

# Marine Le Pen will not capture more than 15 per cent of the vote despite her efforts to transform Front National into a less radical populist party

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*How many voters will support Front National candidate Marine Le Pen in the upcoming French presidential elections? [Catherine Fieschi](#) argues that despite Le Pen's efforts to transform the Front National into a less radical right-wing party her campaign has reached its limits, and that she will struggle to capture more than 15 per cent of the vote.*



Marine Le Pen's campaign for the French presidency is a case study in just how bamboozled we can be by populist parties of the right. On the one hand these parties obsess us: our tone tends to betray a prurient interest that smacks vaguely of political voyeurism (especially from the UK where we delight in clinging to the notion that, unlike those 'continentals' we don't really 'do the far right'). Yet for all our Liberal nice-girl infatuation with the rough boy on the block, it is also clear that we still have not learnt how to understand and diffuse populist politics—not of the right and not of the left. As a result, we are forever being taken by surprise. One of the key issues here is the stability of their support, something [Counterpoint](#) is working on but which is reliably puzzling. The unstable nature of support for populism – in the sense of fluid in its composition rather than in the sense of fluctuating – is illustrated by Marine Le Pen's recent campaign adventures.

Le Pen Jr swept to power from within the party promising a kinder, gentler image alongside a renewed commitment to the electoral fight. Her diagnosis was that the party had gone soft on this; focusing too much on internal politics, and not enough on getting the vote out. When she took over in January of 2011, she was quick to put herself forward as someone from a generation that would neither play the anti-Semitic card, nor cater to the party's (dwindling) old guard shaped by the immediate aftermath of colonialism in France and the racial politics that went with it. Her focus was on a different set of enemies—banking elites, political elites, the enemies of the Republican ideals (not Muslims, but Islam), all this in the name of shoring up French identity in the face of crumbling European institutions, corporate greed and national political ineptitude.

Marine gave her party, the Front National (FN), one last shake, to sever its ties with any element of the far right and complete the party's transformation into a right-wing populist one. Building on a politics of outrage and channelling the sense of betrayal and anxiety felt across vast swathes of French society as the public watched its credit rating fall, its largest banking institutions challenged and its president turning to China cap in hand, Marine took the party forward – forcefully, professionally and with impeccable hair. Long gone was the figure of her father clad in military fatigues, sporting his then trademark eye-patch whilst carelessly turning another racist pun.

Yet despite these efforts and the reservoir of bile and insecurities on which surveys demonstrate she could rely, Le Pen's campaign is in trouble. Two sets of events, one tragic and one a misfiring tactic point to this. First and foremost, the recent killings in Toulouse, which might have 5 or 10 years ago provided her with a ground-swell of support, have done nothing for her. Sarkozy would seem to be the principal beneficiary of this national tragedy. This, in and of itself, is having consequences for her

support – there is a sense of the campaign having reached its limits. And of Marine having reached hers. As a result, the buzz is gradually sounding more muffled.

The allegation she made a couple of weeks ago about Halal practices in French slaughterhouses was a good tip off that the campaign was looking for a lift. An act of desperation, a clutching at the old straws of the FN through the use of its old anti-Islamic armoury, suggests that the relatively more palatable, strictly anti-elitist/anti-European populism was not yielding the dividends she expected. One can almost picture the scene in which one of her aids brings her the most recent numbers on voting intentions: ‘Damn. This will not do. We’re going to have to play the racist card after all. I guess I’ll have to come up with some Halal story or other’. The second tip-off was how little stickiness that story had – she may have been forced to correct, explain and retract, but on the whole the press and the public gave the story short shrift. In combination, these two sets of events point to a campaign being overtaken by the mainstream right and the populist left.

Some still revel in the dark fantasy of Marine Le Pen in the second round of the election with 20% of the vote—it’s exciting; the kind of political brinkmanship that can make politics seem interesting even to a disaffected public. Also, it is a story that sells. But this seems more than unlikely (and let’s not forget that the reason her father made it to the second round in 2002 had more to do with the Socialist camp’s fragmentation in the first round rather than a surge in support for the FN). Marine Le Pen’s support is not insignificant and she does tap into powerful political emotions—including a form of political alienation. But her support is severely constrained by the fact that the two main opponents, the Socialist François Hollande and incumbent Nicolas Sarkozy, represent two distinct and credible political poles. With Hollande polling at 28-30% (depending on the poll) and sticking to his left-wing guns, Le Pen will be deprived of some of the support she had been counting on from disaffected working class voters.

Sarkozy, whatever his short-comings (he is currently also polling at roughly 28-30%), has always been seen as representing a true, robust right within French parameters. Those voters tempted by her nationalism need only turn to Sarkozy. And the Toulouse tragedy, for all the criticism of how the events were handled, is the sort of crisis that suits Sarkozy perfectly – and was even sickly reminiscent of the school hostage crisis he was seen as having handled heroically while home affairs minister. Voters tempted by Le Pen’s anti-corporate discourse can reliably vote for Hollande. Or Melenchon (polling at roughly 14% this week.) That doesn’t entirely take care of her [alleged](#) 17% support (a figure I doubt she will reach, my hunch is closer to 15%, but let’s see) but it dents it significantly. And explains why Halal was briefly back on the menu.

While it would be reassuring to think that a poor showing in this election might usher in a period of decline or stagnation for the FN, the reality is that Europe is probably on the eve of renewed populist activity. Populist politics will shape the agenda both in France and elsewhere in Europe and with renewed vigour as left-wing populism enjoys a renaissance in the coming years. Populism has infinite ideological plasticity and its strength is in the mix of its repertoire bound together by a basic anti-elitism that can appeal to left and right. So we could be witnesses to substantially revised political platforms from the current crop. Or the change may come in the form of parties such as the Dutch Socialists, who are busy gnawing away at Wilders’ support. Le Pen’s recent little tumble in the polls after a debate with the left-wing Melenchon shows that the populist left (ultimately not any nicer) can put up just as good a fight as the populist right. Either way, populism, in all its deceptive simplicity and dangerous claims to ordinariness and common sense, is here for a while.

*Catherine Fieschi will be chairing the UCL European Institute/Counterpoint event **The French Presidential Election: Politics, Populism and Le Pen** on 16 April. [More details.](#)*

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUOPP – European Politics*

## About the Author

### Catherine Fieschi – *Counterpoint*

Catherine Fieschi is the Director of Counterpoint. Previously, Catherine headed the think tank of the British Council as well as the think tank Demos. She also taught Comparative Politics at the University of Nottingham. Fieschi has advised numerous governments, businesses and foundations on aspects of risk, strategy and policy. She is the author of [\*In the Shadow of Democracy: Fascism, Populism and the French Fifth Republic \(MUP\)\*](#) and of numerous articles on extremism, populism, citizenship and identity politics.



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