Populism in Pink: How Marine Le Pen's Revised Rhetoric Closes the Radical Right Gender Gap

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ABSTRACT

Marine Le Pen, the Rassemblement National (RN) party leader, made it to the second round of the French presidential elections in Spring 2017 and earned 33.9% of the vote. While she failed to win the presidency, the RN had gained substantial ground with French voters. In 2022, Le Pen again fell short of the Presidency but received an unprecedented 41.46% vote share. Even more surprising is that Le Pen and her party seem to be winning over women voters in France, as more and more women have been voting for the RN since 2017. Extant research suggests that men are much more likely than women to identify with far-right populist politicians, a finding called the "Radical Right Gender Gap." Here, we examine how Marine Le Pen's moderated rhetoric has worked to close this gap. We argue first that the recent European Union (EU) crises made far-right issues politically salient, thereby drawing the attention of a wider group of voters. Furthermore, Le Pen's ability to moderate the political rhetoric of the RN has legitimized its place as a mainstream party. We examine our expectations using an original pilot survey of a limited French residents and citizens sample. Our preliminary results based on this limited sample suggest that the RN has become a more serious contender in French politics. The party's success has allowed other far-right populist parties to close their gender gap.

Introduction

Marine Le Pen, the Rassemblement National (RN) party leader, made it to the second round of the French presidential elections in Spring 2017 and earned 33.9% of the vote. While she failed to win the Presidency, the RN had gained substantial ground with French voters. In 2022, Le Pen again fell short of the Presidency but received an unprecedented 41.46% vote share. Even more surprising is that Le Pen and her party seem to be winning over women voters in France, as more and more women have been voting for the RN since 2017 (Clement 2022).

Extant research suggests that men are much more likely to identify with far-right populist politicians than women, a finding that has been called the "Radical Right Gender Gap" (Betz 1994; Givens 2004; Mayer 2015; Spierings and Zaslove 2017; Mayer 2022). Here, we examine how Marine Le Pen's moderated rhetoric has worked to close this gap. We argue first that the recent European Union (EU) crises made far-right issues politically salient, thereby drawing the attention of a wider group of voters. Furthermore, we extend the arguments advanced among some scholars that suggest Le Pen's ability to moderate the political rhetoric of the RN has served to attract new voters to the party (e.g., Ivaldi 2015; Stockemer and Amengay 2015; Dumitrescu 2016). Finally, we investigate these questions using an original pilot survey to consider to what extent the RN has become a more serious contender in French politics and whether it has shown a way for other far-right populist parties to close their gender gap.

The initial results from our preliminary study show that voters who see Marine Le Pen as more moderate are more likely to view her positively. Our preliminary study also suggests moderate evidence for Euroscepticism and feminism as predictors of a positive perspective on Marine Le Pen. While our results do not confirm a closing of the radical right gender gap, they suggest ample room for continued efforts to attract more women to the RN party.

More broadly, we contribute to the emerging scholarship on the role of women in high-profile political positions, especially in far-right political parties. In Europe, an increasing number of women have assumed the role of chief executive in the past two decades, such as Angela Merkel in Germany, Magdalena Andersson in Sweden, Theresa May and Liz Truss in the United Kingdom, and Ursula von der Leyen as president of the European Commission. Additionally, several women have become leaders in far-right political parties, including Marine Le Pen. In 2022, Giorgia Meloni became the first female prime minister in Italy; her accomplishment is particularly noteworthy given that her leadership was made possible by forming a coalition between her far-right party, Brothers of Italy, and several other right and far-right parties (Di Donato, Wedeman, and Mortensen 2022). Given these important political developments, scholarship that examines the motivating factors for supporting women political leaders – especially women political leaders from the far-right – is essential today. While limited in nature, our study seeks to make a meaningful contribution to this nascent literature.

Our study proceeds as follows. First, we begin by defining populism and its connection to the far-right in Europe. Next, we evaluate the history of the Front National/Rassemblement National and how this political party has claimed ownership over many Eurosceptic issues, increasing its political relevance over time. Third, we discuss how the increased saliency of far-right political issues and the moderated rhetoric of the RN led to Marine Le Pen's electoral success in 2017 and 2022, thereby paving the way for an investigation into whether she can close the radical right gender gap. Then, we discuss our original pilot survey on French attitudes toward Marine Le Pen and her appeal to feminist perspectives. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the implications of Le Pen's popularity for the future of far-right parties in France and throughout the EU.

Defining Populism and the Far-Right in Europe

Since 2015, many politicians who subscribe to a far-right ideology have taken on a populist tone, especially in countries in Europe and the United States. Populism has been defined as a "thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonist groups, 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite,' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people" (Mudde 2015). Populism is not always right-wing in its political ideology; there has been a long history of left-wing populism in Latin America. Instead, what makes populism distinct is its focus on "the people" in conflict with "the elite."

In Europe, populism has primarily accompanied a right-wing political ideology. Scholars point to five key features of a far-right political ideology: "nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy, and the strong state" (Mudde 1995, 206). An anti-elite strategy fits better with right-wing political ideology in the EU because the EU traditionally stands for more liberal values such as open borders, free movement of people, human rights for marginalized groups, and extensive social welfare policies. Thus, these liberal policies can be more easily critiqued as elitist from a more conservative ideology.

