



The use of collective memory in the populist messaging of Marine Le Pen

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London School of Economics, UK

Abstract

Globally populist movements are on the rise, which is why it is essential to examine this phenomenon more closely. In France, 50 years ago, Jean-Marie Le Pen founded a populist party, le Front National (now renamed Rassemblement National or RN). However, it was not until his daughter Marine Le Pen took over the Party in 2012 that it began to see significant electoral gains. This is despite the fact that the underlying political message remained the same. By changing her rhetorical tactics and relying on references to collective memories and the unconscious associations they evoke, Marine Le Pen mainstreamed the RN and found more national support. This article examines the rhetorical tactics she deploys and how collective memories can effectively convey political messages.

Keywords

2022 French presidential elections, France, Joan of Arc, political rhetoric, populism

The rise of populist political parties worldwide has led to accrued interest and analysis of the content and style of their messaging. A fascinating case study is that of the Front National in France, which until 2012 was a far-right fringe party with limited electoral success. The Party's platform established by its founder Jean-Marie Le Pen openly included xenophobic, exclusionary and racist rhetoric, which kept the party on the fringes of national politics (Delafoi, 2017).¹ However, in 2012, Marine Le Pen replaced her father and transformed the Front National, renamed Rassemblement National (National Rally) in 2018, from an alt-right movement to a populist party (McDonnell, 2015; McGregor, 2019: 17). Soon after her takeover of the leadership, the party began to see growing political success. Membership went from 22,000 to 83,000 (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017: 53). In 2014 the RN overtook the traditional conservative grouping the UMP (Union pour un Mouvement Populaire) in the European parliamentary elections. In

Corresponding author:

Dalya Soffer, London School of Economics, London WC2A 2AE, UK.

Email: d.soffer@lse.ac.uk

2015, it beat both the UMP and the Socialist Party in the first round of voting in 6 of 13 regional elections. Using a populist message in the 2017 presidential elections, Marine Le Pen established herself as the front-runner whom all other candidates had to beat. Recent polls suggest that she may get 44–48 percent of the vote in the second round in 2022; some even predict she may win (Bryant, 2021; Poll of polls: polling from across Europe. Update daily, 2022; Sollety, 2021). However, research reveals that the political programme has not changed under Marine Le Pen's leadership; only the rhetoric has. Given the radical and for many dangerous policies the party has always supported, it is essential to understand what stylistic elements particular to populist rhetoric account for this turnaround.

Populism is challenging to define because populist movements encompass many different political ideologies, ranging from the far-right to the far-left. In Europe, the term generally refers to parties that espouse anti-immigration and xenophobic views. In Latin America, however, populist parties are characterized by clientelism and 'unsustainable policies that set undeliverable expectations about the future of the economy'. Once in power they are associated with economic mismanagement (Cachanosky and Padilla, 2019: 210; see also Sabatini, 2021). This divergence in definitions has led some political analysts to question the validity of the term (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017: 1). Increasingly political scientists are taking a broader 'ideational approach' to populism, viewing 'it as a discourse, an ideology, or a worldview' (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017: 4). The commonalities among political parties which establish themselves as populist are more their means of communication with voters than any particular ideology. Populist parties can be defined as those which have the following characteristics (Turpin, 2006: 5): (a) They are led by a charismatic leader; (b) The leader does not represent the people but instead reflects them. She is a direct representative of the people because she *is* the people; (c) The leader criticizes the existing establishment and institutions; (d) Her message is based upon a story. All of which are found in the messaging of Marine Le Pen.

Politicians must establish their legitimacy with the public as leaders in order to be elected, and populists, most commonly, initially seek to establish it through references to symbolic archetypes. Having proclaimed themselves legitimate contenders for national leadership, they must convince a sufficiently large proportion of the population to support their values. In addition, they must convince the electorate that they are sincere, as well as capable, and able to keep their promises. One critical way of achieving these goals is to develop a self-image that reflects a shared *ethos*. Equally important is the ability to convey their vision for the future. For the message to be accessible to the largest number of people, it is presented in many cases via imagery, representing the country's present and explaining its future. Populist politicians, in their speeches, must explain the situation, what is at risk, and most critically offer their voters a solution that will, hopefully, lead to victory (Mao, 2019: 35). This message is invariably conveyed through a story because myth is at the very heart of their political message (Turpin, 2006: 8).

