the Humanist Democratic Centre (*Centre Démocrate Humaniste*).

Typology on society questions of the electorates in Brussels and (-10 is the most conservative score and 10 the most liberal one)

	Charleroi	Brussels
PS	-0.06	-1.37
MR	-0.94	-2.40
CDH	-1.52	-3.83
Ecolo	1.92	2.64
FN	-1.27	-4.15

On the subjects of *law and order* and tolerance towards others, the National Front electorate is, on the contrary, very different from the average of the other parties. Both in Brussels and Charleroi the average score of the FN differs very considerably from that of the other political parties. It is on these questions that it is possible to discern a clear distinction. The rejection of others and the high importance attached to questions of *law and order* have very high scores among National Front voters. In Brussels, the difference with the MR electorate, which is the nearest, is 9.44 points and in Charleroi, the gap with the PS electorate, which is the nearest, is 4.45 points. This major cleavage seems to mirror similar observations in other European configurations. In France, Nonna Mayer (1997: 17) suggested the establishment of "a new ideological cleavage", contrasting "a humanistic universalism, advocating equality, solidarity between human beings and their intrinsic dignity, with an inward-looking, anti-European, authoritarian and xenophobic anti-universalism, which is essentially the prerogative of Le Pen's voters and transcends the traditional left-right cleavage".

Typology on law and order and tolerance towards other questions of the electorates in Brussels and Charleroi (-10 is the most close-minded outlook and the most security score and 10 the most universal one and the less security)

	Charleroi	Brussels
PS	-1.90	4.80
MR	-1.85	3.65
CDH	-1.40	5.03
Ecolo	-0.63	7.41
FN	-6.35	-5.79

We can also isolate a distinctive characteristic of the National Front electorate: it tends to be far more pessimistic than that of democratic parties. In Charleroi, 34.62% of the National Front voters interviewed declared that they expected their economic situation to worsen in the coming months, including 10% who expected a sharp deterioration.

Future from the voters' point of view (Charleroi)

	Quite better	Better	Worse	Quite worse	Neither better, nor worse	I do not know
PS	2.29	19.08	14.50	5.34	40.46	18.32
MR	1.08	15.05	16.13	5.38	44.09	18.28
CDH	0.00	16.22	27.03	2.70	40.54	13.51
Ecolo	0.00	18.75	28.13	3.13	50.00	0.00
FN	5.77	15.38	25.00	9.62	34.62	9.62

In the Brussels Region, 34.15% of National Front voters also declared that they expected their situation to deteriorate, including 12.20% who predicted a very sharp worsening, i.e. four to five times more than the scores of the other political parties. Just under 20% considered that their socio-economic situation would improve, compared with 31% in the PS, 33.5% in the MR, 29% in the CDH and 31.5% in Ecolo.

Future from the voters' point of view (Brussels)

	Quite better	Better	Worse	Quite worse	Neither better, nor worse	I do not know
PS	5.36	25.51	12.12	3.19	34.69	19.13
MR	3.49	28.03	13.95	2.51	40.45	11.58
CDH	3.59	25.45	10.48	2.69	38.62	19.16
Ecolo	3.29	27.12	13.15	2.47	40.00	13.97
FN	2.44	17.07	21.95	12.20	31.71	14.63

The pessimism noted with regard to its socio-economic future seems exacerbated as regards political life and political representatives. In reply to the question of whether politicians of both sexes take care about what people like them think, almost 80% of National Front voters replied "practically not", a score very much higher than among supporters of the democratic parties. Only 2% replied "a lot" and 17.3% "a little". The lack of tolerance towards others interacts with and, in all likelihood, sustains and is sustained by a feeling of having been abandoned by political parties and leaders. This crisis of confidence is frequent among extreme right voters. As Ignazi has emphasized (2001: 379), it is moreover a constitutive element of the dissemination of the extreme right's message: "Without the existence of a widespread "crisis of confidence" in democratic political systems, the dissemination of phenomena (and political

speeches) such as those of the extreme right would not exist". This pessimism leads in numerous democratic States to a certain feeling of alienation, which explains part of the increase in non-voting over the last twenty years (Delwit, 2007). In Belgium, as voting is compulsory, it can result in blank votes or protest votes for the extreme right, comparable to the "*niniste*" (neither right nor left) vote pointed out by Mayer (1999: 42), "the revolt of victims of social exclusion" for Cuperus (2005: 162), or Poujadist from the perspective evoked by Castel (2003 : 50) in connection with voting for Le Pen in April 2002: "From a sociological point of view, it is essentially a "Poujadist" reaction, fuelled by a feeling of alienation and resentment towards other groups and their political representatives who benefit from change while ignoring the fate of the losers".

Politicians perception among voters (Charleroi)

	A lot	*A little*	*Practically not*	*I do not know*
PS	7.63	45.80	39.69	6.87
MR	2.15	41.94	52.69	3.23
CDH	5.41	43.24	45.95	5.41
Ecolo	12.50	46.88	37.50	3.13
FN	1.92	17.31	78.85	1.92

A last element concerning the National Front electorate is noteworthy because it is not immediately obvious. On a left/right scale, National Front voters seem to assume the way they vote. Asked to position themselves on a scale from 0, the furthest left on the political spectrum, to 9, the furthest right on the political spectrum, the average score of the National Front electorate is the most to the right in both Charleroi (5.7) and Brussels, where the score of 6.33 is particularly high. There is therefore an awareness of voting for a party labelled on the extreme right of the political spectrum. This description, outside the party, is therefore not seen as a stigma for National Front voters who seem, on the contrary, to assume it without any specific problems.

Political auto-positioning

	Charleroi	*Brussels*
PS	3.39	3.16
MR	5.25	5.05
CDH	4.50	4.40
Ecolo	3.68	2.86
FN	5.70	6.33

4.   Epilogue

The conclusions that can be drawn from this examination of the National Front and its hypothetical relationship suggest numerous questions for political analysts. The political texts and activity of the Belgian National Front, raise first of all an

important question: does the National Front have *primary goals*? In their paper, Harmel & Janda (1994: 265) consider that "parties have numerous goals, each party has a "primary goal", and the primary goal varies among parties – and perhaps within parties across the time. (Such goals include: vote maximizing, office maximizing, representation/participation of members and policy/ideology advocacy)". However, on the basis of the National Front's track record it is not possible to discern any primary goals. It does not seem to have a clear vote maximizing strategy, and even less an office maximizing representation strategy. As regards support for or promoting public policies, the FN has, for the last 20 years, focused almost exclusively on themes relating to migration and *law and order*. It must be noted, however, that the FN is caught up in a ritual recitation of certain words and formulas, without any precise proposals, in particular within the parliamentary forum. In addition, the promotion of its ideas remains confidential, so much so that the party's visibility within society is extremely low. The poverty of its web site, which is regularly inaccessible, is ample proof of that. In short, it is very difficult to identify the objective or priority objectives of the National Front, not only externally but also internally, given the very small number of members and the permanent rotation of its small management team.