Criticism of the EU does not always center on right-wing ideology, as there are examples of political parties that are critical of the EU from both the left and the right. This critical perspective of the EU is often labeled Eurosceptic. In the EU context, however, it is typically more common to see Euroscepticism, right-wing ideology, and populism combined by a single political party, as the combination of ideology and strategy fits this political context particularly well. An example of this Eurosceptic, populist, right-wing ideology in practice is the British referendum against membership in the European Union that was held in June 2016 and championed by the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). The outcome of this vote—commonly called Brexit—and the subsequent withdrawal of the UK from the EU in January 2020 were seen as a victory for those who rejected the EU as an elite institution and wanted to return the political power to the people. Therefore, in Europe, it makes sense for populist strategies to partner with far-right political ideology as a strong contrast to the European Union.

Such a movement has also swept through Europe in places like Austria, Hungary, and France, where far-right parties have achieved new levels of electoral success (Mudde 2015). In the case of France, the new strength of this far-right populist movement is perhaps the most significant. France has a long history of an established right-wing party in the RN. Still, the recent electoral successes of far-right parties in Europe and the US seem to have legitimized the RN and contributed to increased polarization within French society (Mammone, 2015; Armstrong, 2017; Mowat 2018).

The Rise of the Rassemblement National

On October 5, 1972, members of several fringe, far-right parties in France came together under the leadership of Jean-Marie Le Pen to establish a new political party named the Front National pour l'Unité Française, or the Front National (FN). Jean-Marie Le Pen united the various far-right movements by emphasizing two central issues: the need to stop the spread of communism and the disappointment over the loss of the Algerian War (Stockemer and Amengay 2015). Both of these issues threatened the core of French national identity for Jean-Marie Le Pen. However, it was difficult for the FN to distinguish itself from other right/conservative political parties early on. Consequently, the party performed poorly in elections at all levels from 1973-1984 and remained on the political fringe.

Before 1984, the FN had a pro-European agenda. The European Economic Community (EEC), established in 1957, had as one of its central goals the reintegration of West Germany into a democratic union with the rest of the democratic European continent. As such, Jean-Marie Le Pen saw the EEC as a guardian against the spread of communism, which fit his narrative for the party. Moreover, the strong actions taken by President de Gaulle in the 1960s meant that the EEC would not threaten French sovereignty. De Gaulle's actions surrounding "the Empty Chair Crisis" in the Council of Ministers had forced the EEC states to pass the Luxembourg Compromise in January 1966 that allowed any member state to veto policy that it believed would significantly damage national policy. Consequently, the EEC was seen by many French politicians as a safe place to pursue their international agenda.

However, by 1984, French President François Mitterrand had become one of the central champions of the European project, advocating for increased cooperation among the member states and a deepening power of the EEC institutions. He strongly supported the enlargement of the Mediterranean countries of Greece, Spain, and Portugal, which changed the power balance
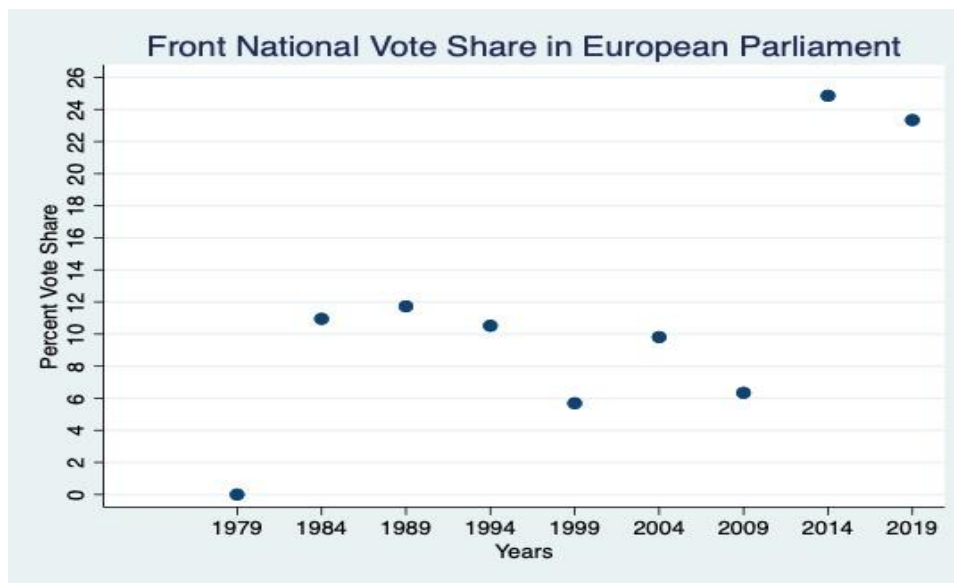
Figure 1. Front National Vote Share in European Parliament

between EEC members. Additionally, he was a strong advocate for the Single European Act in 1986, which significantly expanded the powers of the EEC by setting the idea of a single currency and a common foreign and security policy into motion. This deepening of European integration gave more power to the European institutions and forced member states, like France, to cede sovereignty in certain key policy areas.

At this point, the EEC became a threat to the FN, and the FN began to take on a distinctly Eurosceptic tone. The party that championed the need for a strong national identity and the retention of sovereign powers now had a foil in the EEC. As such, an electoral breakthrough occurred in the 1984 European Parliament (EP) elections, where the FN secured 10.95% of the vote share and a subsequent 10 seats in the EP (see Figure 1, Front National Vote Share in European Parliament).