Every national group has a body of collective memories that shape its national identity (Roediger and DeSoto, 2016). For instance, the way the Israelis and the Palestinians recall the events surrounding the creation of the state of Israel differ greatly and are integral to the shaping of each population's national identity. Similarly, when asked to recall the events of World War II, Americans will likely report the attack on Pearl Harbor,

D-Day, and dropping a nuclear bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. To Russians, it is known as the Great Patriotic War, not World War II, and they will recall the Battle of Stalingrad or the Battle of Kursk as significant events of that war. These memories serve to weld groups of people together (Lebow et al., 2006: 2–4; Nora, 1996: 3). Collective memories are the shared recollections of events ‘that forge a sense of place, time-consciousness, and social differentiation’ (Kurtz, 2020: 265). Therefore, when politicians reference a historical event, they are evoking the *collective memory* the nation has forged of that event, which, frequently, can be very different from the historical reality.

Broadly speaking, Marine Le Pen paints a picture of France being besieged by out-of-control Muslim immigration which is undermining France’s cultural heritage. According to her, one of the main reasons for this situation is multiculturalism, represented by the European Union and French political elites which endorse it. In her view, the influx of immigrants not only undermines France’s culture but is also the source of its economic woes. Muslim immigrants take jobs away from French citizens and ‘steal’ social benefits paid for by the French state, which is why she has proposed a referendum on a bill ‘whose aim is to drastically regulate immigration’ if she is elected president in 2022. The bill would impose strict criteria to determine who is eligible to enter France, obtain French nationality, and give ‘native citizens’ priority access to social housing, jobs, and social security benefits (Reuters, 2021). But to get followers to adhere to the party’s mission, the RN must go beyond merely providing solutions for the future. Journalists Edwy Plenel and Alain Rollat, who covered the RN for a decade, suggest that Marine Le Pen has to incarnate the past in the present by evoking collective memory (Alduy and Wahnich, 2015: 2512). It is through the prism of the past that all of us can understand the present (Lebow et al., 2006: 3). This is a strategy Marine Le Pen has been following as she invokes events in French history to forge an image of herself and convey her message to the public through the use of historical archetypes. The advantage of using archetypes is that they are timeless, and they can appeal to everyone because they reference an unconscious but collective memory (Alduy and Wahnich, 2015: 1880). Implicit or unconscious memories in this context are associative, consisting of links we have created in our minds between certain objects and feelings or concepts. Exposure to such stimuli unconsciously evokes these associations and affects how new information is processed and how we behave (Coltheart, 2018; Shaw, 2016: ebook location numbers 1989 and 2992).

While traditional politicians in a liberal democracy may present arguments based on rationality, populist rhetoric is determined directly by ideology (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017: 4), that is a values-based system which inspires party supporters and links them together. The populist leader provides their supporters with a framework through which they can interpret the world. One way to do this is to offer historical figures and stories that incarnate the values and messages they are conveying rather than discussing abstract ideas and solutions. Speeches of populist leaders frequently use familiar mythology or a collective memory to express implicit or unconscious value-based messages (Turpin, 2006: 3). In addition, through references to legendary figures and archetypes, the populist message provides a schematic simplification of what often feels like a confusing world and offers a way to understand it (Alduy and Wahnich, 2015: 1851). Le Pen has claimed success in this endeavour, saying that ‘Our biggest victory . . . without a doubt, is our ideological victory’ (Notre plus grande victoire [est] à n’en pas douter, notre

victoire idéologique). However, her plan must be to ‘transform this ideological victory into an electoral victory, a political victory’ (il nous faut transformer, cette victoire idéologique en victoire électorale, en victoire politique) (Le Pen, 2021).

Marine Le Pen uses a consistent narrative arc in her speeches, invoking three myths. She begins by referencing a Golden Age, which is destroyed after a betrayal by the elites until, finally, there is the promise of restoration by a saviour (Alduy, 2015: 250; Sini, 2016: 4; Turpin, 2006: 9). Marine Le Pen evokes different collective memories depending on the message or goal of any given speech while still following the same narrative arc.