This first question leads immediately to a second question: can we really talk of a political party? In their study on the new parties, Harmel and Roberston (1985: 507) asserted without beating about the bush that a "political party is defined as an organization that purports to have as one of its goals the placement of its avowed members in governmental office". Consequently, the question is frankly open as regards the FN. It cannot be considered either as a contender party or as a promoter party (Harmel & Robertson, 1985: 517) and, as we have highlighted, it certainly does not have any ambitions to place its members in governmental office. The definition of Harmel and Robertson is clearly restrictive, but other definitions do nothing to dispel any such doubts among researchers. The National Front has just as much difficulty in fitting in with the traditional approach of La Palombara and Weiner (1966) as with that of Weber (1971).

When all is said and done, what undoubtedly is the most striking characteristic of the National Front is its incredible evanescence, which is above all tangible in organizational terms. The party is incapable of ensuring a minimum of continuity, including as regards its ability to present candidates for the local, regional and national elections, and its few elected representatives often leave the party rapidly. It is also manifest from an ideological point of view, since the FN does not even have a reference document for its members. This evanescence is finally striking in the party's relations with the institutions. Daniel Féret is the only personality who has, formally, had a regular presence in the institutions. As for the rest, their presence is minimal, and frequently of short duration, particularly at local level, and without political perspectives.

All that could detract from the usefulness of analyzing the National Front and lead to it being classified among the irrelevant parties (Sartori, 1976). The problem with that, however, is that occasionally the National Front is a not insignificant electoral actor which, from this point of view, satisfies clearly the conditions of relevance with regard to Sartori's electoral indices. Furthermore, although in a limited way and

without being able to coordinate any social movement, it can also have a blackmail potential, in particular in putting together local coalitions. This leads us directly to the National Front electorate. Who are they?

In the context of a consociative type of functioning, the National Front seems to be an organization which attracts the votes of people who are *anxious and feel trapped* in a difficult social situation. What distinguishes FN voters clearly from those opting for a democratic party is their focus on matters of *law and order* and their ethnocentric position. This configuration can lead us to describe the FN electorate as essentially *protesters*. At the same time, we have noted that in two areas with strong FN electorates – Brussels and Charleroi –, on average this electorate positions itself on the extreme right of the political spectrum. In that way, an appreciable number of electors assume their choice, which qualifies the purely "protest" perspective.

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Notes

[1] *Electoral tracts,* Legislative elections of 1985.

[2] "The National Front's programme", *in The National Front. A party… a president*, ND.

[3] Tract of the National Front National, *Mind your won business!*, 1997.

[4] *The National Front's programme*, elections of June 1999, p. 16.

[5] *Legislative elections 2003, regional and European elections 2004; the National Front's programme*, 2003, p. 16.

[6] *Le Soir*, 11 September 1995.

[7] *Le Soir*, 10 April 1996.

[8] *Le Soir*, 6 June 1996.

[9] *Le Soir*, 27 January 2005

[10] FN, *Brussels, my city… for how long?*, legislative elections of 1987.

[11] UDRT, *UDRT-RAD Section Saint-Josse-Ten-Noode says no to Saint-Josse-Ten-Marrakech*, 1982.

[12] Brussels federation of the PS, *Defining an immigration policy for Brussels*, 1987, p. 3.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 4.

[14] In particular the policy initiated by the executive of the Brussels Region under the presidency of the socialist Charles Picqué with effect from 1989.

[15] *Le Soir*, 9 May 1998.

[16] *The National Front n° 1*, October 1989, p. 19. (This refers to the slogan "*Touche pas à mon pote*" (Get your hands of my friend) coined by the French anti-racist campaigner Harlem Désir).

[17] Article 7 §1 stipulates: "The company may not produce or broadcast programmes which are against the law or the general interest, which do not respect human dignity, and in particular those which contain an incitement to discrimination, hatred or violence, in particular for reasons of race, gender or nationality or seek to minimize, justify or approve the genocide committed by the German national-socialist regime during second world war or any other form of genocide".

The *Front national vis-à-vis* power in France: factors of political isolation and performance assessment of the Extreme Right in municipal office

Gilles Ivaldi

The position of the *Front national* (FN) *vis-à-vis* power and the issue of its qualification to form or not alliances with established actors of the mainstream right have occupied the realm of political debate in France since the first electoral breakthrough of the extreme right in the mid-1980s. These salient and highly divisive issues topped the national agenda in the 1998 regional elections in which the far right managed to enter into formal coalitions with a number of centre-right and conservative leaders in regional councils. Concurrently, the FN's success in securing an overall majority in four city councils of Southern France in 1995-1997 was the first occurrence of the extreme right holding public office since the end of WWII and the fall of the collaborationist Vichy regime. Although all those city councils were subsequently lost by the FN and its MNR splinter group, the analysis of the period of the *Front national* assuming local power raises a number of issues regarding patterns of management and policy-making by the far right at municipal level.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the FN's relationship with power in relation to the seemingly paradoxical isolation of the French extreme right at the margin of the national party system despite its electoral strength. While addressing a number of factors pertaining to the increasing rejection of Le Pen's party towards the fringe of the legitimate space for inter-party competition, the study will also point to the specific political opportunity structures that exist at local and regional level, which facilitated the accommodation of the far right by the RPR/UDF cartel over the 1986-1998 period. As shall be discussed, France can be considered an intermediary case between, for instance, Austria and Belgium, as well as one of "variable geometry" at national and sub-national level. Such difference between national and local party politics is of particular relevance to most right-wing populist parties in Western Europe, which have often first emerged politically and electorally in critical elections at sub-national

level, where the threshold for new peripheral actors' entry into the party system remains significantly lower. As was notably the case for the French *Front national*, these second-order elections helped right-wing populist actors acquire political legitimacy at lesser organizational cost in the initial stage of their development. In the light of the development of broad right-wing coalitions in Austria and Italy, there is also some evidence that the experience of politically accommodating the far right was first conducted at sub-national level before moving onto the national political agenda (Gallagher, 2000; Bale, 2003). Arguably this pattern would have been very likely replicated in the late 1980s in France, had the institutional constraints not deprived the extreme right from parliamentary presence and coalition potential.

The analysis of the FN's position within the party system will be complemented with an evaluation of the party's performances in municipal office in Toulon, Marignane, Orange and Vitrolles. In particular, we will suggest a possible characterization of two divergent models of "ideological" and "pragmatic" municipal governance, whilst pointing at the many similarities in the significant impact of the traditional far right *Weltanschauung* and development of political patronage on the process of agenda setting and the implementation of local social and cultural policies across the four localities under FN administration.

1.   From challenger to adversary: electoral consolidation and systemic isolation of the French far right

The 2002-2004 series of elections bore testimony to the consolidation of the position of the extreme right in the political system as a strong mobilisatory force (Perrineau, 2005). The results pointed to the institutionalization of the far right, the continuing strength of a core of loyal voters, and the FN's ability to retain a foothold in its former bastions despite the schism by the *mégrétiste* faction departing from the party in 1999 (see Table 1). While demonstrating the enduring capability of the far right to secure a stable partisan support between elections, these results revealed simultaneously the blatant failure of Mégret's splinter *Mouvement national républicain* (MNR) and the FN's capacity to assert its hegemonic position on the extreme right camp. The succession of electoral setbacks experienced by the MNR between 2002 and 2004 was compounded by severe financial and legal difficulties that contributed to delivering the final blow to an already weakened party which now appears largely irrelevant to first-order politics (Evans & Ivaldi, 2005).

