In a book about the changing landscape of French politics since the 1970s, no party presses its case for consideration more forcefully than the Front National (FN). Between the National Assembly elections of 1973, which the FN was founded to contest in the name of a unified French nationalist right, and the most recent corresponding elections of 2012, the party increased its national vote share from 0.5 per cent (fewer than 125,000 votes) to 13.6 per cent (over 3.5 million votes). Between the same two elections, by contrast, the once powerful French Communist Party (PCF) saw its vote share collapse from 21.4 per cent in 1973 to a mere portion of the 6.9 per cent polled collectively in 2012 by the far-left alliance, the Front de Gauche (FG). Measured by performance in presidential elections over the same period, the growth of support for the FN is even more spectacular: from 0.7 per cent (fewer than 200,000 votes) in 1974 to 17.9 per cent (over 6.4 million votes) in 2012.¹

Located close to the perimeters of the FN’s lifespan, these elections frame some of the most profound changes in French politics under the Fifth Republic. The long-term rise of the FN and the decline of the PCF are part of a wider picture of change that has seen the ever disunited centre-right combine forces (mostly) in the Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (UMP) while the
Socialist Party (PS) has come to exert an unrivalled domination on the left. With the PS (29.3 per cent), the UMP (27.1 per cent) and the FN (13.6 per cent) accounting for fully 70 per cent of the vote in the 2012 National Assembly elections, and with no other party exceeding the 6.9 per cent of the Front de Gauche, the contours of France’s political map seem defined today by a clear tripartite structure of centre-left, centre-right and far-right blocs. This three-way concentration of voting was even more pronounced in the 2012 presidential election, where almost three out of four first-round votes (just under 74 per cent) went to the Socialist (28.6 per cent), UMP (27.2 per cent) and FN (17.9 per cent) candidates, leaving barely a quarter of the entire ballot to be shared among the remaining seven contenders.

Yet this apparently simple ‘tripolarisation’ masks complexities in relation to the FN’s current positioning within French political space. In light of the defining structural tensions in post-war French politics between fragmentation and bipolarisation, this chapter examines the role of the FN within the French party system today. It seeks to provide some historical context for understanding the current strength of the FN and how this fits within the evolution of party competition in France over recent decades. It discusses the FN as a force for both fragmentation and bipolarisation, considering the positioning and repositioning of other parties vis-à-vis the FN; and it shows the FN to be a party whose reserves of support lie not only on the right but also on the left. The chapter concludes by assessing the prospects opened by the switch from a strategy of systematic opposition under Jean-Marie Le Pen to one of systemic integration under Marine Le Pen.

**Fragmentation and bipolarisation in contemporary French politics**

For party system analysts, France’s political landscape offers a rich and varied topography stretching back to the restoration of democracy following the Vichy regime of the Occupation years. Under the Fourth Republic (1946–58), the most marked feature of the French party system was its fragmentation, with electoral support dispersed across an array of old and new parties competing for power in a National Assembly elected by proportional representation. Geographical specificities, socio-economic cleavages, sectoral interests and divergent policy agendas made for unstable and short-lived coalitions, shifting party alliances, and an average government life expectancy of some six months. Under the Fifth Republic (since 1958), this tendency to fragmentation has been constrained by the powerful countervailing force of a two-ballot majority voting system that exerts a polarising pull towards broad coalitions of right and left.

These polarising constraints have not resulted in any lessening of inter-party competition. French voters continue to select from a wide range of
parties, and those parties compete not just for the grand prize of the presidency but also for 577 seats in the National Assembly and 348 in the Senate, 1,880 seats in regional councils, 4,052 seats in departmental councils, 74 seats for France in the European Parliament, and no fewer than 519,417 seats on municipal councils. Competition at all of these electoral levels, however, is tempered by the imperative to preserve tactical alliances, observing what the Socialist and Communist parties have long called ‘la discipline républicaine’, most evident in second-ballot withdrawal agreements. The resulting ‘bipolar multipartism’ has ensured that, whatever the proliferation of parties and candidates contesting elections, every government under the Fifth Republic (except for the transitional administration of 1958–62) has been supported by an effectively sound parliamentary majority or coalition of right or left. This prevalence of polarisation over fragmentation has given Fifth Republic politics their structural logic.

The classic expression of this polarisation is a presidential election by universal suffrage where only two candidates can advance to the run-off, each dependent for election on mustering the larger presidential coalition; but the same polarising pull has been a structuring force in all arenas of political competition. It has also led recently to what some analysts have identified as a shift from multiparty to bipartisan polarisation, or the beginnings in France of a predominantly two-party system on the Anglo-Saxon model. Other analysts see pluralist fragmentation as a defining feature still of the French party system, a fragmentation that continues to be artificially masked by institutional curbs and strategic imperatives.

The respective performances of the PCF and the Gaullist Union pour la Nouvelle République (UNR) in 1958 laid bare the mechanics of electoral competition under the Fifth Republic. Having won over a quarter of the vote and over a quarter of National Assembly seats (145) in 1956 under the proportional system of the Fourth Republic, the PCF saw its 18.9 per cent of first-round votes in 1958 translated into just over 2 per cent of seats (10) on the second round. The most powerful party of 1956 was thus reduced to the weakest in 1958 by a two-ballot voting system that nullified a party as strong as the PCF if it could not reach out to wider support through tactical alliances for the crucial run-off ballot. The Gaullist UNR, with a smaller share of the first-round vote (18 per cent), drew sufficient support from conservative, centre-right and even centre-left voters in the second round to win some 40 per cent of the seats (188).

This inauguration of the new electoral rules in 1958 and the early dominance enjoyed by the UNR would compel other parties to reassess their political alliances and to seek wider reserves of second-preference support. This would result in the re-mapping of the political landscape into what Maurice Duverger would call a ‘bipolar quartet’, a configuration that was to find its most balanced expression in the National Assembly elections of 1978 when the PS, the PCF, the neo-Gaullist Rassemblement pour la République (RPR), and the smaller centre-right parties in and around the Union pour la
Démocratie Française (UDF) each attracted 20–25 per cent of the ballot, accounting between them for close to 90 per cent of the entire vote. Though the neat symmetry of the 1978 election was to be the exception rather than the rule, the power balance between the opposing left–right coalitions was broadly maintained in the 1980s and 1990s, with a strengthened PS compensating for its declining Communist partner and with the RPR competing with its UDF ally for supremacy on the right. As Pascal Perrineau reminds us in the previous chapter, Jean-Marie Le Pen’s qualification for the second round of the presidential election in 2002 put an end to the comfortable assumption that such run-offs were the preserve of centre-right and centre-left. It did not, however, alter the power balance between the dominant forces of French politics. In the subsequent National Assembly elections of 2002, the newly formed centre-right UMP was returned with an emphatic majority – a majority it would retain in 2007 in defiance of a pattern that had seen governing majorities swing from right to left and back again at all National Assembly elections since the victory of the right in 1978: 1981 (left), 1986 (right), 1988 (left), 1993 (right), 1997 (left) and 2002 (right).

