

The French Political “Earthquake” and Extreme Right in Europe

by Virginie Guiraudon and Martin A. Schain

On April 19, Jean-Marie Le Pen, the leader for the extreme-right National Front (FN), came in second after Jacques Chirac in the first round of the French presidential election. Politicians spoke of a political “earthquake” whose aftershocks led to a massive mobilization of the Left, and in particular young people, in the streets. Demonstrators referred to the even bigger demonstrations against the Berlusconi-led populist coalition in Italy a few months before and expressed some embarrassment at having admonished the Austrians when Haider’s Freedom Party joined a coalition government in 2000. A day after the second round of the French election, another political shock took place in the Netherlands. Pim Fortuyn, who had won 35% in the Rotterdam local elections, was murdered, and his Leefbaar (livable) party went on to become the second party in the Netherlands with 17% of the vote and 26 seats in the second chamber.

Both episodes followed the successes of various populist or extreme-right parties in other Western European countries (Denmark, Austria, Norway, Belgium, Italy, Switzerland, and Hamburg in Germany), and political leaders were quick to conclude that Europe was witnessing a new populist wave that could not be ignored. Tony Blair and José Maria Aznar, as well as Gerhard Schroeder, referred directly to the French and Dutch electoral results in their call for the Seville EU summit to be dedicated to fighting illegal immigration. These recent events lead to two main questions: Did we indeed witness a sea change? What has been the impact of these results on the party system and on national and European policy agendas?

In electoral terms, the French results are hardly a sea-change. Since 1984, the FN has become a well-established political party, with a loyal electorate. By the late 1990s, over 90% of those who voted for the FN had done so previously. Among these voters, there was a higher level of those who identified with the party than for any party except the Communists. In 2002, 81% of those who identified with FN/MNR voted for Le Pen. Finally, although the party had some strong regional bases, it was the first or second party of the right in at least 80% of the electoral voting districts in France.

Moreover, Le Pen, who has been a presidential candidate three times, has always done well in these elections (just as Arlette Laguiller does on the extreme Left, this time in competition with a young Trotskyist postman who gathered 4.25% of the vote, only about 400,000 less votes than she did). With 16.95% of the vote, Le Pen bettered his previous performance by less than 2%-- about 220 thousand votes. (Meanwhile the traditional Right lost 4 million votes compared with 1995, and the governing “plural Left” one and a half million.) Voter turnout was at a historic low for presidential elections, with 28.4% of registered voters not casting a ballot. In this context, the biggest surprise was the stunningly poor performance of the two leading candidates, compared with 1995, but also the confirmation of the virtual disappearance of the Communist Party, whose leader gained barely 3.5% of the vote.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to underestimate the surprise of Le Pen’s percentage of the vote, a personal best. After all, FN had split in 1999, and Le Pen (who retained control of the party name) lost two-thirds of his militants to his rival and second in command, Bruno Mégret. Surveys after 1999 indicated about 6% of the vote would go to FN and 3% Mégret’s rival party, the MNR. So, Le Pen’s 17% of the vote was generated on the basis of past loyalties and personal attraction. The real surprise was more broadly political, rather than electoral. The National Front had emerged as the second party of a fragmented right in 1997, and then imploded a year and a half later. Now, against all odds, Le Pen was gaining support once again. The vast sea of 16 candidates indicated the breakdown of party strength on

both the right and the left, creating additional space for a resurgent extreme right. Moreover, one consequence of the campaign is likely to be a re-emergence of a FN organisation, and a re-building of FN support.

Le Pen got the highest level of support among 18-24 year-olds with 20%, double that of any other candidate (Jospin was second with 12%). He also did surprisingly well, second only to Chirac, among the '68 generation (45-64 year-olds) with 19%. Once again Le Pen was by far the most popular candidate of the working class, with 24% of the blue collar vote, compared with 16% for Chirac, who came in second.[1] His greatest gain is amongst the unemployed vote (38% of them voted for Le Pen while only 12% had in 1995).[2] Given the continued "gender gap" of the FN vote (21% of French males voted for Le Pen and 13% of French women), this makes the FN voter profile very similar to that of the Freedom Party voter in Austria: a blue-collar prime age male.[3] In the spatial distribution of the vote, Le Pen seems to be progressing where it was already gaining: in the Eastern half of France from North to South. Results at the local level show that he is doing well where both the extreme left and the abstention are strong, suggesting in these localities a complete disaffiliation with mainstream politics.

The other surprise is the gap between supporters of Le Pen (and Mégret) and of other candidates regarding the issue of immigration. After years in which supporters of other parties grew increasingly concerned with immigration, reaching 31% of the total electorate in 1993, the gap began to grow again in 1997 and 2002. Although concern among all voters about immigration dropped to 18% by 2002, it was 60% among Le Pen's supporters.[4]

In the Netherlands, immigration and in particular Moslem migrants was also at the center of the campaign of Pim Fortuyn's campaign. The eruption of an anti-establishment party on this kind of platform is not a new phenomenon. In 1989, the leader of the conservative Liberal VVD party, Frits Bolkestein, broke the Dutch elite consensus not to talk about immigration by calling Islam a "deviant" culture preventing the integration of Moroccan and Turkish immigrants, using terms similar to Fortuyn's pamphlet on "the Islamization of Dutch culture" that deemed Moslems "backwards."

Throughout the 1990s, immigration and the integration of Moroccan and Turkish immigrants remained a hot electoral issue. In the 1994 parliamentary elections, the Dutch Parliamentary Election Study panel survey revealed that almost 50% of voters believe that foreign minorities were a important problem, a score higher than for any other issue,[5] and the now deceased neo-fascist leader Hans Janmaat and two other Centrum Party members were elected. They lost their seats in 1998, but 33% of Dutch voters still believed immigration was an important issue. With 24.7% of the vote, the VVD became the second largest parliamentary group and joined the "purple coalition". Thus the Leefbaar party's emphasis on immigrants was not new but its denunciation of the Dutch elite consensus more credible. Rather than a sea change, the 2002 election revealed a changing of the guards with a maverick party and charismatic leader taking up part of the issue space left by a "deradicalized" party of government.