Unlike its right-wing populist counterparts in Austria, Italy or the Netherlands (Heinisch, 2003; Minkenberg, 2001; Van Praag, 2003; Luther, 2003), the French *Front national* never managed to effectively seize upon those electoral successes to escape the margins of the national political system, to which it had been confined by its emergence as the aggregation of a number of peripheral nationalist and neo-fascist organisations within the post-1945 historically de-legitimized far right camp (Camus & Monzat, 1992). The political isolation and lack of coalition potential by the FN at national level contrast with the actual development of collusive strategies by leaders of the mainstream right at local level and the recurrent building of tactical alliances *in the field* over the 1983-98 period. In this, the situation of the French far right within the party system has traditionally been one of a precarious equilibrium between

pragmatic cooperation and political rejection on ideological and moral grounds, which, for instance, clearly differs from the tight *cordon sanitaire* built around the *Vlaams Blok/Belang* by all established parties in Flanders since the early 1990s (Delwit et al., 1998; Lubbers et al., 2000; Erk, 2005). In order to understand the motives behind this intricate vacillation movement of "variable geometry" combining inclusion and exclusion of the FN, we need to look at relevant longitudinal elements of alteration in patterns of party competition in relation to the changing balance of power within the right pole of French politics, the divergent political opportunity structures that exist at national and sub-national levels, and the crucial institutional constraints inherent in the majoritarian system in the first-order arena of electoral politics in France.

Table 1
FN and MNR election results (1984-2004)

	Election	%	Post-1999 split
1984	European	11.4	-
1986	Legislatives	9.8	-
	Regional	9.5	
1988	Presidential	14.4	-
	Legislatives	9.7	
1989	European	11.7	-
1992	Regional	13.8	
1993	Legislatives	12.4	-
1994	European	10.5	-
1995	Presidential	15.0	-
1997	Legislatives	14.9	-
1998	Regional	15.1	
1999	European	9.1	5.8 FN
			3.3 MNR
2002	Presidential	19.2	16.9 Le Pen
			2.3 Mégret
		17.8	Le Pen (2nd round)
	Legislative	12.4	11.1 FN
			1.1 MNR
			0.2 Other ER
2004	Regional	16.1	14.7 FN
			1.4 MNR
	European	10.11	9.8 Le Pen
			0.3 Mégret

Source: Ministry of Interior.

A. *Changing patterns of inter-party competition*

Since the Front national gained political prominence, the major parties of the parliamentary right have been confronted with the issue of dealing with this new challenger on their right flank. Subsequently, both the Gaullist RPR and centre-right UDF had to derive "appropriate" strategies to limit the increasing impact of Le Pen's party which, in the initial phase of its electoral growth, impinged primarily on

right-wing electoral territory amongst dissatisfied RPR/UDF voters (Martin, 2000). To begin here with a focus on the national level, it is true to say that, contrary to the ambivalent attitudes of the RPR/UDF cartel towards the FN throughout the 1980s, there was a significant shift by 1990 towards a clearer refusal by top-level leaders of the mainstream right to collaborate with the far right, which was further reaffirmed by President Chirac in the aftermath of the traumatic episode of the 1998 regional elections and resulted in the unambiguous rejection of the *Front national*.

In the highly ideologically polarized context of the mid-1980s, the "incorporative" approach to the rise of the FN by the mainstream parties of the right – as then theorized by regional UDF leaders Jean-Claude Gaudin or Jacques Blanc for instance – was predominantly seen as part of the response to the shock caused by the victory of the left in 1981 and the consequent alternation in power by the socialist-led alliance with the PC. The virulent anti-communist ideological element in the legitimization by national party executives of local agreements with the FN was, for example, central to the tactical manœuvring that took place in the critical municipal by-election of September 1983 in the city of Dreux. What was to become the founding event in bestowing political respectability upon the *Front national* was countenanced by a number of key representatives of the RPR/UDF (Chirac, Gaudin, Pons, Giscard, Barre, Poniatowski) on the ground that the FN was less an immediate danger than the "socialo-communist" leftist cartel and the participation of the so-called "Red Fascists" in government. The anti-left strategy was further enhanced in the 1986 and 1988 elections where a number of centre-right leaders officially formed alliances with the FN representatives at the local level [1].

This concept of the FN's ideology being no more than a "radical" expression of right-wing conservatism was articulated by a number of national leaders of both the RPR and UDF, as illustrated for instance by Charles Pasqua's quote in April 1988: "on what is essential, the FN shares the same concerns and values as the majority [RPR/UDF]" (*Valeurs actuelles*, 30 April 1988). According to Jean-Claude Gaudin, then President of the UDF parliamentary party in the National Assembly, the FN must be considered "a challenger not an adversary" (*Europe 1*, 17 February 1985). Such an inclusive approach was facilitated by the spatial and ideological positioning of Le Pen's party itself at the right end of the political spectrum on the "national-conservative revolution" agenda (Taguieff, 1989) that would incorporate traditional conservative policies together with liberal pro-market economics and anti-tax populism. It also coincided with the FN's attempt at building links with the mainstream right through conservative factions and think-tanks, most notably the *Club de l'Horloge* where Bruno Mégret and most of his supporters originated. The FN's tactics of opening-up attracted a number of defectors who helped sustain the party's efforts to acquire political legitimacy and a more acceptable public image, and who, for the vast majority, subsequently left the FN. In the 1986 legislative elections, this collusive strategy of *notabilization* was politically formalized through establishing *Rassemblement national* proportional lists that brought together Le Pen's *Front national*, Mégret's *Confédération pour l'Avenir et le Renouveau* (CODAR) and parent *Comités d'Action républicaine* (CAR), as well as members of the *Centre National des Indépendants et Paysans* (CNI/CNIP) such as

Olivier d'Ormesson, Yvon Briant, Edouard Frédéric-Dupont, Michel de Rostolan or Philippe Malaud.

By the beginning of the 1990s, the main parties of the right moved progressively away from such conciliatory attitudes towards the *Front national* both for strategic and ideological motives, particularly under increasing "moral" exhortation by the left, the media and a number of key figures of the RPR/UDF including Alain Juppé, Alain Carignon, François Léotard, Philippe Séguin, Gérard Longuet, Bernard Stasi or Michèle Barzach. To some extent, the re-introduction of the majoritarian electoral system in 1988 had considerably limited the electoral impact of the FN and shed light on its inability to effectively translate first-round votes into parliamentary seats, thereby contributing to reduce part of the competitive pressure put by the far right upon the RPR and UDF within the whole rightist camp. More particularly, however, the unprecedented score achieved by the FN candidate in the April 1988 presidential ballot convincingly showed that the extreme right success at the polls was not simply a temporary upsurge of protest, dissatisfaction and dissent – as had been wrongly anticipated by most leaders of the centre and conservative right –, but instead a deeply rooted phenomenon which could only be tackled by longer-term political strategy and not tactical case-by-case arrangements. Especially in the areas of Southern France where local agreements had been publicly made in 1986, the outcome of the 1988 legislative election provided some evidence of the counter-productive effect of colliding with the extreme right which, if systematically put into action by the RPR/UDF cartel, would very likely lead to further consolidation and legitimation of Le Pen's position within the political system rather than limiting effectively its potential for electoral growth and party system impact. Moreover, the 1989 municipal contest confirmed that the influence of the FN was spreading far beyond the boundaries of its traditional electoral strongholds of the South and that the issue of party cooperation with the far right would have to be addressed at national level in the forthcoming cantonal, regional and legislative elections. Lastly, following two years of alternation in national government by the RPR/UDF alliance between 1986 and 1988, there was a realization that part of the FN's electorate originated from the ranks of the left and would therefore remain deaf to all attempts by the traditional right to call upon those voters by politically accommodating Le Pen's party.