This period saw the normalising not only of left–right alternation in government but also of power sharing, with three spells of left–right ‘cohabitation’ (1986–8, 1993–5, 1997–2002) tightening the hold over power exercised by the ‘parties of government’. The same period witnessed the emergence of new political forces (far-right, far-left, green and other) as challengers and/or auxiliaries to the established blocs of right and left. Despite what seemed to be a trend of growing multipartism and increasing fragmentation through the 1990s and early 2000s, the 2007 presidential and National Assembly elections gave all the appearance of a strongly bipolarised system structured not around four main parties now but around two, with the PS consolidating its dominance on the left and the UMP on the centre-right. In the 2007 elections to the National Assembly, the UMP and PS between them won almost 65 per cent of the vote in the first round and almost 90 per cent in the second, securing 499 of the 577 seats and leaving the UMP on an absolute majority with 313. These elections seemed to mark the end of a period of bipolarised multipartism and the beginnings in France of a two-party system in which both UMP and PS had passed a point of critical dominance on right and left respectively.

The Front National within the French party system

Throughout the early electoral history of the Fifth Republic, institutional constraints and the dynamics of the party system effectively barred entry to non-mainstream parties wishing to impose themselves as new and independent players. The founding rationale of the Fifth Republic had been to concentrate power and to exclude outsider parties (like the Poujadists
under the Fourth Republic) that might constitute a threat to the political order. Within a presidency-oriented political culture where parties now acted primarily as presidential support groups, the breakthrough of a serious new challenger party looked a remote prospect. The National Assembly elections of 1978 were, we have seen, monopolised by the ‘big four’ political forces of the PCF, PS, RPR and UDF, each of which would field its heavyweight champion for the presidency in 1981 (the four garnering between them over 87 per cent of the vote in a field of ten contenders).

Within this closed party system, there was no non-Communist far-left alternative of any note, nor any electorally significant environmental party, and no far-right party with even the faintest electoral prospect. In his study of political parties in France in the 1970s, François Borella described far-right and far-left movements alike as mere ‘spectators’ and ‘occasional agitators’ on the outer margins of an inaccessibly bipolarised system. In the National Assembly elections of 1981, non-Communist far-left movements mustered 1.4 per cent of the vote, ecologists 1 per cent, and the combined forces of the far-right 0.4 per cent, with less than 0.2 per cent going to the Front National of Jean-Marie Le Pen, who could not secure sufficient support from elected sponsors to stand in the presidential election. In 1981 as in 1978, therefore, the parties of the ‘bipolar quartet’ occupied the political terrain to the near exclusion of all others. Their combined scores in the National Assembly elections of 1981 came to over 92 per cent, higher even than in 1978. Adding the moderate ‘divers droite’ and ‘divers gauche’ scores plus that of the Socialists’ long-time centre-left allies, the Left Radicals, brought the figure to over 97 per cent, leaving less than 3 per cent for protest, anti-system, single-issue or other parties.

This four-way monopoly of electoral support was not to last. From the mid-1980s, the emergence of new challengers on right and left, combined with the decline of the PCF, tested the solidity of the established party system. Of the new political players emerging in this period, the FN was by far the most significant and the most durable. While various configurations of greens and fringe movements such as Chasse, Pêche, Nature et Traditions (CPNT) or the sovereignist Rassemblement pour la France (RPF) recorded isolated successes in regional, European or National Assembly elections, the FN established itself as a tenacious challenger at every point in the electoral cycle, for vote share if not for actual seats. Following its breakthrough in the European elections of 1984, the FN went on to attain average first-round scores of over 10 per cent in seven National Assembly elections (1986–2012) and of 15 per cent in five presidential elections (1988–2012).

Although Tables 2.1 and 2.2 chart an electoral challenge sustained over a quarter-century, the influence of the FN within the French party system has not been constant throughout that period. It can be divided into four phases: electoral consolidation despite continued marginality (1986–1994), increasing electoral impact (1995–8), decline (1999–2009), and reinvigoration (since 2010).
From 1986 to 1994, the FN consolidated its electoral presence and raised its capacity to threaten the political balance, but without any decisive influence on election outcomes (despite winning 35 seats in the National Assembly under an exceptional department-list proportional system in 1986). This changed in 1995, when Jacques Chirac owed his presidential victory against the Socialist Lionel Jospin to vote transfers from Jean-Marie Le Pen (with an estimated 2.3 million first-round Le Pen voters ensuring Chirac’s 1.6 million margin of victory in the run-off). This was the first occasion when FN voters brought a decisive, if indirect, impact to bear in a national election, an impact that would be repeated in subsequent presidential elections. In 2002, Le Pen’s ousting of Jospin and qualification for the run-off assured Chirac’s landslide re-election in a contest the incumbent had been uncertain to win against his Socialist challenger. In 2007, Nicolas Sarkozy’s strong appeal to Le Pen supporters in the first round, together with an estimated 2.5 million vote transfers for the second round, provided his margin of victory (2.2 million votes) against the Socialist Ségolène Royal; and, conversely, Sarkozy’s inability in 2012 to rally enough Marine Le Pen voters for the second round consigned him to defeat.

A clear impact on election outcomes was also exerted in the municipal elections of 1995, the National Assembly elections of 1997 and the regional elections of 1998.
elections of 1998. In the 1995 municipal elections, the FN won control of the towns of Toulon, Orange and Marignane in the southern Provence–Alpes–Côte d’Azur region, adding Vitrolles in a by-election in 1997. In the National Assembly elections of 1997, 76 three-way run-offs in legislative constituencies contested by FN candidates split the vote on the right and helped secure 47 seats for the left and the defeat of a number of prominent centre-right candidates. The FN could not claim here to have been the determining factor in the left’s 63-seat majority, but it did play a highly influential role. Even in the 445 constituencies where it did not contest the second round, the FN had an influence on some results through the votes cast by its supporters (with an estimated 50 per cent transferring to the RPR–UDF, 21 per cent voting for PS candidates, and 29 per cent abstaining or spoiling their ballot).

In the regional elections of 1998, the FN emerged with 15 per cent and 275 regional councillors as almost the strongest party on the right (ahead of the UDF with 262 councillors and close behind the RPR with 285). In four of France’s 22 metropolitan regions (Bourgogne, Languedoc-Roussillon, Picardie, Rhône-Alpes), local centre-right leaders secured governing majorities with the tacit or overt support of FN regional councillors. These elections allowed the FN to increase not just its tactical bargaining power but also its regional administrative role and clientelist influence.