With this new political focus and the brief shift to a proportional representation system in 1986, the FN finally achieved some electoral success in the National Assembly; the FN received 9.65% of the votes and sent 35 members to the parliament (see Figure 2, Front National Vote Share in National Assembly). The party base of the FN also saw growth as it attracted individuals from the moderate right political parties who were more Eurosceptic.

The Maastricht Treaty establishing the European Union in 1992 marked the most significant shift in the FN's view toward the European Union and its position in French politics. The EU would now include three "pillars" of common policy: a common economic policy to continue the work of the EEC, a common foreign and security policy, and a common internal justice policy to include free movement of persons within the EU and a common EU citizenship. Jean-Marie Le Pen says the EU would be "the end of France, the French people, its language and culture" (Goodliffe 2015, 334). From this point forward, the FN became France's most vocal Eurosceptic voice. Still, the vast majority of the FN's electoral success, albeit very small, was in the European Parliament, where a far-right, Eurosceptic political platform was seen as more relevant to French voters.

The period of *cohabitation* from 1997-2001, marked by a politically opposed president and prime minister, effectively weakened the power of the French president to decide upon European policy (Drake 2005, 7). In this period of weakness, the FN continued to gain ground with voters who expressed dissatisfaction with the European Union.

That support was enough to propel Jean-Marie Le Pen to the run-off elections for the president in 2002, a first for the FN and a significant surprise in French politics. In the first round, Jean-Marie Le Pen won 16.86% of the vote, which was barely enough (0.68%) to beat out Lionel Jospin of the Parti Socialiste (PS) to secure a second-place position and the runoff against the incumbent candidate Jacques Chirac of the Rassemblement pour la République (RPR) party.

This electoral success was unprecedented for the FN, but it was also extremely short-lived. Chirac overwhelmingly beat Jean-Marie Le Pen in the second-round election by 82.21% to 17.79%, the largest margin of victory ever in a French presidential election. In part, Chirac owed this victory to the support he received from most of the other political leaders in France who saw a Chirac presidency as much more palatable than a Le Pen presidency. While Le Pen did have an important moment on the national scene, his loss signaled that it was time to bring change to the party.

Still, the Eurosceptic feelings remained relatively strong in France. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the European Union moved forward steadily so that some elites believed it was time to write a constitution for the EU. In October 2004, representatives of the 25 member states of the EU signed the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe (TCE) that would
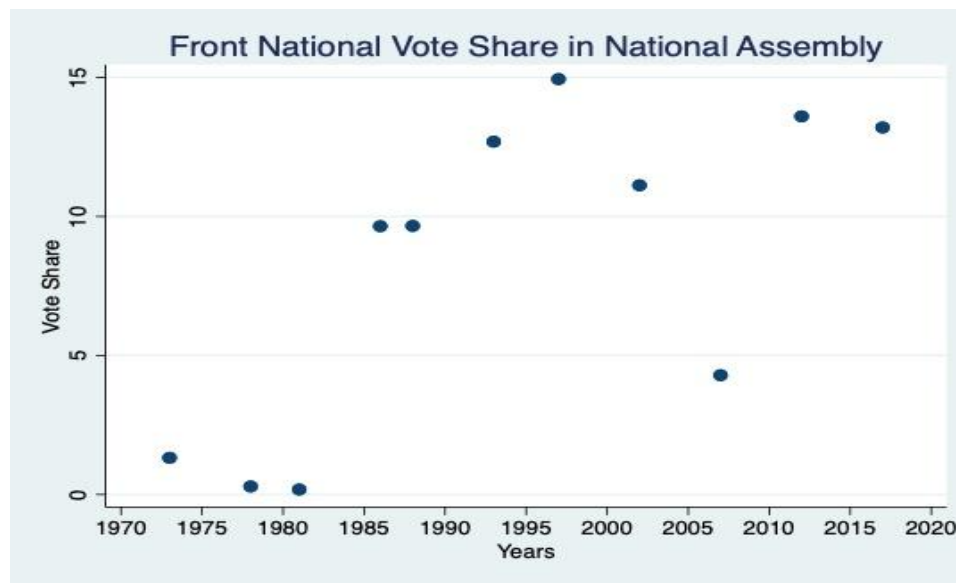
Figure 2. Front National Vote Share in National Assembly

greatly expand the powers of the EU. Given the significance of the TCE, many European leaders called for a direct vote on its implementation. French President Jacques Chirac supported the TCE but decided to hold a referendum in France to allow the people to decide if France should ratify the treaty. The referendum was held on May 29, 2005. The three major political parties in France all supported the TCE, including the Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (UMP) under President Chirac, the Parti Socialiste (PS) under party leader François Hollande, and the Union pour la Démocratie Française (UDF) under party leader François Bayrou. Strong opposition to the TCE came from both the political left and the political right. On the left, leaders such as Jean-Luc Mélenchon viewed the neoliberal policies of the TCE as a challenge to the French economy, especially its services sector and workers unions. Opposition also came from the far right, where leaders like Jean-Marie Le Pen of the Front National saw the TCE as a threat to French national identity and a way to open the door to Turkey's membership in the EU. Ultimately, the public voted 54.67% against the TCE and only 45.33% in favor.