In 1990, the founding of the electoral umbrella *Union pour la France* (UPF) marked a significant shift in the strategy of the dominant parties of the mainstream right towards a "neither Le Pen, nor Mitterrand" line of rejecting alliances with the far right whilst simultaneously refusing to join forces with parties of the left within the so-called *Front républicain* suggested by former Mayor of Grenoble Alain Carignon, in every election where the FN would be in a position to win in the second round. With a clear view to pushing the FN towards the extreme right fringe of the party system, this exclusive strategy was continued at national level throughout the 1990s under the leadership of President Chirac and led eventually to his solemn condemnation of the "*Front national* as a racist and xenophobic party by nature" (*Libération*, 23 March 1998) if not simply "racist, anti-Semitic and xenophobic to the core" (to quote here former PM Alain Juppé, in *Le Monde*, 21 September 1996). The refusal to negotiate with the far right was subsequently endorsed as a central principle in the building

of future electoral alliances by the President of the renewed UDF (François Bayrou) in 1998 and all leaders of the *Union pour un Mouvement populaire* (UMP) cartel that emerged from the 2002 elections (Nicolas Sarkozy, Philippe Douste-Blazy, Jean-Pierre Raffarin, Alain Juppé, Dominique de Villepin), with the support of an overall majority of conservative and centre-right voters in opinion polls.

The attempt at confining Le Pen's party to its original anti-system role was accompanied with the ideological re-appropriation by the mainstream right of part of the FN's agenda on the salient issues of immigration and law-and-order throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Whilst initiated originally by those within the RPR/UDF whose individual profile and political pedigree (e.g. Pasqua, Bernard Pons, Robert Pandraud or Michel Poniatowski) were considered objective assets in conducting such hostile ideological "takeover", this strategy was approved and backed up by a number of prominent figures and spokesmen of the RPR and UDF (Chirac, Barre, Giscard d'Estaing, Balladur) who, on a number of occasions, undertook to manipulate crudely and capitalize on some elements of the ethno-authoritarian repertoire of the far right in order to limit its electoral audience. The dramatic impact of the FN on the mainstream right's national political agenda was also patent in the process of policy-making and the development of more restrictive policies by the RPR/UDF coalition (Ritaine, 2005; Fassin et al., 1997; Givens & Luedtke, 2005; Guiraudon, 2003), as was evidenced by the implementation of the Pasqua's Laws of September 1986 and August 1993, and their numerous legislative sequels from the Debré's Laws in April 1997 to the National Security Bill of March and Immigration Laws of November 2003, Villepin's Action Plan against illegal Immigration in May 2005 and the most recent proposals by Nicolas Sarkozy for the prevention of crime, soft-drug abuse and juvenile delinquency in December 2005. Since 2002, this combination of a restrictive line on immigration and a tough stance on law-and-order has occupied the realm of political discourse by mainstream UMP, and more particularly by a number of "cameo role" MPS who have been devoted the task of issuing the most "extreme" statements and publicizing the most controversial proposals. The mixing of immigration and security issues has also become a crucial element in Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy's strategy to appeal overtly to the less radicalized segment of the FN's electorate in order to enlarge its potential popular support in the forthcoming 2007 presidential ballot, as was demonstrated by his highly criticized management of the November 2005 riots in suburban France, and the many *ad hominem* attacks he received with accusations of going overboard on xenophobia and authoritarianism.

By the mid-1990s, the ostracization of the FN by the RPR/UDF and the former's loss of coalition potential at national level corresponded with – or more probably induced – some programmatic change together with a perceptibly more radical anti-system approach by Le Pen's party. A consequence of the harder line taken by the mainstream right, the process of transformation on the far right of the French political spectrum can be considered one of radicalization and ideological escalation. Together with increasingly violent behaviours, including a significant number of racist attacks by FN members and supporters during 1995, Le Pen's party entered into re-developing formal links with neo-fascist groups such as the GUD, *Jeunesses nationalistes*, *Troisième Voie* or Pierre Sidos' *Œuvre française*, which had distanced themselves from the neo-

conservative approach favoured by the FN in the preceding period. All these factors contributed to further isolating Le Pen's organization within the party system (Ivaldi, 2003). In particular, the continuation and accentuation of the conspiracy theory, anti-Semitism and Holocaust revisionism – which traditionally remain structuring identity elements in the core ideology of the extreme right –, together with the resurgence and development of segregationist and discriminatory measures in the early 1990s – as illustrated by the publication by FN of its *50 proposals for immigration* in November 1991 and the subsequent promotion of overt race-based prejudice by Le Pen's party (Swyngedouw & Ivaldi, 2001) – led to the perception by a growing proportion of the public of the *Front national* as a party unambiguously located at the extreme right end of the political spectrum (Figure 1). In November 2005, no less than 78 per cent of the French said they were in disagreement with the FN's ideas (CSA-*Marianne*, November 2005) and two-thirds (66 per cent) considered Le Pen's party a "threat to democracy" (TNS-SOFRES, December 2005).

Figure 1
Public perception of the Front national *as a "threat to democracy" (1983-2005)*
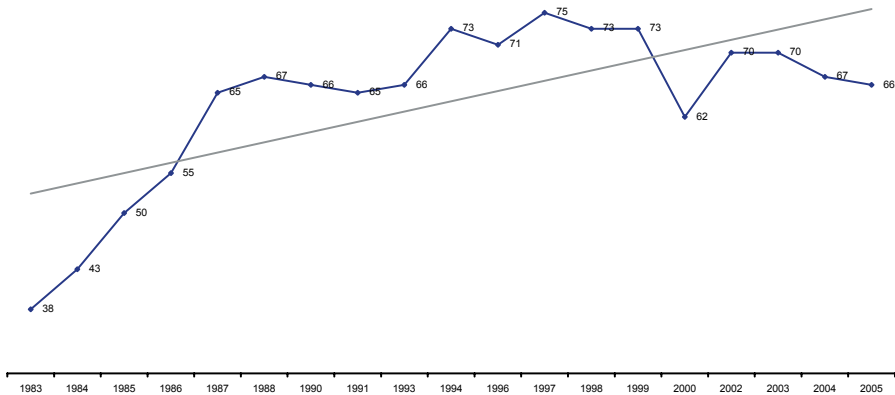
Source: TNS-SOFRES surveys.

