

The Front National is tipped to ‘win’ this year’s elections in France, but it needs more than votes to claim a share of power

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*In addition to the European Parliament elections in May, France will hold municipal elections on 23 and 30 March. **James Shields** writes that, as with many French elections, the far-right Front National (FN) has attracted much media coverage and public attention in the lead-up. However, he argues that while the FN might significantly improve its share of votes and seats, the party remains critically hampered by its lack of political allies and a highly disproportional electoral system that punishes isolation.*



“Why the FN has already won the municipal elections” – thus the [headline](#) of an article published in mid-November on the website of the French radio station Europe 1. Of all parties, it declared, the FN was best placed to profit from the March elections and might deliver on its own prediction of winning up to 1,000 seats across France’s municipal councils.

A similar tale is foretold of the European elections in May. “The FN top party in France”, [announced](#) the television channel France 24 after a survey in autumn placed the FN first on 24 per cent of voting intentions for these elections. A more [recent survey](#) in January kept the FN in “pole position” on 23 per cent. This projection of the FN as France’s “top party” in waiting has resonated across the print and broadcast media, leading even the sober left-leaning daily *Le Monde* to [reflect](#) on the unrivalled “upward dynamic” of Marine Le Pen’s party.

So the FN will ‘win’ both the municipal and the European elections of 2014. But what does ‘winning’ actually mean?

This question might best be approached by reviewing something of the FN’s current electoral standing. Here is a party, in brief, which attracted a combined 10 million first-round votes in the presidential and National Assembly elections of 2012. Its leader, Marine Le Pen, with 6.4 million votes (17.9 per cent) and third place in the presidential poll, exceeded her father Jean-Marie Le Pen’s best score in five presidential bids (one of which placed him second). She also secured more first-round votes than Jacques Chirac did in any of the four presidential elections he contested (two of which he went on to win).

Of all the parties competing in the 2012 elections, the strongest upward curve was achieved by an FN which added 5 million votes to its combined tally for the corresponding elections of 2007. And it has sustained its momentum. Compared with a deeply unpopular Socialist administration and a centre-right opposition riven by division, the FN was the party in the ascendant in France in 2013. It came close to winning two National Assembly by-elections and made headlines by winning the cantonal by-election of Brignoles in the southern Var department in October.

But look inside France’s elected bodies and the FN vanishes from sight. It has no stake in national, regional or departmental government, and it controls not a single town, village or hamlet in France. Its victory in Brignoles raised its total representation on France’s departmental councils to two seats out of 4,052. Similarly, in the 2012 National Assembly elections, the FN dominated media attention yet secured only two seats out of 577.

Across the last full cycle of elections since 2008, the FN has won not a single senator out of 348 and not a single mayor out of 36,718; it took 118 regional council seats from 1,880, three European Parliament seats from a French allocation (then) of 72, and 85 municipal council seats from no fewer than 519,417. In other words, the FN won some 200 seats from well over half a million across the major forums of democratic representation in France – or 0.03 per cent.

Any observer of British politics will know a thing or two about electoral distortion, but consider the votes/seats ratios showing the FN's gains in the 2012 National Assembly elections relative to those made by 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 (2/577) – the same number as that gained by the Centrist Alliance and the Regionalists with a mere 0.6 per cent of the first-round vote, while the Greens with 5.5 per cent took 17 seats.

Institutional non-existence may play to the advantage of an anti-system party, but it is a critical impediment for an FN seeking to become France's party of government and a leader [predicting](#) she will be “at the Elysée in ten years' time”. It shows how little headway the FN has in fact made in moving from its marginal isolation to a genuinely central role in French politics. In terms of executive power, it remains consigned to oblivion, no more than a virtual force routinely excluded from ‘the system’.



Marine Le Pen, Credit: Remi Noyon (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

In addition to the FN's long-term status as a pariah party, two main reasons combine to explain this exclusion: the two-round majority voting system employed fully or partly across most French elections, and the continued resistance by the centre-right UMP to any formal cooperation with the FN. Witness the difficulty encountered by Marine Le Pen, like her father before her, in gathering the 500 elected sponsors' signatures required to stand as a presidential candidate. There are some 47,500 public office holders in France empowered to give this endorsement. That the FN candidate should have been barely able to muster support from 1 per cent of them is eloquent commentary on the party's continued ostracism by almost the entire political establishment.

Under these conditions, the FN remains what it has been since its emergence as a political force in the 1980s: a critically isolated party with almost no elected base and no network of co-operational support. It has the negative capacity to spoil, but not the positive capacity to impose itself as a viable alternative. Even if it meets its own [target](#) of winning “hundreds, maybe a thousand” seats in this month's elections, including possibly a few mayors, it will raise its total representation across France's municipal councils to ... 0.2 per cent. If that is winning, it calls for some redefinition of losing.

Over the past thirty years, the FN has had a far-reaching impact on the French party system, the issue priorities of voters, and the public policy agenda in France. A [recent poll](#) showed popular agreement with the party's ideas at 34 per cent, the highest level yet recorded. To that extent, Marine Le Pen's strategy of ‘de-demonising’ the party, softening the cruder edges of its image and message, seems to be having some effect.

But the FN has encountered the limits of its impact by being excluded, with only the rarest exceptions, from the exercise of real power. In the current context of economic crisis and popular disaffection with mainstream politics, it may look well placed to extend its electoral challenge. Yet, unless and until it can impose itself on the centre-right as an essential alliance partner, it will continue to see its gains at the polls reduced to little or nothing.

The European elections are another case in point. As the Table below shows, if it performs as predicted, the FN [could win](#) up to 18 of France's 74 seats in the European Parliament. This would mark an impressive advance on the three seats it currently holds – but to what effect? With 2.4 per cent of the 751 seats in that assembly, it will remain as marginalised in Europe as it is at home, compelled to seek its allies among other, equally ostracised, far-right parties (see the [political courtship](#) already underway between Le Pen and Geert Wilders of the Dutch Party for Freedom).

Table: Predicted vote share and seats for 2014 European Parliament elections in France

<i>Party</i>	<i>Parliamentary group</i>	<i>Predicted vote share (%)</i>	<i>Predicted seats</i>
Union for a Popular Movement (UMP)	EPP	22	20
Front National (FN)	NI	20	18
Socialist Party (PS)	S&D	16	14
Union of Democrats and Independents (UDI)	ALDE	12	8
Front de Gauche	GUE-NGL	9	8
Europe Ecology – The Greens (EELV)	Greens/EFA	9	5
New Anticapitalist Party (NPA)	GUE-NGL	4	0
Arise the Republic (DLR)	EFD	3	1

Note: Predictions are from [Pollwatch2014](#) based on opinion poll data up to 14 February.

So talk of the FN's emergence as winner from the 2014 elections is highly misleading. The lights may be “[at green](#)”, but the road ahead is blocked by institutional and political obstacles that the FN is powerless to remove. For all its assiduous efforts to clean up its act and grow its popular support base, its destiny lies not in its own hands. It remains far from even a minor share in power, and its leader very far indeed from the Elysée.

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

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