This period of 1995–1998 marked a high point in the pressure exerted by the FN on the RPR and UDF. It gave rise to intense discussions on both sides about the strategic sense of continuing to resist an alliance and thereby splitting the vote on the right. The dilemma was resolved only by the scission of the FN in January 1999 and the departure of much of the party’s administrative and elected personnel with former deputy leader Bruno Mégret, who had been more favourable to a deal with the centre-right than the old guard faithful to Jean-Marie Le Pen and wedded to a posture of continued anti-system populism. This damaging split weakened the party and saw membership fall by around half from a peak of some 50,000 in the 1990s. It seemed to presage the end of the FN as a major force in French politics, ushering in a period of declining electoral performance and influence between 1999 and 2009.

Despite Jean-Marie Le Pen’s election to the presidential run-off in 2002 and a record score for the FN in the regional elections of 2004, this period saw a sequence of electoral results at different levels (European 1999, 2004, 2009; presidential 2007; legislative 2007; municipal 2008) that returned the FN to levels not seen since the party’s breakthrough in the mid-1980s, depriving it of the bargaining power that had so imposed upon elements of the centre-right in the 1998 regional elections. The score of 4.3 per cent in the 2007 National Assembly elections was the FN’s poorest since 1981, cutting its annual state funding from 4.6 to 1.8 million euros and landing the party with a bill for the campaign costs of 361 candidates who had failed to win state reimbursement by securing at least 5 per cent of the vote. In the municipal elections of March 2008, the party would plumb further depths, falling below 1 per cent in its national average. The FN
seemed a party that had run short of ideas, was facing financial ruin, and whose electoral dynamism was approaching exhaustion.

The fourth phase, that of strong electoral recovery, can be synchronised with Marine Le Pen’s emergence as prospective then confirmed successor to her father as FN leader in 2010–11. A partial electoral recovery in the regional elections of March 2010 (11.4 per cent) and an unprecedented score in the first round of cantonal elections in March 2011 (15 per cent) set the party on track for its record result in the 2012 presidential election and near-record performance in the National Assembly elections that followed. Electorally reinvigorated, it also began to recover financially, seeing its annual state funding rise now to 6 million euros on the strength of its 13.6 per cent share of the ballot and the election of two parliamentary deputies in 2012.

The Front National: A force for fragmentation or bipolarisation?

This brief overview of the FN’s fluctuating fortunes raises the question of its role as a disruptive element within the bipolarising logic that has so defined Fifth Republic politics. The FN was formed in 1972 to be a fragmenting force upon the Republic, a ‘receptacle of all discontent’ working to ‘bring down the regime’. Although it affected a posture of democratic engagement, it was an anti-system party within the Sartorian definition: its founding mission was to subvert the Gaullist Republic with its hated institutions, defining values and dominant political forces of right and left. In keeping with that mission, the FN’s electoral appeal has been based on popular disaffection with the mainstream parties, ‘la bande des quatre (the gang of four)’ in Jean-Marie Le Pen’s favoured phrase, the ‘UMPS’ in Marine Le Pen’s updated formulation. With their message of ‘Tous pareils, tous pourris (They’re all the same, all rotten)’, they have sought to chip away at the political legitimacy enjoyed by the mainstream parties and to open a space for the FN large enough to change the dynamics of electoral competition.

We saw in Pascal Perrineau’s opening chapter that the wider resonances of this anti-system message have been felt in many ways, but the FN has been the most potent force for disruption within the French party system. This disruptive capacity was dramatically shown in the 2002 presidential election. Although Jean-Marie Le Pen’s shock election to the run-off at the expense of outgoing Socialist Prime Minister Jospin was part of a much wider picture of fragmentation in that election (with record vote dispersal across candidates, record abstention for a presidential election, record anti-system voting), it stands as the event which marks a rupture in the electoral norms of the Fifth Republic.

Yet the real significance of the FN since its emergence as an electoral challenger in the 1980s has not been as a fragmenting force but rather,
perversely, as a force for consolidating the very bipolarism it sought to end. Already in the 1988 National Assembly elections, the concern of the RPR and UDF to close ranks not only against the left but also against an FN that had almost deprived them of their slender majority in 1986 was evident in their decision to present single joint candidates in the name of an Union du Rassemblement et du Centre (URC). The same tactical solidarity of the RPR–UDF, reconfigured as the Union pour la France (UPF), ensured the centre-right a sweeping victory in the National Assembly elections of 1993. This gave the FN its campaign focus for the subsequent elections of 1997, with its objective to inflict maximal damage on the outgoing centre-right coalition, provoke the ‘implosion of the RPR–UDF bloc’ and bring about a ‘recomposition of the broad political landscape’.

The election of Le Pen to the presidential run-off in 2002 seemed to take the FN a step closer to forcing such a recomposition, yet it merely gave new impetus to the bipolarisation of French politics. If the first round showed the FN’s potential for disruption, the second round exposed the limits of its electoral capacity. The election in 2002 produced the wrong result for the FN. Le Pen had long built his hopes on eliminating the leading centre-right candidate then mobilising a broad coalition of the right against the Socialist front runner in the second round. Facing Chirac rather than Jospin removed all but the most marginal room for attracting support beyond his own core electorate. This restricted his advance between the two rounds to less than 1 per cent, some 720,000 votes, while a massive ‘Republican front’ rallied for the incumbent President. The 3 per cent (fewer than a million votes) that had separated Chirac from Le Pen in the first round swelled to a winning margin of over 64 per cent (some 20 million votes) in the second (82.2 per cent to 17.8 per cent).

In the wake of this aberrant presidential poll, the creation in 2002 of the UMP formalised the centre-right’s strategy of increased internal cooperation and continued exclusion of the FN. The formation for the first time under the Fifth Republic of a single overarching centre-right party constituted arguably the most far-reaching outcome of the FN’s impact on the French party system. No more would the first round of the presidential election be treated as a form of primary on the centre-right. The presidential elections of 2007 and 2012 would see the designated UMP candidate, Nicolas Sarkozy, neutralise competition within his own extended political family and seek to rally a unified coalition of centre-right support, with only the challenge of the non-aligned centre (in François Bayrou) recalling the previously open internecine rivalry within a nominally allied centre-right.

A restructuring impact was also exerted by the FN on the left. Chastened by the severe defeat of 1993, the parties of the left embarked on a renewed project of cooperation to compete against the greater intra-bloc cohesion of the centre-right. This would take concrete form in the government of the ‘gauche plurielle’ from 1997 to 2002. But unity through diversity is, as the left would discover, a risky strategy. Mortgaged to their observance
of pluralism, the Socialists felt the fragmenting effects in 2002 of a surplus of left-wing presidential candidates, creating the conditions for Le Pen’s elimination of Jospin. Following that débâcle, the need for tighter concertation was the driving force behind the electoral agreements between the Socialists, the Parti Radical de Gauche (PRG) and the Mouvement des Citoyens (MDC) in 2007, an approach that would be replicated and again deter the multiplication of leftist presidential candidacies in 2012.\(^\text{17}\)

