

Marine Le Pen's result in last Sunday's French elections confounded the experts but does not signal the rise of the far right in Europe

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Pollsters often get election results wrong, and this week's French elections were no exception, with Front National candidate Marine Le Pen gaining more votes than was widely expected. As part of our continuing series on the French elections, [Marley Morris](#) reflects on the result, finding that while we should be careful to not exaggerate the success of Le Pen, the result puts her and not left-winger Mélenchon in the spotlight.



Once again, the Front National has confounded the experts. Last week Counterpoint and the UCL European Institute held a [discussion](#) on the French presidential election, looking in particular at how Front National candidate Marine Le Pen would fare. Most of our panel thought the 'Vague Bleu Marine' had failed to materialise and some expected her to do worse than her father in 2002 – whether they put it down to a poor campaign, Sarkozy's hard right stance siphoning voters from the Front National, or Marine Le Pen's failure to de-demonise her party. Similarly, pollsters underestimated the Le Pen score. Only Jocelyn Evans' [prediction](#) of 17.4 per cent – based on a long-range model – was virtually on the money. Le Pen received 17.9 per cent of the vote; the highest ever score for the Front National.

So while Le Pen's campaign was poor, perhaps the [shift](#) towards traditional Front National territory – immigration, security, Islam – in the later stages paid off. While there was the Sarkozy factor, his hard right positions, as some of our speakers pointed out, may have failed to woo Front National voters this time round after a dismal five years in power. And while Marine Le Pen's strategy of [de-demonization](#) may have failed, this could have in fact contributed to the sense of surprise success. The polling companies' low estimate may be down to the well-known 'shameful vote' factor – Front National voters being unwilling to admit their true voting intention in interviews. Perhaps pollsters – assuming that "Marine" and her "normalisation" of the party had at least in part successfully removed the stigma of voting for the FN – did not adjust their figures appropriately to account for the shameful vote. In other words, perhaps there were more embarrassed, reluctant Le Pen voters than the pollsters expected.



Marine Le Pen Credit: Rémi Noyon Creative Commons (BY)

The experts may have underestimated the FN's success, but last week's discussion still proved insightful for understanding the final result. We discussed how a female leader would impact on the Front National vote. As it turned out this could well have been a significant factor, with the traditional extreme right gender gap [narrowing](#) this time round. Counterpoint's [research](#) into the Front National may be relevant here – we found that 55 per cent of potential supporters (those who in the run-up to the 2007 election agreed with Jean-Marie Le Pen but were unlikely to vote for him) were women. Could these potential supporters have been mobilised by Marine Le Pen in 2012?

We also discussed the rise of far left candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon. Some suggested that it would be the left rather than the populist right that would now capitalise successfully on the anger and frustration felt by people amidst the continuing Eurozone crisis. "Blame the bankers not the immigrants!" Mélenchon bellowed

(though Le Pen [surely](#) wanted to blame both.) The renewal of the left has now been thrown into question. Of course, the results were brilliant for the left in one sense. François Hollande is on course to be the first socialist president in France since Mitterand and Mélenchon did far better than expected only a few months ago. But any [hope](#) that Mélenchon would knock Le Pen into third place and force Hollande to tack to the left has been checked as both [Hollande](#) and [Sarkozy](#) go after the Le Pen vote.

Still, we should be careful to not exaggerate the success of Marine Le Pen. In a terrible economic climate, with massive disillusionment with national and European political elites, an unpopular incumbent and a bland principal challenger, she only received one percentage more of the vote than her father in 2002. Indeed as [others](#) have noted, a greater proportion voted for the extreme right in 2002 than in 2012, but the vote was split between Bruno Mégrét and Le Pen.

Claims on the basis of the Le Pen result that the economic crisis is fuelling a [rise in the far right](#) should also be considered carefully – [Jamie Bartlett](#) emphasised the importance of cultural factors in understanding support for parties like the FN. Not all right-wing populist parties are in ascendance. In the Netherlands even PVV leader Geert Wilders – who [recently](#) brought down the Dutch government by walking out of budget talks – is losing momentum. Polls point to the PVV winning fewer seats than it won in 2010 and the party recently [suffered](#) a high-profile defection.

That does not mean we should dismiss the outcome of the election. As Phillipe Marlière suggested that even if Le Pen were only to get 15 per cent, this would be a remarkable result given the party's troubling platform. It is healthy for us to express surprise at the success of such a party, even if that success has been repeated again and again. Better surprise than glum acceptance.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPPE – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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