The referendum's outcome in France shocked the French political elite and the elite in the European Union, who had long seen France as a champion of the European Union. However, with the resounding referendum against the TCE and its defeat in the referendum in the Netherlands, the EU abandoned the TCE and implemented a trimmed-down version of the treaty in 2007. The message was clear, however, that the French people were no longer fully supportive of the EU and that opposition voices would have political influence. Moreover, this distrust was further strengthened by the fact that the EU went ahead with a version of the TCE in the Lisbon Treaty despite being voted down by citizens of two member states.

Still, even with this momentum, the FN performed poorly in national and European elections. The FN's vote share dropped dramatically in the 2007 national elections, with candidates receiving only 4.29% of the vote in the National Assembly, resulting in no seats in the parliament and only 10.44% of the vote share in the presidential election (see Figure 2). Similarly, the FN's performance in the 2009 European Parliament election was poorer than the cycle prior, with the party receiving only 6.34% of the vote, equating to a loss of 4 seats (see Figure 1).

Moreover, the political climate surrounding Jean-Marie Le Pen began to shift significantly. In 2016, lawmakers in France overturned his ability to claim legal protections from facing trial for hate speech, a protection he previously claimed while serving as an MEP (News Wires 2021). As such, Jean-Marie Le Pen faced trial in 2016 and was found guilty of the charge of denying crimes against humanity for his hate speech directed at Jews and regarding the Holocaust (News Wires 2016). Numerous other charges emerged about Jean-Marie Le Pen's rhetoric surrounding Jews, Muslims, and immigrants, to name a few examples, and he found himself embroiled in much political and legal controversy (News Wires 2021).

Capitalizing on these events, Marine Le Pen, Jean-Marie Le Pen's daughter, removed her father from the party and officially assumed leadership of the FN in January 2011. Since then, the FN - now the Rassemblement National - has noticeably shifted course. Still, whether these changes are sufficient to attract and retain a broad voting base to earn key electoral victories remains.

Marine Le Pen and the Radical Right Gender Gap

Scholars have identified an important pattern in who votes for radical right parties. This pattern, known as the "radical right gender gap," demonstrates that men are more likely than women to vote for radical right parties. According to the literature, this gap persists for several reasons. First, men are more likely to be blue-collar workers, whose position in the labor market tends to make them less supportive of a global economy; in turn, this vulnerable position in the labor market means that men are more likely to be receptive to the protectionist, anti-globalization economic goals of radical right parties (Betz 1994; Givens 2004; Kriesi et al. 2008). Second, men tend to have a stronger attachment to more traditional gender roles and gender stereotypes than women, who are more likely to subscribe to a general feminist ideology; traditional gender roles rather than feminist ideology are more closely aligned with the social policies espoused by radical right parties (Kitschelt and McGann 1995; Inglehart and Norris 2003). Third, men tend to be less religious than women, which suggests that men are less likely to be persuaded by arguments of compassion or inclusivity of people in need, like immigrants or other ethnic minorities (Mayer 2015). Fourth, men tend to have a greater overall involvement in politics, making them more likely to vote at all and more likely to vote for populist parties (Norris 1996; 2005; Spierings and Zaslove 2017). Ideology research suggests that men and women do differ in far-right ideology. However, given the same attitudes as men, women still have a significantly lower probability of translating these attitudes into votes for far-right parties (Hansen 2019). Finally, emerging research suggests that men are more risk tolerant and are more likely to vote for riskier parties, like populist radical right parties; women, in contrast, are more risk averse and, as such, prefer not to waste their vote on a riskier political party (Oshri et al. 2023). These factors are among the most prevalent contributing to the radical right gender gap.

Marine Le Pen presents an interesting challenge to the idea of a radical right gender gap in France, as she is now the leader of the foremost radical right party, the Rassemblement National. Moreover, her recent electoral successes in 2017 and 2022 suggest that Le Pen has done a better job of mobilizing her base and expanding it to include new voters.

As highlighted earlier, the recent crises in the EU have made Eurosceptic issues more politically salient in France, and these issues align with traditional issues of concern for radical right parties. Now, issues of unemployment and immigration (among others) are front and center for French voters. The June and July 2023 riots sparked by the police killing of a young man of North African descent provide further evidence of the salience of issues surrounding immigration and the plight of first and second-generation French citizens (News Wires, 2023). Polls from the summer of 2023 suggest that Marine Le Pen would beat Emmanuel Macron if the presidential election were held then; clearly, the political context in which a crisis is present impacts voters (New York Times, 2023). Moreover, the seeming inability of any government, be it the French government or the European Union, to resolve these challenges head-on further amplifies the voice of Eurosceptic parties, like the Rassemblement National.

Still, the shift in politically salient issues toward those more closely aligned with a radical right party does not guarantee electoral success for Marine Le Pen or any radical right leader unless those issues are connected to a broader constituency. We argue that this includes contacting women to close the radical right gender gap. Thus, Marine Le Pen's strategy of "normalization" has broadened her appeal to a wider base of voters, particularly women.

Since becoming the party leader, Marine Le Pen has emphasized 'normalizing' the party's image to broaden its appeal to voters who might agree with its critique of contemporary French society and policy solutions but were previously reluctant to vote for it due to its extremist reputation. Principally, this strategy of *dédiabolisation* (normalization) has involved ridding the FN of its most extreme followers, disavowing the antisemitism that had long been a staple of its discourse, and presenting the party as much more culturally tolerant than it had been under the leadership of its founder (Goodliffe 2016, 129–30).