In terms of party strategy, it is true to say that the *Front national* shifted its own position and moved away from the conciliatory attitude embodied by the *mégrétiste* group amongst the party's top-level elites prior to the 1999 split, towards the "neither left, nor right" strategy of revolutionary nationalism. This new direction was formulated and articulated in the IXth party congress of February 1994 and subsequent summer university in July 1995 under the auspices of the radicalized youth organisation of the party (FNJ). The shift in party positioning was notably due to the changing balance of power and the growing influence of the rival faction led by Bruno Gollnisch together with a number of former Secretary General Jean-Pierre Stirbois' supporters in response to the transformation of the FN's electorate and the consolidation of the far right amongst blue-collar workers, which emerged from the outcome of the 1995 presidential ballot. Since then, the ideological aggiornamento

on liberal pro-market economics by the *Front national* and the incorporation of traditional left-wing themes of socio-economic protectionism and anti-globalization with a strong working-class appeal have led to increasing the ideological distance with the RPR/UDF coalition. The progressive spatial positioning of Le Pen's party as a third competitive bloc distinct from both the left and parliamentary right was central to the party strategy revealed at the Xth national congress of Strasbourg in April 1997 despite Mégret's personal success in the delegates' vote. In sharp contrast with the way in which the FN sought to establish itself as a possible junior partner within a broad right-wing coalition throughout the 1980s, the political strategy that was experimented in the 1997 legislative elections and later formulated again in the national party convention of Lyon in January 1998 became one of fierce antagonism towards the mainstream right and President Chirac in particular, along the lines of the traditional anti-Gaullist component of the extreme right inherited from the post-Algerian war period and OAS legacy. In the 1998 regional ballot, the apparently more conciliatory attitude concealed in reality the attempt by the FN to destabilize and ultimately dislodge the RPR/UDF pole at local level and, in that sense, was a replication of the new strategic party positioning. Interestingly, the presidential election strategy unveiled by the *Front national* in January 2006 is a clear continuation of the "neither left nor right" formula, with a clear view to enlarging the party's electoral support on the left side of the political spectrum and, more particularly, among euro-sceptic left-wing voters that rejected the European Constitutional Treaty in the May 2005 referendum.

B.   *Political opportunity structures, institutional settings and the sub-national level*

While perceptible at the national level, changes in patterns of party competition were less palpable at sub-national level where tactical collaboration with the far right took place until 1998. Deprived of national coalition potential and increasingly rejected at the fringes of the political system, the *Front national* managed however to pursue cooperation with local leaders of the mainstream right thereby demonstrating the precariousness of the strategic and moral stance taken by the RPR and UDF leaderships. To account for this "variable geometry", we need to address the divergent political opportunity structures that exist at national and sub-national levels, and the crucial role by institutional settings in shaping party competition in the first-order arena of French politics (for a general discussion, see Carter, 2005; Rydgren, 2005; Van der Brug et al., 2005).

The principled firm stance taken by the RPR-UDF national leadership not to coalesce with the far right was largely facilitated by the crucial institutional constraints inherent in the two-ballot system, the mechanical process of majoritarian "amplification" due to the disproportional translation of votes into seats and the higher threshold for parliamentary representation of peripheral actors, which all derive from the strong bipolar logics of the electoral system (Charlot, 1993; Ysmal, 1998). Performing an index of disproportionality for each of the legislative contests over the 1978-2002 period illustrates the distorsive effect of the electoral system in manufacturing parliamentary majorities, as was particularly marked in 1993 and 2002 (Table 2).

Table 2
Disproportionality and PR simulations in legislative elections (1978-2002)

Elections	1978		1981		1986*		1988	
% Disproportionality†	7.6		16.2		6.3		11.6	
PR Simulations (highest-average formula with a 5 per cent threshold)								
	Votes	Seats	Votes	Seats	Votes	Seats	Votes	Seats
Extr. Left	3.0	0	1.2	0	1.5	0	0.3	0
PC	20.6	77	16.1	53	9.7	32	11.1	39
Verts	2.1	0	1.0	0	1.24	0	0.1	0
PS + Other Left	24.3	127	38.1	198	32.8	211	37.5	225
RPR/UDF+Other	44.1	269	42.9	223	44.7	277	40.6	258
Regionalists	0	0	0.1	0	0.1	0	0.3	0
FN	0	0	0.1	0	9.9	35	9.7	33
Total		474		474		555		555
Overall maj.		*238*		*238*		*278*		*278*

Elections	1993		1997		2002 **		
% Disproportionality	23.5		17.7		22.8		
PR Simulations (highest-average formula with a 5 per cent threshold)							
	Votes	Seats	Votes	Seats	Votes	Seats	
Extr. Left	1.7	0	2.6	0	2.8	0	
PC	9.1	30	9.8	36	4.8	11	
Verts	7.9	21	3.1	0	5.7	15	
PS + Other Left	20.1	120	31.1	219	26.7	187	
RPR/UDF+Other	44.0	328	32.3	223	43.4	290	
Regionalists	0.3	0	0	0	0.3	0	
FN	12,7	56	15.2	77	11.3	52	
Total		555		555		555	
Overall maj.		278		278		278	

Note: Mainland France, legislative elections, 1st ballot ("other parties" excluded from calculation).
† Gallagher's least-squares index (Gallagher, 1991).
*1986: actual results, election was held under proportional representation.
**2002 : Left = PS (24.1% ,184 seats) + Other Left (2.6%, 3 seats) ; Right = UMP (33.7%, 267 seats) + UDF (4.9%, 14 seats) + MPF /RPF (1.2%, 1 seat) + Other Right (3.6%, 8 seats) ; FN alone (the MNR would not have received any seat).
Source : BDSP electoral database; our calculations.

In the case of the FN, the impact of the institutional settings on the party's inability to enter the parliamentary arena and acquire either coalition or blackmail potential was demonstrated *a contrario* by the short-lived attempt by the socialist government to introduce proportional representation for the 1986 legislative election, whereby the FN won a total of 35 seats in the National Assembly (of which 3 had been elected on CNIP lists). The expected distribution of seats in subsequent parliamentary elections, as can be estimated by applying theoretically the proportional department-list system that was introduced in 1986, suggests that with a mere 6 per cent of parliamentary seats the far right would have held the balance of power as early as 1988 and acquired

strong coalition potential again in 1997. Under such hypothesis, Le Pen's party would have been in a position to force the dominant RPR/UDF cartel into collaborating to achieve an overall majority against the left on both occasions (Table 2). It must be noted here that this would also have had important implications for the FN in terms of public funding with an anticipated increase of over 50 per cent in the party's state subsidies which amounted to over 4,500,000 euros proportionally to the FN's score in the 2002 legislative ballot.

With respect to the systemic marginalization of the far right, one last key feature of the electoral system that ought to be mentioned here is the clear incentive for party aggregation and cartelization in legislative contests, which derives from the above institutional constraints: from 1981 onwards this led to increasing cooperation between the RPR and UDF at constituency level despite recurrent discord in presidential ballots, and the consequent reduction in party fragmentation within the right pole of French politics, which contributed to further isolating the FN. The outcome of the 2002 legislative elections, where the Front national managed only 11.1 per cent of the first round vote and lost about 2 million voters relative to the immediately preceding presidential ballot, clearly showed the impact of the rallying dynamic initiated by the UMP (single candidates in no less than 93 per cent of all constituencies) on the structure of political supply on the right, and the clear tendency for a significant proportion of former FN voters to defect to the newly formed centre-right umbrella organization rather than "waste" their vote on a party with very little coalition potential.