From the late 1980s, therefore, the FN acted as a spur to greater cooperation and partisan discipline on the centre-right, in National Assembly and other elections if not initially in the presidential contest. Though the response on the left was less urgent, it was accelerated by the heavy defeat of 1993. The 2002 presidential election marked a decisive moment. It confirmed the imperative, as urgently now on the left as on the right, to minimise fragmentation and promote intra-bloc cooperation over intra-bloc competition, favouring the consolidation of a two-pole system structured around the dominant parties of the UMP and the PS. The reduction from 16 presidential candidates in 2002 to 12 in 2007 and 10 in 2012 partly reflected this turn towards a more concerted bipolarity. The 57 per cent won by the UMP and PS candidates in the first round in 2007 (21 million votes) and their combined 56 per cent in 2012 (20 million votes), compared with only 36 per cent for Chirac and Jospin in 2002 (10.3 million votes), seemed to confirm this renewed assertion of bipolarism over fragmentation. The subsequent elections to the National Assembly amplified this picture, with the UMP and PS taking between them almost as large a share of the 577 seats in 2012 (474: 82 per cent) as they had in 2007 (499: 86 per cent) and seeming to bear out Grunberg and Haegel’s argument for a two-bloc system centred on these hegemonic parties and their satellites.\(^\text{18}\)

Real power and virtual power

So where does the FN sit within this bipolarised political space? The question invites two quite contrary answers. In terms of political influence, the FN has imposed itself as a third competitive bloc and intensified its challenge to the two-bloc dominance of centre-right and centre-left. Far from being a marginal far-right party exerting only nuisance power, the FN has acquired in Gilles Ivaldi’s terms a ‘central place’ in French politics through its ability to set the policy agenda on certain issues and to compete for votes on both right and left of the political divide.\(^\text{19}\)

Other analyses concur with this view of the FN as a central electoral competitor and argue for an increasing ‘tripolarisation of French political life’.\(^\text{20}\) ‘We’re moving towards a landscape that is effectively tripartite,’ warned the Socialist deputy Jean-Christophe Cambadélis in summer 2013, calling on the various components of the left to unite and form ‘the strongest pole’.\(^\text{21}\) Reacting to the FN’s elimination of the Socialist-backed PCF candidate
in the cantonal by-election of Brignoles in October 2013 (an election the FN would go on to win in a run-off against the UMP), the PS first secretary Harlem Désir saw ‘a very serious warning for the left’. Division, he urged, ‘is not an option . . . In the prevailing conditions, the left must unite’.22

The same argument for unity in the face of the FN challenge ran through the vexed debates sparked by the leadership contest within the UMP in 2012 and the calls for the party to stay true to its ‘founding pact’ of bringing together diverse currents of the post-Gaullist and post-Giscardian centre-right. The FN had opened a ‘fault line’ in the UMP, warned former Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin, sounding a ‘red alert’ over the danger of the party fracturing. The UMP’s internal divisions were also, for some, a factor in its electoral defeat by the FN in Brignoles.23 Not the least of the fracture lines now running through the UMP is that between a national leadership firm in its refusal to countenance a deal with the FN and a majority of grassroots supporters who favour binding or occasional cooperation.24

All of this speaks to the political power of the FN as felt by the mainstream parties, and to its polarising effects on the party system. In terms of executive power, however, the FN has been effectively consigned to the margins. Here it is no more than a virtual force. It has failed with very few exceptions to convert its influence into representation and remains almost entirely bereft of institutional existence. For all its anti-establishment invective, it has barely made a dent in the UMP–PS duopoly and the stability of two-bloc politics as bolstered by the two-ballot majority voting system. Other factors too (the electoral calendar and reform of the voting rules for certain elections) have conspired to perpetuate the hegemony of the mainstream parties and the FN’s exclusion from ‘the system’. It exists as an increasingly potent electoral force, with its presence amplified through the media; but its lack of access to executive power at almost all levels is among the most serious obstacles to the systemic integration its leader now claims to seek.

Before considering in more detail the obstacles that impede the FN, let us first take some measure of its real, and growing, political significance. The FN emerged from the 2012 presidential and National Assembly elections stronger than ever in terms of support, having attracted a combined 10 million votes across both first ballots. Not only did Marine Le Pen, with 6.4 million votes, outdistance her father’s first-round performance in 2002 (4.8 million); she exceeded the joint scores of both Jean-Marie Le Pen and Bruno Mégret in 2002 (5.5 million) and of Jean-Marie Le Pen and Philippe de Villiers in 1995 (6 million). More remarkably, she secured more first-round votes than Jacques Chirac in any of the four presidential elections he contested between 1981 and 2002 – two of which Chirac went on to win (1995 and 2002).

Of all the candidates in the 2012 presidential election, and of all the parties in the 2012 National Assembly elections, Marine Le Pen and the FN showed the strongest upward dynamic, gaining 7.5 per cent and 9.3 per cent respectively on the corresponding elections of 2007 (see Table 2.3). Over a longer time frame, the share of the vote on the right claimed by the FN in
presidential elections has risen from 1.5 per cent in 1974, through 28.3 per cent in 1988, to 38.2 per cent in 2012 (see Table 2.4). In National Assembly elections, the FN’s share of the vote on the right has similarly risen from 0.4 per cent in 1981 through 17.6 per cent in 1986 to 28.4 per cent in 2012 (see Table 2.5). The elections of 2012 therefore represent (with the exception of 1997) a peak not just in votes cast for the FN but, more worryingly for the UMP, in the proportion of the combined right vote taken by Marine Le Pen and her party.

The map of FN support as drawn by Marine Le Pen in the first round of the 2012 presidential election had a broadly familiar look, with high points in the south-east, the north and the north-east of the country. She secured 20 per cent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2.3 Electoral ups and downs, 2007–12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Candidate (presidential elections)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ségolène Royal/François Hollande (PS)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicolas Sarkozy (UMP)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jean-Marie Le Pen/Marine Le Pen (FN)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>François Bayrou (UDF/MoDem)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Various far-left (Besancenot, Buffet, Laguiller, Bové/Mélenchon, Poutou, Arthaud)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **Party (National Assembly elections)**     | Percentage change of vote share between 2007 and 2012 (first round) |
| Parti Socialiste (PS)                       | +4.6                                                                   |
| Union pour un Movement Populaire (UMP)      | −12.4                                                                  |
| Front National (FN)                         | +9.3                                                                   |
| UDF/MoDem/Centre pour la France             | −5.8                                                                   |
| Various far-left (mainly PCF/Front de Gauche) | +0.2                                                                   |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2.4 Front National share of combined right vote in presidential elections (first round), 1974–2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Year</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Figures do not include François Bayrou with his posture of non-aligned centrism
or more of the vote in 11 of France’s 22 metropolitan regions and in 43 of the 96 departments. She won over 25 per cent in ten departments, including the south-eastern Vaucluse, where she recorded her highest score of 27 per cent, and the neighbouring Gard, where she led the poll with 25.5 per cent. Other strong scores were registered in the Provence–Alpes–Côte d’Azur and Languedoc-Roussillon regions: 24.8 per cent in the Var department, 24.2 per cent in Pyrénées-Orientales, 23.5 per cent in Alpes-Maritimes and 23.4 per cent in the Bouches-du-Rhône. An arc of departments across the north also saw scores well above Le Pen’s national average: Pas-de-Calais (25.5 per cent), Somme (23.8 per cent), Oise (25.1 per cent), Aisne (26.3 per cent) and Ardennes (24.5 per cent). Le Pen voting was strong in north-eastern departments in or adjoining the border regions of Alsace and Lorraine, with 25.8 per cent in Meuse, 24.7 per cent in Moselle, 24.2 per cent in Vosges, 23.4 per cent in Haut-Rhin, 25.3 per cent in Haute-Marne and 25.1 per cent in Haute-Saône as in Aube. In only two departments of metropolitan France (Paris and Hauts-de-Seine) did Le Pen’s score fall below 10 per cent.