The strategy of dédiabolisation can also be translated as de-demonization, which suggests that Marine Le Pen's strategy was not just about normalizing the political rhetoric of the FN but also about ridding the party of its evils (The Economist 2013). Chief among these tasks for Marine Le Pen was removing her father and his more extreme colleagues from the party. In this way, she could very clearly signal a shift in the party's direction even before adjusting her political rhetoric.

Scholars have suggested that five characteristics differentiate the RN under Marine Le Pen from the FN under her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen: "(i) self-labels itself a republican party... (ii) cites Republican figures such as Hannah Arendt ... (iii) economy, social protection and France's economic crises are at the center ... [along with principles of] *laïcité* and republicanism ... (iv) anti-elitist tone ... (v) young, dynamic and relatively attractive woman [as the leader]" (Stockemer and Amengay 2015, 375). Additionally, Marine Le Pen has reprioritized the traditional political concerns of the RN by giving "greater programmatic importance to economic issues, while de-emphasizing its cultural agenda" (Ivaldi 2015, 355). Cultural issues are still central to the RN's political platform, especially regarding anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiments. Scholars remark:

> There has been a shift in discourse and policy programs away from cultural and nationalistic issues and more focused on economic and social issues. .... However, even with this shift, the data show that the post-2011 FN gives significantly higher policy weight to cultural issues (e.g., religion, immigration, and security) and significantly less to economic and social issues than the typical mainstream party. Moreover, looking at particular policies, Dézé

(2012, pp. 148-155) points out that the 2012 party program deviated little or not at all from the traditional FN positions: the party still rejected other mainstream parties, immigration policies, the European Union, globalization, and advocated a very strong state (Dumitrescu 2016, 4).

Thus, Marine Le Pen has strategically made economic issues and broader security issues a more visible priority for the party, along with the cultural issues that play well in a climate of fear over terrorism and immigration, thereby capitalizing on the Eurosceptic political environment present in France today.

Evidence of the strategy of dédiabolisation can be further seen in examining the political platform, or manifesto, of the Rassemblement National. The Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) identifies political issues that are typically right-leaning and left-leaning and then constructs a score for a political manifesto based on these right and left dimensions, called the "RILE" score (Volkens et al. 2019). Right-leaning political issues include favorable mentions of the following terms and issues: the military, freedom, and human rights, constitutionalism, political authority, a free market economy, incentives, economic orthodoxy, welfare state limitations, national way of life, traditional morality, law and order, and civic-mindedness. Negative mentions of protectionism are also included in right-leaning ideology. On the other hand, left-leaning political issues include positive mentions of the following terms and issues: anti-imperialism, peace, internationalism, market regulation, economic planning, protectionism, controlled economy, nationalization, welfare state expansion, education expansion, labor groups, and democracy. Additionally, negative mentions of the military are also included in left-leaning ideology. Taken together, the scale on the right issues is subtracted from the scale on the left issues to create the RILE score that ranges from 100 to -100; higher, positive values are considered more right-wing, and higher, negative values are considered left-wing.

More recently, research has suggested that there may be issues with using CMP data in comparisons with other countries, which is called a country bias, and in comparisons across time, which is called time bias (König, Marbach, and Osnabrügge 2017). Such research has proposed alternatives to the RILE score, such as the Manifesto Common Space Score (MCSS), which considers both the country bias and the time bias and performs particularly well in cross-national time series comparisons of political party manifestos (Flentje, König, and Marbach 2017). For this project, we are not comparing the FN/RN to other right-wing populist parties but only to themselves, so we do not need to concern ourselves with the country-bias issue. However, we are interested in changes over time, so we have more closely examined the MCSS scores. What we find is that MCSS scores place the FN/RN at a consistent far-right position relative to all other parties in France, which is consistent with the claim we are making here based on the CMP data (König, Marbach, and Osnabrügge 2017 486). We also find that the overall MCSS score for all political parties in France remains close to zero or slightly negative for the period 1950-2010, meaning that all political parties in France were overall moderate or slightly left-leaning (König, Marbach, and Osnabrügge 2017, 482). Still, this overall trend does not account for the steep drop in FN scores; the most plausible explanation is that this trend results from changes in the party itself rather than an aberration in the data.

When considering the RILE score for the FN/RN (see Figure 3, Front National Manifesto Score), we can see values ranging from 28.49 to a high of 50.67. At the same time, Jean-Marie Le Pen was the party leader, indicating a high, right-leaning ideology. However, after Marine Le Pen became party leader in 2011, the RILE score dropped to 8.01 in 2012 and 5.81 in 2017. While some analysis has suggested that political parties in France have trended toward left-leaning ideology in recent years, a drop in score from 50.67 to 5.81 – 44.86 points – is difficult to ignore. The precipitous drop in RILE scores seems to indicate that the simplest explanation is usually the most obvious: Marine Le Pen's leadership has had a moderating effect on the party manifesto of the FN/RN.