Table 3
FN-right alliances in regional elections (1986-2004)

1986	*1992*
FN score: 9.5 per cent (137 regional councillors)	FN score: 13.8 per cent (241 regional councillors)
Aquitaine, Franche-Comté, Languedoc-Roussillon, Haute-Normandie, Picardie, Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, Midi-Pyrénées	None
1998	*2004*
FN score: 15.1 per cent (275 regional councillors)	FN score: 14.7 per cent (156 regional councillors)
Bourgogne, Centre, Languedoc-Roussillon, Picardie, Rhône-Alpes	None

Such analysis of the impact of institutional features on the FN's incapacity to acquire coalition potential at parliamentary level is mirrored at local level by looking at the specific structure for party competition and cooperation created, for instance, by the proportional representation system under which regional elections were fought from 1986 to 1998. In 1986 and 1998, this provided the *Front national* with the opportunity to form tactical alliances with local leaders of the mainstream right in a number of regional councils (Table 3). By contrast, the change in the electoral

system at regional level that was implemented prior to the 2004 ballot, together with the landslide victory by the left one must add, resulted in a sharp decline in the number of regional council seats won by the far right (-119 seats nationwide) and the consequent loss of its former blackmail potential, which both contributed to prevent yet another distressing episode of widespread FN-right collaboration that could have been anticipated otherwise.

Looking at the specific political opportunity structures that exist at local level, it is important to stress the tactical, ideological and organizational elements in politically accommodating the *Front national*. Although partly a trivial consideration, we must first stress here the highly pragmatic approach that governed some of the most vilipended *ad hoc* alliances formed by regional leaders of the RPR/UDF whose main – if not sole – purpose was to hold power against coalesced parties of the left. This was particularly true of the 1998 series of FN-right deals and subsequent inclusion of the FN as a junior coalition partner, which were largely justified by the local notables of the mainstream right as they refusing to bear yet another political cost that would add to the already disastrous consequences of the electoral debacle in the 1997 legislative ballot following the hazardous dissolution of the National Assembly by President Chirac. Notwithstanding the "iron law" of electoral arithmetic, there is also a clear evidence of the historical links that exist between the constellation of far right small groups and think-tanks, on the one hand, and the more established parties of the mainstream conservative or centre-right on the other, particularly in Southern France where there has been traditionally some ideological convergence and organizational "porosity" (Blöss et al., 1999), which can be regarded as key explanatory factors of the flirtation by a number of local leaders of the RPR and UDF with their FN counterparts as early as 1986.

At local level, the ideological promiscuity of the mainstream right with the *Front national* has been historically maintained by the close links that were built through a number of interconnected groups which served as bridging organizations and formed a locus for political networking at local level. Throughout the late 1960s and 1970s, the particularly strong anti-Gaullist element brought together former OAS and Tixier-Vignancourt supporters with members of the *Républicains Indépendants* (Rémond, 2005) among whom were found some of the instigators of future political cooperation with the far right such as Jean-Claude Gaudin, Jacques Blanc, Jacques Médecin, Jacques Peyrat, Charles Baur, Charles Millon, Bernard Harang or Jean-Marie Le Chevallier. In 1998, for instance, Millon's strategic attempt at creating a new political party benefited from the organizational support by the CNI. In the 1980s, Philippe Malaud and Yvon Briant's CNI continued to play this role of establishing contacts between the extreme and mainstream right camps and accommodating former far right activists such as Alain Robert, founding member of *Ordre Nouveau* in 1969, or Jean-François Touzé (FN). This role has since been taken upon by Philippe de Villiers' MPF and, until 1999, by now marginalized Pasqua's RPF, in an attempt at attracting defectors from the FN. In Mediterranean France, more especially, the ideological connection was significantly reinforced by the sociological element inherent in the large community of French *pieds-noirs* repatriated from Algeria following the country's independence in 1962, whom for the vast majority settled in the Southern

regions (Delpard, 2002; Verdès-Leroux, 2001) and whose influence on the FN-right linkage would later be manifest in specific areas like Marignane or Toulon for instance. In 1998, the PS-PC alliance within the *Gauche Plurielle* cartel revived also traditional hostility towards the communist party amongst some of the mainstream right regional leaders: as expressed then by Michel Poniatowski: "it is worse to be taken hostage by the communists rather than the *Front national*" (*Libération*, 20 March 1998). Such ideological justification of FN-right agreements at local level was for instance brought in as a key motive for colluding with the extreme right in Picardie where the left was supporting a PC candidate to regional council presidency.

Lastly, the "variable geometry" in patterns of cooperation with the extreme right at national and sub-national level is illustrative of the traditional organizational weakness of political parties in France (Avril, 1995; Huard, 1996; Knapp, 2003) and the crucial contribution by local notables in structuring political competition, particularly at the centre-right of the political spectrum (Colliard, 1971; Platone, 2003). In 1998, the decision by local leaders of the UDF to rely tactically on the support from the FN to achieve regional council majorities, in overt opposition with both the RPR and UDF apparatus, was partly an act of rebellion against the centralized hierarchical structure of the parties and the Jacobin top-down approach by national party leaderships. It was also a clear indication of the predominance of political individualism, inter-personal relationships and long established contacts by the regional notables of the mainstream right with their FN counterparts whose sociological profile, personal history and former political attachments were in many cases very similar to those of the parliamentary right. All the above elements were already plainly put forward by a local UDF leader in Marseille in the early 1990s as an attempt to justify past and future accommodation of the FN: "We will not let our friends from Paris come down here to bother us. There has been enough quibbling. This problem is a pain for everybody [*sic*] and we are not happy about making such deals. But the FN representatives are people we have always mixed with and with whom we have talks that we often do not have with the Socialists", he said (*Le Monde*, 6 June 1990). To quote here Marie-Thérèse Allain, UDF representative on the regional council in Centre in 1998: "we knew those FN guys, who were said to be fascists and Nazis, for two regional legislatures. When the time came to meet them, we did not see what the problem was" (*Le Monde*, 9 June 1998).

2.   The *Front national* in municipal office: models of local governance on the far right

The picture that emerges from the above analysis of the FN's confinement at the extreme margins of the national party system since the early 1990s together with the party's more recent loss of coalition potential at regional level in 2004, is undoubtedly one of political isolation. As was suggested earlier, this has also contributed in return to reinforce the self-positioning by Le Pen's party at the periphery of the system in order to exploit all political resources available from electoral populism, anti-partyism and the promotion of anti-establishment attitudes. If we are to address the issue of the FN's relationship with power, this first part of the study ought to be complemented with an evaluation of the party's performances and models of governance in municipal office following its success in securing a majority in four city councils of Southern France

in 1995 (Toulon, Marignane and Orange) and 1997 (Vitrolles). In this, we suggest a characterization of two divergent models of local governance, whilst pointing at the many similarities in the significant impact of the traditional far right *Weltanschauung* and development of political patronage on the process of agenda setting and the implementation of social, cultural and economic policies across the four localities under FN administration.

A.   *"Pragmatic" vs. "ideological" municipal governance*

To a large extent, the line of division between local notables and party leaders, which was identified with respect to the diverging strategies of the mainstream right *vis-à-vis* the FN at national and sub-national levels, is echoed by the cleavage that emerged within the *Front national* following its accession to municipal power in the mid-1990s. Looking at the models of local governance implemented by the FN Mayors, there is some evidence of two conflicting types of "pragmatic" versus "ideological" municipal management. In relation to the above considerations regarding the *Front national's* increasing propensity from 1995 onward to promote its own image as a third distinctive bloc in French politics, and thereby a possible challenger to all established actors of the left and the right, the unprecedented experience of holding municipal power was obviously considered by Le Pen's party an opportunity to prove itself a credible and legitimate alternative to the RPR/UDF cartel.