Beyond these familiar geographical contours, a feature of the 2012 election was the growth of support in industrial and post-industrial areas of the north and north-east, with Le Pen competing more vigorously against the parties of the left than against the centre-right in working-class constituencies of some departments (Oise, Somme, Nord, Pas-de-Calais, Aisne, Moselle, Vosges, Haute-Saône, Bas-Rhin and Haut-Rhin). Le Pen voting was particularly high in some former left-wing municipal strongholds: as examples, in the Nord department, Bruay-sur-l’Escaut (33 per cent), Anzin (29.4 per cent), Vieux-Condé (29.4 per cent) and Douchy-les-Mines (29 per cent); or in Pas-de-Calais, Harnes (31.8 per cent), Montigny-en-Gohelle (31.8 per cent),

### TABLE 2.5 Front National share of combined right vote in National Assembly election (first or single round), 1981–2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Combined right vote (%)</th>
<th>FN share of combined right vote (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>43.1</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>54.7</td>
<td>17.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>50.3</td>
<td>19.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>56.9</td>
<td>21.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>51.5</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002*</td>
<td>52.9</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007*</td>
<td>51.1</td>
<td>8.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012*</td>
<td>47.9</td>
<td>28.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Figures do not include François Bayrou’s UDF/MoDem with its posture of non-aligned centrist
Méricourt (30.7 per cent), Oignies (29.4 per cent), Sallaunines (29.3 per cent), Liévin (29 per cent) and Bully-les-Mines (29 per cent). In Le Pen’s adopted political base of Hénin-Beaumont in the Pas-de-Calais coalfields, the FN leader came first with 35.5 per cent.

In all of these locations, and in many more, the FN emerged as the main party of opposition to the PS and PCF. Other northern towns built on the production of coal, steel and iron voted strongly for the FN leader, such as Freyming-Merlebach (33.9 per cent) and Stiring-Wendel (33 per cent) in the Moselle department and Wittelsheim (32.5 per cent) in Haut-Rhin. Such results attest to the FN’s penetration of areas where industrial recession, unemployment and economic hardship have taken a heavy toll and where, as Sylvain Crépon’s fieldwork in the Pas-de-Calais shows, the FN has replaced the PCF as the ‘voice of the people’ against élites of right and left who have failed to respond adequately to the concerns driving voter choice.

What also marked this election for the FN was the support won by Marine Le Pen in some departments of the centre and west of France, with scores of 19 per cent to 23 per cent across Eure, Eure-et-Loir, Loiret, Loir-et-Cher, Orne, Cher and Sarthe. Gains were also made further west, with scores of 12 per cent to 16 per cent in coastal departments from Calvados through Manche, Côtes d’Armor, Finistère, Morbihan and Loire-Atlantique to Vendée and Charente-Maritime. Similarly, in a number of departments in and around the Massif Central (Dordogne, Corrèze, Cantal, Lozère, Allier) the Le Pen vote made significant ground. This map of support gave evidence of some recomposition of the Le Pen vote between 2002 and 2012. In more than a fifth of metropolitan departments, support receded – by some margin at times in traditional areas of strength such as the Mediterranean littoral (−2.5 per cent in Alpes-Maritimes), Rhône-Alpes (−4.2 per cent in Haute-Savoie) and Île-de-France (−4.2 per cent in Seine-Saint-Denis). This erosion of support in areas of established FN strength combined with growth in areas with no history of strong FN voting provided some measure of Marine Le Pen’s success in ‘nationalising’ her appeal and reducing the once sharper divide between a France receptive to the FN and a France of weak FN support separated by a line running north-west to south-east.

A further aspect of Marine Le Pen’s success was the support she attracted in many rural areas. In the tiny village of Brachay in Haute-Marne, over 70 per cent of the votes cast went to Le Pen (31 of 43); in the nearby village of Flammerécourt, the figure was 55 per cent (24 of 44 votes). Though exceptionally high, these results were not unique. Some of the most arresting scores for Le Pen in this election were recorded in similarly small communes. The Haute-Marne department alone yielded further striking examples: Doulevant-le-Petit 46 per cent, Baudrecourt 44 per cent, Montreuil-sur-Blaise 44 per cent, Nomécourt 43 per cent, Fays 42 per cent – five villages with a combined electoral register of barely 400. These resounding scores from la France profonde confirmed that FN voting could no longer be adequately defined by its urban character and issues, with immigration and crime eclipsing other concerns. As a post-election IFOP study led by Jérôme Fourquet showed,
support for Le Pen was optimised in peri-urban zones located between 20 and 50 kilometres from large urban agglomerations, while her vote in some urban locations dropped below levels achieved by her father. These peri-urban zones most receptive to Le Pen are those described by the geographer Christophe Guilluy as a ‘fringe France’, the new locus of a de-urbanised working and lower-middle class exposed to the economic effects of globalisation and averse to its social and cultural implications. This is a France that combines economic hardship with limited social mobility, cultural conservatism and rising political disaffection, and where concerns over jobs, crime, immigration and Europe make fertile terrain for populism.

Alert to the potential for expanding and diversifying her electorate, Marine Le Pen made a determined effort to appeal not just to this ‘fringe France’ but to the wider rural France into which it has extended, a France ‘despised by Parisian élites’ and desolated by ‘shameful European directives’. She pledged to restore local services hit by cuts, to reduce the price of fuel, and to scrap the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) in favour of a ‘French Agricultural Policy (FAP)’. In the purest populist tradition of defending les petits against les gros, she claimed to be the voice of the ‘invisible’ and the ‘forgotten’, those at ‘the bottom of society’, the many nameless victims of open borders, globalisation and the ‘excesses of capitalism and the free market’. Nor is ‘populist’ a label Marine Le Pen rejects: ‘If populism means, as I think it does, defending the people against the élites, defending the forgotten ones against élites that are in the process of strangling them, then yes, in that case I am a populist’. Although there are echoes here of a right-wing tradition running from Maurice Barrès to Pierre Poujade, Marine Le Pen combines this posture with a left-leaning repertoire of anti-capitalism, economic redistribution and social welfare provision.