With these strategic differences, Marine Le Pen has been able to move the rhetoric of the party a bit away from the extremes to reach a broader range of disenfranchised French citizens, which includes such diverse groups as lower-skilled workers, young adults 18-30 years old, adults 66 years and older, and women (Stockemer and Amengay 2015). In this way, she has connected with several communities that all feel left behind by mainstream parties. For instance, lower-skilled workers and youth are especially impacted by unemployment, which is an issue that has been unresolved by the main political parties. For many older French, the nostalgia for days when France was less diverse and more powerful globally has drawn them to the party. For women, Marine Le Pen provides a high-profile role model that encourages women to increase their participation in politics (Wolbrecht and Campbell 2007).

Still, whether these factors are enough to close the radical right gender gap, particularly in France, scholars have provided evidence that the radical right gender gap appears to be closing since Marine Le Pen assumed leadership over the RN before the 2012 election (Mayer 2015; 2022). However, the question remains as to what causal factors are driving this finding and whether it is temporary or representative of a more permanent shift in voting. Here, we argue that the two sustainable ways the gender gap can be closed are the association of key political issues with the RN and an acceptance of Marine Le Pen as a more moderate feminist politician.

H1: Voters identifying Eurosceptic issues as politically salient will view Marine Le Pen positively.

H2: Voters who see Marine Le Pen as more moderate will be more likely to view her positively.
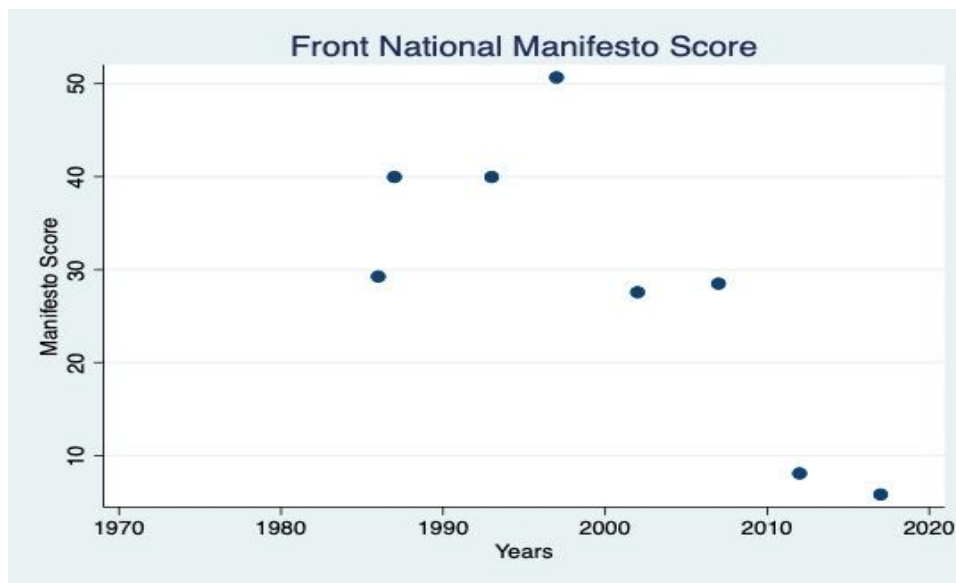
Figure 3. Front National Manifesto Score

H3: Voters who identify as feminists will be more likely to see Marine Le Pen as a positive representative for women.

Pilot Study Research Design

We test our theoretical expectations using an original survey of French citizens and residents from September 11 to October 31, 2022. We designed the survey as a pilot study to seek a small but representative sample to provide preliminary insights into our hypotheses. Our survey was approved by the Georgia Southern University Institutional Review Board and was administered using Qualtrics. The researchers used personal contacts to begin the survey and snowball sampling to round out the sample.

In total, we had 28 respondents, all self-identifying as French citizens and residents. Our respondents come from a diverse set of regions across France, including Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes (3), Ile-de-France (7), Normandie (2), Occitanie (2), Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur (13), and Other (2). We report additional demographics about our respondents below when discussing our control variables. We administered our survey in French and then translated our results into English.

While we recognize the limitations of such a small sample size, we see value in these early empirical tests, as even preliminary insights can provide value in developing research areas. Pilot studies are particularly useful in survey research where the testing of a survey instrument can provide key insights for future revisions of the instrument and future recruitment strategies (Van Teijlingen and Hundley 2001). Thus, we proceed with the survey analysis below.

Dependent Variables

We asked respondents two questions about Marine Le Pen to serve as our dependent variables. First, we sought their opinion of Marine Le Pen (Q9) in an open-ended question. We designed this question as open-ended to capture the widest range of opinions possible. Our general expectation is that most respondents will have either a neutral or positive opinion of Marine Le Pen if she is working to close the radical right gender gap.

Then, we asked respondents if Marine Le Pen represents women well (Q22) to examine if Marine Le Pen is perceived as effectively closing the radical right gender gap. Again, we used an open-ended question format to capture the reasoning behind a respondent's answer.

Even though all of these questions were open-ended, we included a numerical tally of similar responses and reported them in our analysis along with comments directly from our respondents.

Independent Variables

Broadly, we are interested in two sets of independent variables. First, we wanted to know if individuals identifying Eurosceptic/right-wing issues as most important will have a positive view of Marine Le Pen. These variables help to capture the first part of our argument, which is that the RN has been able to attract voters due to the current political climate. So, we asked our respondents if they think France's membership in the EU is overall positive for France (Q15) and to identify the most pressing issue facing France right now (Q19).