Cécile Alduy and Stéphane Wahnich, researchers at Stanford University, conducted a detailed quantitative and qualitative analysis of 500 speeches, texts, declarations, and interviews of Jean-Marie and Marine Le Pen. They found that there is no change in the political positions and platform of father and daughter, as can be seen from her recent electoral campaign proposal to ban ‘Islamist ideologies’, which she called ‘totalitarian and murderous’ (AFP, 2021). However, Alduy and Wahnich stress that there are significant stylistic differences in the delivery of their messages. Their analysis highlights, for instance, that, among other things, Marine Le Pen frequently mentions ‘la douce France’ or ‘Sweet France’, which is a reference to the *Chanson de Roland*. This epic poem is the foundation of French national literature and is included in the curriculum of all French students. It recounts a battle that occurred in Spain in 778 between Charlemagne and the Saracens and sets the stage for a perpetual struggle between the French and Islam. In the story, a glorified vision of France is under siege by followers of the Prophet Mohammed. Charlemagne, however, is too trusting and leaves his rear flank exposed. The traitorous heathens take advantage of this and reveal their barbarity by attacking in an effort to invade France. Victory is torn from the ashes of defeat by a last-gasp, all-out effort on Charlemagne’s behalf made by a small band of royal guards led by Roland ready to sacrifice their lives for their country. The invaders are ultimately defeated because of the actions of these devoted loyalists who were willing to fight for their country in the same way as the RN is ready to fight for France today. The poem depicts Muslims as treacherous and untrustworthy. If the French are too naïve or trusting, as Charlemagne was, Muslims will take advantage and destroy French culture and society. The tale also allows supporters of the RN to identify with the royal guards, cementing a sense of unity and brotherhood within their ranks.

By repeatedly referencing ‘La Nation’ and ‘La France’, Le Pen is trying to resurrect a conception of France which existed for nearly one hundred years. Pierre Nora notes that for more than a century up to 1933, the nation, history, and memory had an unusually close, almost symbiotic relationship which took on a sacral character. According to Nora (1996: 5), ‘History was holy because the nation was holy’. Le Pen revives this quasi-religious view of France and its history and culture. If she can confer religious grandeur to the values and history of the French nation, she can associate her movement with the Crusades conducted in the Middle Ages to liberate the Holy Land from Muslim invaders.

Marine Le Pen also associates the notion of unity to France’s glorious past, which emphasizes the value of remaining pure and rejects the idea of allowing foreigners into the country. She references numerous historical periods and links the prosperity of that

time to a unified nation. We see evidence of this in a speech she gave in 2011, in which she says:

Throughout our fifteen-hundred-year history, we have sought out the unity which makes us unique, but this unity is a jewel which we must continuously cherish. What was the purpose of Clovis' baptism if not the building and consolidation of national unity, the masterpiece of the unifier kings, Henry IV and his 'Paris is surely worth a mass', the builders of our cathedrals, Bonaparte's codes, the black Hussars of the Third Republic, the resistance of the 1940s or the soldiers of our empire. (Quoted in Alduy and Wahnich, 2015: 2011).²

Here she invokes several pivotal moments in history when France was allegedly united. Each example reinforces the idea that ethnic unity has positively impacted the French in the past and will do so in the future.

The notion of unity also decides who is eligible to be considered French. She attacks multiculturalism for this reason, decrying it in 2013 because it 'fractures France's population along religious and ethnic lines' (Ce multiculturalisme qui fragmente la population de la France selon la religion et les origines, quoted in Alduy and Wahnich, 2015: 2041). On another occasion, she argues that because of diversity which has been imposed on the French, the country has been transformed, French values, laws, and lifestyle have collapsed to the point that the French are forbidden from being themselves in their own country (quoted in Alduy and Wahnich, 2015: 2041).³ She recently put the challenge France faces in stark terms, claiming that the April 2022 election 'will be about our civilization. Will France remain France or be brushed aside by the uncontrolled torrent of massive immigration flows that will wipe out our culture, our values, our way of life' (quoted in Nussbaum (2021a)). This is why we see that even while she nominally claims to be open to the idea of accepting immigrants who are capable of integrating into French culture, she simultaneously rejects the assertion by stressing that: 'You either inherit French nationality or you merit it' (la nationalité s'hérite ou se mérite, quoted in Alduy and Wahnich, 2015: 2046). To 'merit' the right to become French, according to Le Pen (2012),

will require a clean criminal record, a very good command of the national language, a way of life that conforms to our customs and republican values, a faultless education for your children, and respect and love for the country that has welcomed you. All this will be scrupulously checked!⁴

By making such onerous requirements for anyone to 'merit' French nationality, it is doubtful that anyone who is not historically French can ever obtain citizenship and touts the importance of the shared past of the 'Native French's' as essential for national unity. This is the basis for her proposed referendum on immigration which would 'drastically' restrict the numbers eligible to become a French citizen.

By using collective memories of historical events as the vehicle for her ideas, she makes a significant part of her message incomprehensible to most people not born and raised in France. Incomers or other nationals do not have the same unconscious associations to the historical events and figures in her national pantheon. They may be familiar with the history, but they do not share the collective memory they represent for French nationals. Many scholars, including Karl Deutsch, argue that what defines a people is 'a

community of complementary habits of communication'. He emphasizes how stylized representations of the past shared by a community create a 'we feeling' among its members (Lebow et al., 2006: 3). It is this 'we feeling' that Le Pen seeks to cultivate in her audience by making references to the Nation's collective past.