In terms of voter profile, an Ipsos poll carried out for the first round of the presidential election showed support for Le Pen at 29 per cent among blue-collar workers (higher than for any other candidate), 25 per cent among shopkeepers, artisans and small business owners, 21 per cent among low-skilled non-manual employees, and 18 per cent among unemployed voters. These findings were consonant with other polls which indicated strong support for Le Pen among the same categories, with higher levels recorded at times for blue-collar workers and unemployed voters (31 per cent and 28 per cent respectively for Cevipof, 35 per cent and 26 per cent for OpinionWay). These polls also showed a closing of the gender gap in the Le Pen vote, highest levels of support in the 25–49 age group, and a strong appeal among the most poorly educated and those with the lowest earning power.

The 2012 elections confirmed the ‘proletarisation’ of the FN electorate that has been underway since the early 1990s; they also confirmed FN voting as an expression of political choice defying neat left–right categorisation. An OpinionWay survey from April 2012 found that Le Pen drew support from across the full spectrum, with 13 per cent of Sarkozy’s 2007 electorate, 9 per cent of Bayrou’s centrist support, 4 per cent of former
Royal voters, 8 per cent of voters of the non-Socialist (mainly Trotskyist) left, and 19 per cent of those who had abstained or spoilt their ballot in 2007. The same poll found that Le Pen drew 32 per cent of those with confidence in ‘neither left nor right’ to govern the country. This political ‘polymorphism’ has become a defining feature of the FN electorate, chiming with the party’s former slogan ‘Ni droite, ni gauche – Français!’ In the run-up to the 2012 presidential election, Marine Le Pen gained more new support from the left than from the right. This partly explains the difficulty faced by Nicolas Sarkozy in seeking to attract Marine Le Pen’s voters for the second round. Estimates of first-round Le Pen voters transferring to Hollande, abstaining or spoiling their ballot in the run-off vary from 42 per cent to 56 per cent, confirming the highly composite nature of her electorate and providing a seemingly incongruous key to the Socialist candidate’s victory. Some polls estimated the transfer of votes from Le Pen to Hollande at 21 per cent, 1.3 million; but even if one retains the lower estimate of 13–14 per cent (some 850,000), their transfer not to Sarkozy but to Hollande was decisive in securing the latter’s victory margin of 1.1 million votes.

There has long been a perverse element in vote transfers from far-right candidates in presidential elections. Part of Jean-Louis Tixier-Vignancour’s ultra-nationalist support base preferred the Socialist Mitterrand to General de Gaulle in 1965, and some Le Pen supporters in subsequent elections transferred to the Socialist candidates Mitterrand, Jospin or Royal rather than to their post-Gaullist opponents, Chirac or Sarkozy. With Marine Le Pen, however, there is another explanation beyond political cynicism to explain the left-leaning tendency in part of her electorate.

In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and in a context of economic austerity, rising unemployment, falling purchasing power and widespread pessimism, the FN under Marine Le Pen has effected a strategic shift towards an economically protectionist discourse embracing state interventionism, government spending on welfare, the expansion of public services and income redistribution. These classically ‘left-wing’ economic emphases now sit alongside the social illiberalism and ethno-cultural exclusionism of the FN’s programme. A leftward shift on economic policy began tentatively in the 2002 presidential campaign then developed in 2007, but it has been given stronger expression under Marine Le Pen’s leadership since 2011. It has, as Gilles Ivaldi argues, ‘taken the FN closer to fitting the “welfare chauvinist” profile’ identified by Herbert Kitschelt as a strategy combining xenophobic authoritarianism with welfare-oriented social policies and protectionist economics. The electorate that responds to this blend of economic and social protectionism is one of economic hardship, with a large component of what is now defined as the ‘precariat class’, typically those in insecure, interim or insufficient employment living in disadvantaged communities. An IFOP poll from April 2012 showed that Marine Le Pen won the largest share of the presidential vote among those who found it very difficult to get by on their earnings (32 per cent), with Hollande a distant second (24 per cent). It also
found Le Pen voters to be almost unanimous (91 per cent) in calling for a more economically protectionist France.\textsuperscript{44}

A much more extensive sociological survey by OpinionWay in 2012 showed Marine Le Pen’s highest share of the vote (24 per cent) to be in the lowest-earning category (less than 999 euros per month) and also among social housing tenants (27 per cent). The same survey credited Le Pen with 35 per cent support among blue-collar workers, 25 per cent among low-skilled non-manual employees and 26 per cent among unemployed voters. It also found support for the FN leader at 24 per cent among voters on temporary employment contracts and at fully 38 per cent among those in interim jobs.\textsuperscript{45} Small wonder that purchasing power should have risen to feature among the top three priorities of Le Pen voters in 2012, rivalling or displacing law and order as the second most urgent priority after immigration.\textsuperscript{46}

**Opportunities and obstacles**

The foregoing discussion points to a number of important ‘opportunity structures’, which argue for their place in explanations of the FN’s enduring resilience.\textsuperscript{47} These would suggest that, in the current context of economic crisis and disaffection with mainstream politics, the party is well placed to consolidate and extend its electoral challenge. Yet, viewed through another lens, the FN has made little headway in moving from its marginal isolation to a genuinely central role in French politics. To judge by column inches and media airtime, and compared with a deeply unpopular Socialist administration and a divided UMP opposition, the FN was the successful party in France in 2013. It stole the headlines in two National Assembly by-elections, which its candidates came close to winning with 48.6 per cent (Beauvais) and 46.2 per cent (Villeneuve-sur-Lot) of the run-off vote.\textsuperscript{48} Yet it emerged from the year having gained just one cantonal seat in the by-election of Brignoles in the southern Var department, taking its total representation on France’s departmental councils to two seats out of 4,052.\textsuperscript{49}

Similarly, in the National Assembly elections of June 2012, the FN was at the centre of media attention yet won only two seats out of 577. As in the above by-elections of Beauvais and Villeneuve-sur-Lot, a number of FN candidates achieved very strong scores in two-way run-offs (Florian Philippot’s 46.3 per cent in Forbach, Valérie Laupies’ 48.7 per cent in Arles, Stéphane Ravier’s 49 per cent in Marseille, and Marine Le Pen’s 49.9 per cent in Hénin-Beaumont); but they lost. Across the last full cycle of other elections from 2008 to 2012, the FN won not a single senator out of 348, not a single mayor out of 36,718, and some 85 municipal councillors from 519,417; it secured 118 regional councillors from 1,880 and three Members of the European Parliament from a French contingent of 72 (raised since to 74).\textsuperscript{50} Put another way, the FN won some 200 seats from over 525,000 – or 0.04 per cent – across all levels of democratic representation in France.
This institutional non-existence may be advantageous for an anti-system party but it is surely a critical deficiency for a party seeking to accede to government. By other measures, too, the FN has failed to create the kind of dynamic required to impose itself as an irresistible force. If Le Pen and her party had the strongest upward dynamic between 2007 and 2012, a longer view gives a quite different picture. Since 1986, when the FN first emerged as a serious contender in National Assembly elections, it has increased its vote share by just 4 per cent, from 9.6 per cent to 13.6 per cent. Since Jean-Marie Le Pen's first significant presidential bid in 1988, the party has raised its share of the presidential poll by 3.5 per cent, from 14.4 per cent to 17.9 per cent. When relativised in this way, the performances of Marine Le Pen and her party in 2012 signify less a powerful surge than a very modest, creeping, ineffectual advance over a quarter-century of electioneering.