Next, we sought to determine if Marine Le Pen has been able to moderate her rhetoric and if this new tone has attracted new voters, particularly women, to close the radical right gender gap. So, we asked if Marine Le Pen is more politically moderate than her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen (Q10), to determine if our respondents have bought into her attempts to moderate the party's rhetoric. Again, we used an open-ended question here to allow respondents to provide more context to their answers.

We also asked if our respondents identify as feminists (Q3) to determine if individuals identifying as feminists will be more likely to support Marine Le Pen as a woman in politics. In this question, we asked for a yes/no response.

Control Variables

We also include several control variables that might impact an individual's perception of Marine Le Pen, largely based on the expectations derived from the literature on the radical right gender gap. We first asked for gender identity (Q2), as the radical right gender gap finding would suggest that men would be more likely to support Marine Le Pen than women.[1] Our respondents are fairly evenly distributed concerning gender: 10 (37%) identify as male, 16 (59%) identify as female, and 1 (4%) did not respond.

Next, we asked for the respondent's age (Q4), as older voters are more typically supportive of radical right parties. We divide our respondents into two categories with nearly equal representation: 13 (48.15%) are under 40, and 14 (51.85%) are over 40.

Third, we asked for political party affiliation (Q11), as someone who identifies as more conservative would be more likely to shift their vote to Marine Le Pen than someone who identifies as liberal. Our respondents are fairly evenly divided among the major political parties in France, although none identify as members of the Rassemblement National. Eight respondents (29.63%) identify themselves as "other" or "no response;" we suspect that at least one of these respondents might be a member of the RN but did not want to identify as such. The breakdown of party affiliation from conservative to most liberal was as follows: 6 (22.22%) for The Republicans (center-right), 7 (25.93%) for Renaissance (center), 3 (11.11%) for the Socialist Party (center-left), and 3 (11.11%) for the France Insoumise (far-left).

We also asked for our respondents' level of interest in politics (Q8) to see if this impacts their beliefs about Marine Le Pen.[2] The majority of our respondents indicated a moderate interest in politics (15, 55.56%), with another 5 (18.52%) indicating a high level of interest in politics and 7 (25.93%) indicating a low level of interest in politics.

Method

Given the nature of our pilot study, our goal was to rely on qualitative measures and descriptive statistics to provide a framework for further analysis. Given the limitations in sample size, a more detailed quantitative analysis is not possible. To report our preliminary findings, we used content analysis to code themes in our open-ended survey responses. We also relied on summary statistics and cross-tabulation analysis to determine if there were any patterns in the relationship between our variables in this pilot survey.

Analysis

Our responses reveal some interesting patterns in French perceptions of Marine Le Pen. First, we asked respondents about their general opinion of Marine Le Pen (Q9). Perhaps unsurprisingly, our respondents were overwhelmingly negative about Marine Le Pen. Using cross-tabulation analysis, we found no support for H1 that political issues or H3 that feminist ideology had any effect on a respondent's opinion of Marine Le Pen. However, we found limited support for H2 regarding the impact of Marine Le Pen's ability to moderate her political tone vis-a-vis her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen (see Table 1). Here, we find that a respondent who sees Marine Le Pen as the same as her father is statistically more likely to have a negative opinion of her, which suggests that those who see her as more moderate are more likely to see her in a positive light. None of our control variables provided statistically significant differences.

All told, there were 20 negative comments about Marine Le Pen, 3 identified as positive, and 3 identified as neutral. Neutral comments included: "Extrême droite / Far right"; "C'est d'actualité / She's news"; and "Populiste / Populist". These comments are seen as neutral because they are factual statements.

Positive comments included: "C'est un leader politique charismatique / She is a charismatic political leader"; "Je pense que certaines de ses idées sont en adéquation avec la situation actuelle. Certaines personnes adhérent à ses idées par raz le bol de la politique actuelle, et également en réaction à l'augmentation de l'insécurité, du chomage... / I think some of her ideas are in line with the current situation. Some people adhere to her ideas because they are fed up with current politics,

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[1]We also asked if individuals identified as members of the LGBTQA+ community, which we also think is important to this story, given the RN's recent efforts to reach out to this community. Unfortunately, we only received a single affirmative response, so we are unable to generalize from this respondent.

[2]We also asked if our respondents voted in the 2022 presidential election in France. Since all but 4 respondents voted, we do not have enough variation to explore this variable as a predictor of our dependent variables.

Table 1. General Opinion of Marine Le Pen

	Negative	Positive	Unsure	Total
Rhetoric is the same as JMLP	11	0	0	11
Rhetoric different from JMLP	8	4	3	15
Unsure	1	0	0	1
Total	**20**	**4**	**3**	**27**
Pearson Chi-Square: 7.56*, sig. where *$p<0.05$; **$p<0.01$; ***$p<0.001$.				

and also in reaction to the increase in insecurity [fear], unemployment…"; and "Je suis en accord avec certains de ses points politique notamment au niveau de la sécurité / I agree with some of her political points, particularly in terms of safety/security". Interestingly, while our statistical analysis showed no support for H1, the comments suggest that political ideas are a motivating factor for our respondents' positive views of Marine Le Pen. Given these responses, we can claim some limited support for H1.