In an attempt to normalize her party in mainstream French politics, Le Pen has had to associate it with the foundational political principles of the French Republic. These include the notions of liberty, equality, and fraternity; the separation of church and state; liberal democracy; and the rule of law (McDonnell, 2015). To that end, she proclaimed the RN to be 'a great republican party' (Le Pen, 2017). In her inaugural speech for the 2017 presidential campaign, she mythologized the republic, emphasizing the need to recover the spirit of the Fifth Republic, a reference to another supposed golden age in French history when France prospered and was internationally respected under the leadership of President de Gaulle (McDonnell, 2015). By associating herself with one of France's most revered political figures who resisted and won against Nazi Germany, she intimates that she is attempting to do the same thing today.

We see that Le Pen resurrects the link which existed between the concept of the nation and its history, which is why she exclaims that 'Our children must know the history of France by heart, its friezes, its mythology, its continuities. They must live it: our kings, the Republic, the wars, our great men!' (quoted in Alduy and Wahnich, 2015: 1843).⁵ One reason for this is to remind the public about the importance of defending French culture. However, she goes one step further and tries to associate the party itself with the nation, replace a standard political reference 'the one and indivisible Republic' (*la République une et indivisible*) with France 'united as One and indivisible' (*la France est Une et indivisible*), thereby associating a principle of governance with a statement on the very essence of France itself. Thus, any invocation of 'la France' in speeches or party political broadcasts refers to the 'holy' nation and the Republican principles of government that the French have regarded as sacrosanct since the Third Republic instituted in 1871. This is why her plea to voters in her 2017 presidential campaign posters to 'choose France' at the ballot box (a surrogate for asking them to vote for her) was a direct reference to all of these elements of the Nation's collective memory (Le nouveau clip de campagne Marine Le Pen, 2017).

The last element in the narrative arc is that of a saviour who re-establishes order after an attack on the nation. The saviour whom Marine Le Pen seeks to emulate and associate herself with is France's most illustrious heroine, Jeanne d'Arc (Joan of Arc). The fact that both she and Joan are women makes the association between them that much easier. Joan's story of a 17-year-old peasant girl guided by God's voice to lead the French army to defeat the English in 5 months after a century of fighting is integral to French collective memory. Joan is presented as a feminine role model (Sini, 2016: 8), but is much more than that. According to Le Pen, 'Joan of Arc is a French national icon because she represents faith in your country and the triumph of the will' (*une icône française car elle symbolise à elle seule, l'esprit de résistance, la foi en son pays et le triomphe de la volonté*, Sini, 2016: 5). Le Pen wants the people to see her both as a successful leader and as a warrior ready to come to France's rescue in the same way as Joan of Arc rescued the country from the English. Le Pen's goal is to imbue herself with the authority and values that Joan of Arc represents, qualities which she has referenced in a speech:

She represents all of the values which we ardently defend. Love of country, the spirit of resistance, the independence of France, the thirst for liberty, the defence of identity and the safety of the French, the assembly of the national troops. (Quoted in Sini, 2016: 5)⁶

Ultimately her goal is for the public to see her as a modern incarnation of Joan of Arc whose national mission is the same. Le Pen is also, however, simultaneously referencing the notions discussed above of national identity and national unity when she speaks of the love of the nation, the defence of French identity and security. In this way, she links all the issues that she focuses on in her campaign to Joan of Arc and her quest. Every year on 1 May, Marine Le Pen reminds her followers of this message by delivering a speech honouring Joan. She gives her followers a lens through which to understand current problems by drawing a direct parallel with the trials and tribulations the French went through during the Hundred Years War as they struggled to rid their homeland of the English invader (Sini, 2016: 3). However, Le Pen is not appealing to historical events but to the legend they have given rise to.

Le Pen makes direct emotional appeals to the electorate. It is generally recognized that political messaging based on identity and emotion is more successful at engaging the public than logic. As Colin Hay (2020: 198) states, '*In terms of turnout, positional politics trumps valence politics every time*' (italics in original). This is why populist leaders generally focus their arguments on positional politics. Even though Le Pen is referencing historical events in her 1 May address, by letting the listener make the parallels with their current situation, the cognitive process engaged is psychological or emotional rather than rational (Danblon, 2010: 230–231). We see evidence of how she accomplishes this in this statement from one of her annual speeches: 'Deep within my soul I know that eternal France is calling out and waiting for us! . . . I will lead these men and women in service of their homeland! [. . .] Help me! Follow me!' (quoted in Alduy and Wahnich (2015: 2447)).⁷ Here she alludes to all the elements of the memory of Joan of Arc. Like the young girl, she too hears voices telling her to save the country. She, too, is imploring her troops to follow her into battle.