This notion of a locus for almost experimentally implementing some of the key measures of the FN political agenda, and therefore establishing the viability and applicability of the far right's programme at national level, was central to the style of local governance developed in Toulon and even more visibly in Vitrolles. In the latter especially, it was clear that some of the most controversial measures by the ruling Mégret municipal administration at local level were given particular emphasis in order to attract as much publicity as possible, thereby serving the party's strategy of differentiation at national level. Hence for instance some of the contentious interviews by Catherine Mégret with regards to the implementation of the FN's most cherished "national preference" discriminatory scheme or her unconditional supporting of Le Pen's highly controversial statement on "fundamental racial inequalities" (*Berliner Zeitung*, 24 February 1997). Interestingly enough, this promotion of a highly ideological municipal agenda was found in the two FN cities where the actual leaders did not originate in the local political circles but instead had been tactically brought in from national party apparatus in 1988.

At variance with the programmatic goals set by Le Pen, the model of governance in Marignane and Orange was rather one of political pragmatism by regional figures of the far right (Viard, 1996), whose main aim was to focus on their personal entrenchment at municipal level and avoid the amount of media attraction that their counterparts received in Vitrolles and Toulon. Not only this "low-profile" approach proved more successful electorally – as was subsequently demonstrated by both Simonpieri and Bompard's hardly contestable success in the 2001 municipal elections contrary to the blatant failure in Toulon in 2001 and Vitrolles in the 2002 by-election –, but it also fits precisely with the general proximity pattern mentioned earlier. The "apolitical management" claimed by Simonpieri and Bompard later allowed its two

proponents to move away from their original far right camp and join forces with the UMP and Villiers' MPF respectively. In 2004-05, the bitter dispute that opposed Bompard to Le Pen, which led eventually to the former being expelled from the *Front national*, revealed also that Bompard opting for pragmatic governance in 1995 formed part of a broader political strategy whose priority was to consolidate the party at local level rather than pursuing what was considered a "pointless" presidential ambition, be it with Le Pen's populist charisma and voluminous media coverage.

The incapacity by the FN to incorporate those antagonist albeit not irreconcilable views showed the strong constraints imposed on the party's development at local level by the hierarchical and centralized structure of leadership. It was also an indication of the high level of intra-party factionalism which is a recurrent feature on the extreme right. The impact of political rivalries between discordant groups of actors within the FN was for instance exhibited in the opposition that arose at local level between Mayor Jean-Marie Le Chevallier and Eliane Guillet De La Brosse, an influential figure of the extreme right in Toulon (Martin, 1996; Samson, 1997). In 1999, the national dispute between Le Pen and Mégret over party leadership led to similar patterns of conflict between the major groups of power-holders at municipal level, with the MNR securing temporarily the city councils of Marignane and Vitrolles, and the FN maintaining its control over Orange. In Toulon, the municipal far right majority broke up into no less than four rival factions leading eventually to a severe electoral setback in the 2001 election despite the tactical alliance between the local MNR representatives and Le Chevallier's *Toulon d'Abord* list in order to prevent the concurrent FN list to move forward to the second round. Similarly, the imbroglio and adverse ramifications that arose from the XIIth party congress in Nice in April 2003, which opposed Marine Le Pen to a troika of party notables led by Bompard, Bernard Antony and Marie-France Stirbois, pointed to a significant shift in the internal factional balance of the FN and increasing discord over political strategy and the sensitive issue of post-Le Pen leadership in a highly divided party.

B.   *Ideological constraints and the local conservative agenda*

Mostly a divergence on the political opportunity for linking municipal governance with the national party strategy of fierce anti-system opposition to all mainstream actors, the above dichotomy should not be taken to mean however that there were significant differences in the actual orientation of policy-making at local level. Across all four city councils, the priorities of the FN administration were very similar, with a strong emphasis on immigration, law and order, local tax cuts, and conservative social and cultural policies. Whereas the first three elements form part of the well-publicized far right post-industrial political agenda and are key issues that recurrently are amongst the most important motives of voting for Le Pen's party in national elections, the social-authoritarian component of the FN's model of municipal governance can be considered an expression of the more traditional national-conservative element in party ideology, which was inherited from the post-Vichyst national revolution and brought to the Front national notably by the Catholic counter-revolutionary fringe of the French extreme right joining forces with Le Pen in the mid-1980s.

By the early 1990s, the focus on "culture" became an integral part of the political strategy by the FN. With a rather dubious appeal to Gramsci and a much clearer reference to the primacy of culture and values in the ideology of the new right (GRECE), the 300 Measures for France's Revival (1993) called for the FN to influence the political debate by promoting traditional cultural values against the established "intelligentsia" and "intellectual terrorism" by the left. As was then formalized by Pierre Vial or Mégret, there was an immediate threat to traditional values of social cohesion and harmony embodied in the so-called "Rap-Tag-Lang" alternative left-wing libertarianism, which commanded to "wage a war on the degeneration of art and culture" (*Le Monde*, 6 February 1992). These themes were further emphasized in the party's summer university of La Grande-Motte in August 1996, whose main focus was on "culture and politics". At local level, the policy impact of the FN's conservative rejection of modernity was manifest in the systematic attacks on popular art festivals (e.g. Châteauvallon in Toulon or the *Chorégies* in Orange), leading anti-racist organisations and youth cultural associations through drastic financial cuts in city council subsidies. The bitter controversy over the *Sous-Marin* café in Vitrolles, and ultimately its forcible relocation in the neighbouring city of Gardanne, together with the closing of the *Lumières* cinema on the account of its showing of "unwanted" short-films on HIV/AIDS or Bompard and Simonpieri's policy of systematically excluding so-called "cosmopolitarian" books from public libraries in Orange and Marignane, were among many examples of the FN's municipal politics of "cultural restoration" inspired by social authoritarianism and sustained by the longstanding conspiracy theory on the far right [2]. It must be noted here that this political struggle against the alleged contemporary "cultural diktat" of the left was reproduced in some of the regions where the FN obtained a right to vote on regional council subsidies by allying with the mainstream right in 1998. In Languedoc-Roussillon, for instance, the FN imposed severe cuts in the monies allocated to a number of cultural associations such as the *Théâtre des Treize Vents*, the *Centre chorégraphique de Montpellier*, the *Festival de Danse de Montpellier* or the *Festival de Cinéma Méditerranéen*. Similarly, in Rhône-Alpes, Pierre Vial, the FN regional Vice-President for Culture, led the council majority into reducing significantly the amount of financial support to a number of art and cultural events such as the Biennial Festival of Dance and that of Modern Art.