Over the same period, the PCF has almost disappeared from view but the PS has held its vote share in National Assembly elections at close to 30 per cent; and the centre-right, despite substantial erosion of support since the 1980s, could still command through the UMP over 27 per cent – precisely twice the score of the FN – in an unfavourable election following ten years in power. Setting that against the 1997 National Assembly elections, when the FN came within less than 1 per cent of being the party with the highest vote on the right (RPR 15.7 per cent, FN 14.9 per cent, UDF 14.2 per cent), it seems so much further now from imposing itself as an essential alliance partner. Even at the peak of its threat to the centre-right’s prospects for a parliamentary majority in 1997, its power remained more virtual than real, with the above profile of results producing 139 National Assembly seats for the RPR, 109 for the UDF and one for the FN.\textsuperscript{51} The performance of the FN in the 2012 National Assembly elections (13.6 per cent) should also be set against the vote share secured by its leader a few weeks earlier (17.9 per cent), marking a loss of 4.3 per cent. This has been a recurrent pattern that the FN has been unable to eradicate (−4.7 per cent in 1988, −5.7 per cent in 2002, −6.1 per cent in 2007), evidence of continued failure in its drive to professionalise and present candidates in National Assembly elections of sufficient number and quality to match or exceed the performance of its leader in immediately preceding presidential polls.

In its impact as a contender in National Assembly elections, the FN might even be argued to have regressed rather than progressed. It qualified in 2012 for run-offs in 61 constituencies, contesting 59 of these, but that number was well short of the 133 constituencies for which it qualified in 1997.\textsuperscript{52} This drop was mainly due to a change of electoral rules in 2003 that required candidates to win 12.5 per cent of the electoral register rather than of votes cast in order to contest the second round. Although the FN went on to win two seats in 2012 compared to one in 1997, its influence on the election outcome was much reduced. Analysis of its performance in all 59 run-offs showed the FN’s limitations. Of the 28 three-way run-offs (in which the FN’s chances of election were strongest), 14 were won by the left, 12 by the
centre-right, and only two by the FN. In two-way run-offs against candidates of the left, the FN increased its score on average by some 16 per cent between the two rounds, but this left it far short of rallying the full combined right vote. In two-way run-offs against centre-right candidates too, the FN gained over 16 per cent on average between the rounds, confirming that its reserves of support extend beyond the right, but again it fell short in all cases. Although the ‘Republican front’ that once united centre-right and left to block the FN no longer reliably functions, the FN continues almost without exception to encounter insurmountable difficulty in rallying a majority in head-to-head run-offs.

The punitive effects of the FN’s isolation are clearer still from votes–seats ratios showing its gains in the 2012 elections relative to those made by smaller, or much smaller, parties. With 13.6 per cent of the first-round vote, the FN went on to win 0.3 per cent of seats in the National Assembly – the same proportion of seats as that gained by the Alliance Centriste and the Regionalists with 0.6 per cent of the first-round vote, while the Greens with 5.5 per cent took 17 seats (see Table 2.6).

A further marker of the FN’s political isolation was the apparent difficulty encountered by Marine Le Pen, like her father before her, in securing her 500 elected sponsors’ signatures. That sponsors’ names are published by the Constitutional Council might explain the reluctance of many to take the step of publicly endorsing an FN candidate; but Marine Le Pen’s much reported struggle to muster barely 1 per cent of 47,500 potential sponsors says much about the FN’s continued ostracism by the political establishment. Of a piece with that ostracism is the fact that, despite its leader’s ambition to ‘de-demonise’ the party and give it a Republican varnish, the FN continues to espouse policies that defy the essential pluralist and egalitarian values of the French Constitution. It has softened its image but has not undertaken any real ideological revision. Its core policy of *priorité nationale* – preferential allocation of jobs, housing and welfare support to French nationals over foreigners – was tested in the mid-1990s by Catherine Mégret as FN mayor of Vitrolles. Her attempt to

**TABLE 2.6 Votes and seats for Front National and smaller parties in National Assembly elections of 2012**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Votes (first round)</th>
<th>% (first round)</th>
<th>Seats (over 2 rounds)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Front National</td>
<td>3,528,663</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Front de Gauche</td>
<td>1,793,192</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greens (EELV)</td>
<td>1,418,264</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nouveau Centre</td>
<td>569,897</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre pour la France</td>
<td>458,098</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alliance Centriste</td>
<td>156,026</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regionalists</td>
<td>145,809</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
institute a special child allowance for parents of French or EU nationality was ruled illegal and incurred a suspended prison sentence, a fine and a temporary ban from public office, yet the same policy featured in Marine Le Pen’s 2012 presidential manifesto. An elected FN seeking to implement its programme in full would be on a collision course with the Constitution.

Attitudinal surveys of FN voters also argue against the FN’s claim to be a ‘normal’ party now. A CSA poll from April 2012 found that, while only 7 per cent of Le Pen voters were motivated by attachment to her as a candidate and 10 per cent by attachment to the FN as a party, 44 per cent voted for her in order to express their ‘opposition to other candidates’. The same poll found that only 36 per cent of Le Pen’s electorate voted so that their candidate ‘be elected president’, compared with 85 per cent of Sarkozy’s electorate and 76 per cent of Hollande’s. Other polls showed Marine Le Pen’s electorate to have the highest proportion of those with no interest in the election and high proportions of those with neither interest nor faith in politics generally. Such findings suggest a deep negativity and protest tendency among Le Pen and FN voters. More generally, support for the FN is tempered by scepticism about the party’s credibility. While a TNS Sofres poll in January 2013 found 32 per cent of respondents in agreement with the ideas of the FN, 81 per cent disagreed with the solutions proposed. The same poll showed only 24 per cent agreeing and 73 per cent disagreeing with the FN’s key policy of *priorité nationale*, while 35 per cent saw the FN as fit to join a government against 54 per cent judging it to be merely a protest party.

**Conclusion: What prospects for the Front National?**

What place, then, does the FN occupy within the contemporary French political space, and what are its prospects? This chapter has argued that the FN vote is a vote beyond right and left – or, in Nonna Mayer’s terms, ‘between’ right and left – with the FN challenging the centre-right but also being the major threat to the Socialist and Communist parties in some former strongholds of the left. Blending authoritarian, exclusivist nationalism with economic and social protectionism, the FN has adapted its policy proposals to appeal across the traditional cleavage structure of French politics. If the foregoing pages acknowledge the strengths of the party under Marine Le Pen, however, they also show the enduring obstacles barring its path. The FN has the potential to play an increasingly influential role in the French party system, but it faces major difficulties in order to realise that potential and to develop from a party of political influence to a party of executive power.