The successful new rhetorical style has led the RN to significant electoral successes and increasing political influence. In the 2014 European Parliamentary elections, the party finished first with 24.86 percent of the vote and obtained 24 of France's 74 seats. In 2017 they secured eight seats in the National Assembly. Many commentators believe that Le Pen has never been better poised for electoral success in a presidential campaign than for the upcoming elections in 2022 (Nussbaum, 2021b). Despite some recent setbacks in the European elections in 2019 and regional elections in 2021. The Party's impact on French politics remains strong (Amaro, 2021; Bridge Initiative Team, 2020). First of all, the disappointing results in this year's regional elections have primarily been attributed to significant voter abstention. It is estimated that three-quarters of Le Pen supporters stayed at home, meaning she potentially has a large electorate to draw from in the upcoming presidential elections (Amaro, 2021). Second, her ability to gain support among voters has forced mainstream political parties to shift their positions to the right on many issues such as immigration and religious freedoms (Davidson, 2021; Nowak and Branford, 2017). One consequence of this shift to the right has been the normalization of Le Pen and her party. Some politicians and right-wing commentators have

criticized her for becoming too mainstream (Ganley, 2021; News Wires, 2021). But we should not be fooled, as journalist Ramdani (2019) put it, the “new” RN party is still FN wolf in sheep’s clothing’. Perhaps the strongest evidence for this comes from the party’s affiliations with a great many of Europe’s most far-right political parties. In the European Parliament, the RN leads a coalition known as the Europe of Nations and Freedom group that includes the Dutch Freedom Party (PVV), Austria’s Freedom Party (FPÖ), Belgium’s Flemish Interest (VB), the Alternative for Germany (AfD), and the Italian Northern League (LN). All of which are either right-wing populist or far-right parties.

Notes

1. In 2002, Jean-Marie Le Pen reached the second round in the presidential election with 16.86 percent of the vote. However, that success is widely attributed to the large number of candidates in the first round. He was crushed (82/18) in the second round by Jacques Chirac, to date the biggest margin of victory since the establishment of the Fifth Republic.
2. Tout au long de nos quinze cent ans d’histoire, nous avons recherché l’unité qui nous singularise, mais cette unité est un joyau qu’il nous faut sans cesse chérir. Que visaient si ce n’est la construction et la consolidation de l’unité nationale le baptême de Clovis, l’œuvre des rois unificateurs, Henri IV et son ‘Paris vaut bien une messe’, les bâtisseurs de nos cathédrales, les codes de Bonaparte, les Hussards noirs de la Troisième République, les résistants de 40 ou les soldats de notre empire.
3. derrière [le]multiculturalisme, la mixité [. . .] il y a cet océan de lâcheté [. . .] qui aujourd’hui transforme profondément notre pays, affaïsse nos valeurs, nos lois, nos modes de vie et abolit le droit des Français à rester eux-mêmes dans leur pays.
4. Devenir Français exigera un casier judiciaire vierge, une très bonne maîtrise de la langue nationale, un mode de vie conforme à nos coutumes et à nos valeurs républicaines, une éducation sans faille à ses enfants, un respect et un amour du pays qui vous a accueilli. Tous cela sera scrupuleusement vérifié !
5. Nos enfants doivent connaître par cœur l’histoire de France, ses frises, ses mythes, ses permanences. Ils doivent la vivre: nos rois. la République, les guerres, nos grands hommes!
6. Elle représente tous les principes que nous défendons ardemment. L’amour de la patrie, l’esprit de résistance, l’indépendance de la France, la soif de liberté, la défense de l’identité et de la sécurité des Français, le rassemblement des forces nationales.
7. Au plus profond de mon cœur, je sais que la France éternelle nous appelle, nous attend! . . . je mènerai ces hommes et ces femmes au service de leur patrie! [. . .] Aidez-moi! Suivez-moi!

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Author biography

Dalya Soffer is a Master's candidate in International Relations at the London School of Economics and graduated Cum Laude from Boston University's Frederick S. Pardee School of Global Studies. Her main interest is in the European Union and the political, economic, and cultural challenges it faces. She has published in numerous outlets, including *The Yale Review of International Studies* and the *E-International Relations Journal*. She is currently researching issues concerning democracy and the rising authoritarian challenge.