In the municipalities, the neo-conservative crusade was accompanied with a number of covert discriminatory practices and the imposition of economic sanctions directed at politically undesirable left-wing political supporters or trade union members among municipal council staff. One tangible and particularly dramatic effect of this witch-hunt was to force a number of people into resigning from their positions within the local administration while others were wrongfully dismissed for alleged reasons of budgetary discipline. Moreover, the very conception by the FN of social policies was placed under the yoke of the far right vision of the world and the party's inability to conceive some of the most salient issues inherent in the transformation of contemporary French society (Martin et al., 1999). Aimed predominantly at the traditional clientele of the extreme right – namely the conservative petty-bourgeoisie –, the social policies by the FN municipal administrations proved highly inefficient in addressing a number of issues ranging from social deprivation, youth and ethnic minorities, abortion, drug

abuse, the prevention of HIV/AIDS or the development of single-parent families, which all fell outside the traditional community as defined by the extreme right. In that, the policy goals of the local FN echoed those of the national party's strategy of spreading ideological influence and disseminating FN publicity within the whole community by establishing a number of flanking organisations (Ivaldi, 1998). Despite ambitious claims of a nationwide network of pro-FN organisations, the target for actual political lobbying was restricted to the social groups which are traditionally most susceptible to extreme right appeal (i.e. veterans, repatriates, the military, police officers, small business owners and traders, shopkeepers). By contrast, the strong emphasis on law and order enforcement, the shift towards more repressive policies, and the significant increase in the municipal police workforce were regarded as the most appropriate responses to all forms of deviance considered prejudicial to the social order.

To some extent, this ideological rigidity was exemplified by the FN undertaking to implement locally the "national preference" social protection scheme contrary to all the country's anti-discrimination laws since 1972, the provisions of the Criminal Code and all basic equality principles underpinning the Human Rights Preamble of the French Constitution. Despite the many claims by Le Pen of a widespread use of the principle across all FN municipalities, there were only very few attempts at infringing overtly the existing legislation on ethnic discrimination. One example was the creation by the Vitrolles city council in January 1998 of a child-allowance to which only the French or citizens of other EU-Member States were entitled. In examining the conditions of eligibility for this special allowance, the Aix-en-Provence Court later ruled that they were against the fundamental principle of equal rights, and gave Catherine Mégret and Deputy-Mayor Hubert Fayard a three-month suspended prison sentence, together with 2 years of ineligibility for public office and a fine of about 15,000 euros. Elsewhere there was a clear tendency for the far right Mayors to opt for more hidden discriminatory practices based upon political patronage at local level, as was the case in Toulon with the priority given to *Moccos* (i.e. people born-and-bred in Toulon) or in Orange with Bompard's concept of "*préférence orangeoise*" (Martin, 1998).

C.   *The development of political patronage*

As indicated above, the social policy goals of the FN municipal administrations and the local management of collective resources diverged significantly from the party strategy of electoral mobilization at national level. Whereas the latter incorporated an unambiguous national-protectionist appeal to the working class in order to meet the expectations of the growing proportion of blue-collar voters amongst the FN electorate by the mid-1990s, the local politics of the far right focused almost exclusively on the traditional petty-bourgeois constituency of the party. This attempt to reinforce existing electoral loyalties by political patronage, as a means of enhancing future re-election opportunities for the incumbent municipal executive, was clear in the management of city council subsidies to local charities and the targeted re-allocation of municipal funds and facilities to FN flanking organisations such as *Fraternité Française* (FF) or the *Front Anti-Chômage* (FAC) at the expenses of long established associations tackling poverty and social exclusion such as the *Secours Populaire* or

the *Restaurants du Cœur*, as well as a number of local humanitarian initiatives e.g. the Oustao charity in the socially deprived area of L'Aygues in Orange, the Kiffa association in Vitrolles or *Les Amis de Jéricho* in Toulon [3].

This building up of an electoral clientele by distributing city council largesse and delivering social benefits conform to the interests of the FN core electorate was in many cases accompanied with political corruption, municipal nepotism, and the absence of budgetary control and financial management expertise, which were pointers to the profound deficit of the far right in the actual experience of assuming power and holding executive office (Ferri & Turc, 1996). Across all four FN municipalities, political favouritism took the form of rewarding party members and supporters by the construction of a municipal bureaucracy in which a number of appointments were based on partisan patronage rather than professional competence. Although of a limited magnitude, party nepotism at local level was manifest in the job opportunities offered to family members and personal friends of the FN mayors, together with side payments paid out of collective resources (e.g. mobile phones, post and telephone bills, campaigning costs, etc.). Of the many occurrences of financial embezzlement at local level, the collapse of Le Chevallier's attempt at creating and developing the *Jeunesse Toulonnaise* youth recreational centre in Toulon, or the sharp criticism contained in the report on the Vitrolles administration by the Regional Audit Office, provided strong evidence of recurrent malpractices in general municipal management by the FN.

3. Conclusion

The characterization of the FN's attitude *vis-à-vis* power since its first electoral successes in the mid-1980s is one of ambivalence and hesitancy which are testament to the profound anti-system element underpinning the political culture of Le Pen's party. Notwithstanding the many institutional, ideological and political aspects that were discussed in this chapter, and which all help account for the increasing isolation of the Front national at the extreme right margin of the French party system, we should stress here the role played by personality factors and the fact that the holding of national government never was envisaged in concrete terms by the FN. This is particularly true of the party leader's individual history and five-decade record of political struggle within the extreme right camp since his participation in the Poujadist movement in the mid-1950s. Despite the constant rhetoric of the FN eventually coming to national power, Le Pen's experience of moving forward to the second round of the 2002 presidential ballot revealed his being far more at ease with the traditional anti-establishment repertoire rather than taking the clothes of a governing party leader.

Together with such personal inability by Le Pen to move away from his longstanding status of opponent in French first-order politics and the more general vulnerability of right-wing populist parties to the salience of the economic dimension (Ivarsflaten, 2005), the continuation by the UMP of the dual strategy of political rejection and ideological re-appropriation of immigration and law-and-order issues casts doubt on future electoral prospects for the extreme right in France. It is also unsure whether the FN will be in a position to impact significantly on the reshaping of the party system in the forthcoming electoral sequence of 2007 despite the favourable

conditions that might arise from probable party fragmentation in the first round of the presidential election. Nor is it clear whether the party will manage to survive the post-Le Pen era and reconcile the many factions and personal agendas that were kept silent over the years by Le Pen's undisputed authority at the top of the Front national.

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Notes

[1] In the 1986 regional contest, the RPR/UDF cartel called for the support from the far right to achieve an overall majority in 7 out of the 22 regional councils. In return, Le Pen's party was entrusted with executive vice-presidencies in four of the above regions. In 1988, the FN and the mainstream right agreed on reciprocal withdrawal procedures in the legislative election in the Marseille municipal constituencies, whereby eight of the extreme right representatives were able to stand alone in opposing the left in the second round, and the FN stepped down from 6 constituencies in the Bouches-du-Rhône department and a total of another 10 constituencies in the whole of the PACA region.

[2] As a matter of interest, the renaming of Vitrolles' Jean-Marie Tjibaou avenue (in the name of former Kanak independence leader in French New-Caledonia) into Jean-Pierre Stirbois (former FN Secretary General) bore testimony to the symbolic importance given by the FN to re-establishing the traditional social order and making its own mark at local level.

[3] The FAC was founded within the FN by Noël Lantz et Jacques Deschanel as early as 1987 but remained marginal to the party's strategy of spreading its electoral influence through peripheral organizations. In February 1994, the FAC merged with the newly formed *Association de recherche pour l'emploi des jeunes* (ARPEJ) under the auspices of the FNJ leader, Samuel Maréchal. FF was founded in 1988 by Pierre Vial et Jean-Pierre Stirbois, and has since been chaired by Mireille d'Ornano, head of the FN list in Hautes-Alpes in the 2004 regional elections.