Of course, it is impossible to list all 20 negative comments here, so instead, we will give a few representative examples: "Un loup déguisé en agneau / A wolf in sheep's clothing"; "Un cauchemar / A nightmare" and "Un danger pour la démocratie / A danger to democracy." While the comments are sharply negative, there is not much of a discernible pattern in motivation for these comments. Instead, many comments seem to point more toward Marine Le Pen's character and actions, which are more difficult to change, than her ideology or rhetoric, which is perhaps easier to address in attempting to close the radical right gender gap.

Next, we asked respondents if Marine Le Pen represents women well (Q22) to examine if Marine Le Pen is working to close the radical right gender gap. We found some interesting patterns in the answers to this question using another cross-tabulation analysis series. Again, we found no support for H1 or H3 concerning whether Marine Le Pen represents women well. However, we did find support for H2, suggesting that those who see Marine Le Pen as more moderate than her father also see her as representing women well (see Table 2). Again, these results speak to the influence of her political rhetoric on public perceptions of her and suggest that further moderating her rhetoric and distancing herself from her father could positively affect her ability to attract female voters.

None of our control variables provided statistically significant differences in means. However, we did find a pattern among women that might have been statistically significant had our sample size been larger. Whereas men overwhelmingly reported that Marine Le Pen did not represent women well, the women in our sample were more divided: 7 (43.74%) said she did not represent women well, 3 (18.75%) said she did support women well, and 6 (37.5%) were unsure. These findings suggest that there might be even further room for Marine Le Pen to close the radical right gender gap as many women might remain undecided about her as a political role model.

Table 2. Marine Le Pen's Representation of Women

	Not well	Well	Unsure	Total
Rhetoric is the same as JMLP	10	0	1	11
Rhetoric different from JMLP	6	5	4	15
Unsure	0	0	1	1
Total	**16**	**5**	**6**	**27**
Pearson Chi-Square: 11.10**, sig. where *$p<0.05$; **$p<0.01$; ***$p<0.001$.				

Again, while most comments regarding whether Marine Le Pen represents women well were negative, the comments were

more moderated, as the statistics demonstrate. Most neutral comments read, "Je ne sais pas / I don't know." Again, these comments suggest that these respondents represent a group that could potentially be persuaded to support Marine Le Pen.

Positive comments include: "Plutôt oui : indépendante et modèle d'ascension / Yes somewhat [More or less]: [she is] independent and a model of ascent" and "C'est une femme de caractère qui a su mener une carrière conséquente malgré les critiques / She is a woman of character who has been able to lead a substantial career despite the criticism". In both examples, the respondents see Marine Le Pen as a role model, which fits our theoretical expectations in H3 about her ability to close the radical right gender gap. Thus, while our statistical analysis did not show clear support for H3, the open-ended comments suggest that those who see Marine Le Pen as a female role model are more likely to have a positive view of her.

Negative comments were generally shorter for this question, but some of the more provocative negative comments included: "Je ne peux pas imaginer être représentée par une fasciste / I can't imagine being represented by a fascist" and "Je ne pense pas que Marine Le Pen représente bien les femmes et surtout pas les femmes françaises, pour la raison suivante : elle ne recherche pas l'intérêt de ces dernières et recherche le sien propre. Elle a assis sa carrière politique sur la défiance de son prochain et a attisé la haine anti-raciale. Elle a développé une vision de la femme archaïque et patriarcale et les encourage à se cantonner à leur rôle de mère au lieu d'encourager l'égalité des genres sur le plan professionnel. / I don't think that Marine Le Pen represents women well, especially not French women, for the following reason: she doesn't seek their interests and seeks her own. She based her political career on distrusting one's neighbor and stirred up anti-racial hatred. She has developed an archaic and patriarchal vision of women and encourages them to confine themselves to their role as mothers instead of encouraging gender equality on a professional level." Interestingly, both comments raise the issue of political ideology and rhetoric. Again, these fit our theoretical expectations that Marine Le Pen will not be able to garner additional support without expanding her ideological base or moderating her political rhetoric.

In sum, our analysis of the pilot survey revealed some interesting preliminary findings. Our cross-tabulation analyses support H2 across both dependent variables, even with the limited data. Additionally, the open-ended comments suggest that H1 has moderate support when considering our respondents' general opinions of Marine Le Pen and that H3 has moderate support when considering our respondents' opinions of Marine Le Pen as a representative of women. Therefore, based on these initial findings supporting our hypotheses, we can conclude that further testing in a large-scale survey is warranted.

Conclusion

Marine Le Pen's recent electoral successes have solidified her role as a formidable figure in French politics. Her ability to articulate solutions to salient political issues in a more moderated tone has attracted a growing number of voters. Our preliminary research suggests, however, that there are some key limitations to her ability to close the radical right gender gap. While voters seem to respond to her distancing from her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen, it is also clear that general opinions of Marine Le Pen remain largely negative, as do opinions about her ability to represent women well. Yet, the results from our pilot study also suggest that many undecided voters could be persuaded to support her and her party in future elections.

The persistence of the radical right gender gap in France might be a positive sign for those concerned about the overall impact of these parties on the future of democracy in Europe. Without question, radical right parties remain relevant in Europe with continued electoral victories in both national and EU elections. However, these parties face significant competing pressures of expanding their base while staying true to their core ideologies and strategies. For the RN in France, this will mean expanding its issues of concern and moderating its rhetoric enough to close the radical right gender gap - a feat that has yet to be fully accomplished.

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