Over three decades, the FN has mounted the most significant and sustained challenge to the established political order of the Fifth Republic. It has played a major role in reshaping the party system, replacing the PCF at least partly in
what Georges Lavau famously called its ‘tribune function’ and driving both centre-right and centre-left into tighter bipolarity. The party system within which it competes today has become more unfavourable, structured as it now is around two rather than four hegemonic parties. The space for a challenge by a party from outside this bipolarised majoritarian system is severely restricted, as shown by the FN’s two National Assembly seats in 2012 compared with the UMP’s 194 and the Socialist Party’s 280. Moreover, as this chapter has argued, the FN set out to disrupt the two-bloc party system, only to become a catalyst for reinforcing the very duopoly it sought to end. Within that logic, the FN remains what it has been since its emergence in the mid-1980s: a party with almost no elected power base and with the negative capacity to spoil but not the positive capacity to impose itself as a viable alternative.

Can the FN emerge from this impasse? As Pascal Perrineau argues, there are three routes by which an anti-system party can come to power: force, alliance or a conversion to respectability. Discounting the non-democratic dimension of the first, the institutional impediments built into the Fifth Republic are such that even a forceful electoral presence can be nullified if a party is sufficiently isolated; the second route has been barred, to date, by the UMP’s resistance to formal cooperation with the FN; and the third has been only partly embarked upon through a change of style but the retention of the authoritarian, discriminatory and xenophobic-nationalist policies at the heart of the FN’s programme.

The examples of Austria and Italy show how mainstream acceptability can be gained by radical right-wing parties with the complicity of the conservative right. For that complicity to be forged in France, the FN would have to abandon some of its key policies – priorité nationale, the restoration of capital punishment, the expulsion of certain categories of foreigner, the rejection of the EU and return to the franc, border controls and trade protection. It would also have to reverse its leftward shift on economic and welfare policy, which has moved it further from the UMP and makes cooperation at a national level yet more difficult to envisage. Even if the UMP leadership were willing (like most of its base) to countenance an alliance with the FN, that might merely replace one set of problems with another. For radical parties, the process of deradicalising can be perilous, with greater respectability and systemic integration being bought at the price of ideological compromise, policy reorientation and possibly party unity.

With the presidential and National Assembly elections of 2012, the FN may have reached the limits of what an outsider party can achieve nationally under the existing institutional constraints of the Fifth Republic. As France entered a new cycle of elections in 2014 with municipal and European polls, the FN gained considerable ground, winning control of 11 municipalities of over 9,000 inhabitants and coming top in the European election with almost 25% of the vote and 24 of France’s 74 seats in the European Parliament. Though they marked a spectacular advance on the corresponding elections of 2008 and 2009, however, these subnational and supranational elections did nothing to
alter the incapacity in which the FN finds itself in terms of access to national representation, let alone national power. With only two parliamentary seats out of 925 across both houses, the FN retained a 0.2% stake in the national legislative arena and found itself blocked still by the same immoveable barrier to its progression as an aspiring party of government. Nor did these elections of 2014 alter – rather, they accentuated – the question confronting Marine Le Pen and her party: whether, and how far, to moderate their programme in order to pass from a vote-oriented to an office-oriented strategy. The question confronting the UMP, too, remained unaltered: whether to continue to exclude the FN or to collude in its systemic integration. The answers to these questions will depend on inter-party dynamics and strategic imperatives that are still being worked out, but they could determine the future shape and direction not only of the French right but of politics and policy-making in France.

Notes
11 Shields, *The Extreme Right in France*, see Note 9, 267–68.


14 Shields, *The Extreme Right in France*, see Note 9, 176.


22 ‘Cantonale à Brignoles: l’UMP et le FN s’en donnent à cœur joie après le 1er tour’, *lemonde.fr*/AFP, 7 October 2013.


31 Christophe Guilluy, Fractures françaises (François Bourin Editeur, 2010).


37 OpinionWay poll of April 2012, see Note 35.


41 For the higher estimate, see the CSA and IFOP polls of May 2012, at Notes 24, 40; for the lower estimate, see the TNS Sofres and Ipsos polls of May 2012 at Note 24, 40.

42 Marine Le Pen’s 2012 presidential programme Mon Projet pour la France et les Français, see Note 32.


45 OpinionWay poll of April 2012, see Note 35.


Direction générale des collectivités locales, ‘Les collectivités locales en chiffres’, see Note 3. It is difficult to determine with precision the number of municipal council seats held by the FN. The claim by the party’s general secretary, Steeve Briois, that the figure is not 85 but 170 still confirms how vanishingly small is the FN’s share of over half a million seats at municipal level (Rémi Duchemin, ‘Pourquoi le FN a déjà gagné les municipales’, europe1.fr, November 15, 2013). Although it did not win control of any council in 2008, a few mayors of small communes (such as Jean-Yves Narquin in Villedieu-le-Château and Gérard Marchand in Brachay) have since rallied to the FN under Marine Le Pen.

Shields, *The Extreme Right in France*, see Note 9, 264–65.


Shields, *The Extreme Right in France*, see Note 9, 263.


CSA poll of April 2012, see Note 46.

Ipsos and OpinionWay polls of April 2012, see Notes 34, 35.

TNS Sofres poll of January 2013, see Note 24.


Ivaldi, ‘The successful Welfare–Chauvinist Party?’ see Note 43.

See IFOP and Ipsos polls of May 2012, and TNS Sofres poll of January 2013, see Note 24.

By the end of the 1970s, four parties of approximately equal strength were monopolising over 90 per cent of the vote in their respective left and right blocs (Parodi, 1989). Nevertheless, this end-state had taken twenty years to produce, concluding in 1978 with the formation of the UDF. The question of electoral change in France has received a great deal of attention in the past fifteen years, as evidenced by the volume of literature on French parties and elections. Since the advent of European Community/European Union politics and the growing influence the supranational arena has over domestic affairs, the potential for the European domain to impinge upon all aspects of national polities has grown. The British National Party (BNP) is a far-right political party in the United Kingdom formed as a splinter group from the National Front by John Tyndall in 1982 and was led by Nick Griffin from September 1999 to July 2014. Its current chairman is Adam Walker. The BNP platform is centred on the advocacy of "firm but voluntary incentives for immigrants and their descendants to return home", as well as the repeal of anti-discrimination legislation. It restricted membership to "indigenous British" people. Party system is a term of art used by political scientists to describe a relatively durable system of political party and voter alignments, electoral rules, and policy priorities that dominate a democratic political system's electoral process for some delimited period of time. The "system" reveals how political parties control the government, how they mobilize a base of voters, and how they handle funding, information, and selection of candidates and office holders. In one country, two party systems