This is the lesson of Fortuyn's party: co-opting the VVD policy agenda did not make the immigration issue go away and a new party could still build upon it. The policies of the previous government targeted illegals and asylum-seekers, but this did not comfort voters into thinking that the government had the problem under control. It rather gave legitimacy to the idea that migrant populations were a threat to Dutch society. The naiveté of the Left has consisted in underestimating these kinds of societal issues and believing that a good government record in aggregate macroeconomic terms (job creation, growth rate) would lead to "retrospective" voting patterns for their camp.

Notwithstanding the fact that we did not witness a sea change, the overall political picture in the EU has changed: the Netherlands joins Denmark, Italy, Austria and Portugal as the fifth EU country in the last two years to elect a coalition government that includes a populist right-wing party. The swing to the right is visible elsewhere. The issue is thus how politics will affect policies.

The effect of extreme-right parties on policies such as immigration and integration is indirect. Yet over time it impacts the political system with respect to the issue-priorities and preferences of voters.

In France, the FN electoral breakthrough was first felt on the party system and the dynamic interaction among political parties competing for votes. The electoral impact was manifested in a realignment of parties within the system in many voting districts, as well as on the issue-priorities of voters across the political spectrum. The breakthrough was felt as well within the party itself. As the FN gained in sub-national electoral victories, it was able to construct a party network by developing support around its key issues. Finally, the party gained increasing influence over the policy agenda, as parties of both the Right and the Left attempted to co-opt and gain control of the issues of immigration and *sécurité*.

The party leadership split in January 1999 indicating the perils of systemic involvement. As the fruits of success accumulate (offices, income and influence), so too do the stakes, leading to tensions that partly explain the FN split. In general, the organizational benefits of success went disproportionately to the followers of Mégrét— who were dominant in the sub-national organizations and among office-holders— while the more ideologically-committed Le Pen group paid the price of compromise. Nevertheless, although the split was organizationally devastating, the elections of 2002 clearly demonstrate that the historic impact on the electorate, the party system and the political agenda could not be easily undone.

The experience in Western Europe indicates that even a modest electoral breakthrough triggers a political dynamic that influences immigration policy. The difference is how institutionalized this influence becomes. Whenever the extreme right has made an electoral breakthrough, established parties have reacted by co-opting some aspects of their program in an attempt to undermine their support. If the French case demonstrates the essential futility of these efforts, the British and German cases would appear to demonstrate just the opposite. Herbert Kitschelt argues that the sharp shift to the racist right by Thatcher leadership was a key factor that stopped the British National Front in its tracks by the late 1970s.[6] Michael Minkenberg makes a similar case for Germany— that major parties co-opted the immigration issue— although he argues that “at the sub-national level, these parties have demonstrated greater staying power than analysts were willing to concede after their decline in the wake of the major parties’ asylum compromise of 1993.”[7]

In fact, these cases demonstrate the agenda-setting impact of the extreme right. The challenge produced similar policy results in different ways. Thus, even where the electoral law has limited the ability of the extreme right to gain strategic advantage in elections, such as in Britain and France, the policy impact can be sustained by local electoral success and by pressure on the leadership of established parties. Even in the highly centralized French system, decentralized structures are reinforced by strong local party units to give them important policy-making roles. These structures, then, can magnify the influence of the extreme right in national politics. This is particularly true in a multiparty system where the balance among the established parties is close and where a relationship of dependence develops between the extreme right and established parties.

Nevertheless, the electoral success of the extreme right is only one factor behind immigration restriction. Jeanette Money makes a convincing case that the move towards restriction in Britain and France long pre-dated the emergence of the extreme right and was linked to electoral dynamics, namely

the attempt by the political right to win votes in constituencies of the left with a high proportion of immigrants.[8] As we saw in the Dutch case, the toughening of both political discourse and legislation on immigration and asylum predated the Leefbaar party's government participation. The same was true of Austria and the Freedom Party. Aside from these cases, European parties of the extreme right have been far more successful in indirectly influencing the political agenda than in gaining direct participation in policy-making. However, it seems that the electoral success of the extreme right undermines attempts by established parties of the right and the left to defuse the immigration issue by developing a consensus position on immigration.

Still the existence of a hegemonic party of the extreme right that has achieved an electoral breakthrough is a relatively rare occurrence. Thus, sub-national thrusts by the Republikaner Party and the DVU in Germany have had a periodic impact on immigration policy in the 1990s, but the impact of these parties has been limited by their fragmentation and by their lack of sustained breakthrough. The problem posed by the British National Front was partially resolved by co-optation, but the Tories had been moving in that direction since the early 1960s. In both countries, immigration remains at the top of the agenda with the same basic approach under center-Left governments. The sociological profile of "ethnocentric" voters and the influence of the tabloid and local press partly explain why they cannot ignore them.

With a common European immigration and asylum policy defined as a high priority for the European Community since the Amsterdam treaty and the Tampere summit, one wonders whether the political clout of anti-immigrant parties will affect the European policy agenda. The Seville summit focus on illegal immigration was framed by the British and the Spanish leaders as a reaction to the French and Dutch elections. Yet, the summit came up with nothing of substance on the harmonization of immigration policy. Instead it enabled each country to demonstrate that it was willing to take tough new measures to protect the frontier. Substantive policy change will remain primarily a national matter and uncoordinated for some time, which does not preclude convergence on the restriction of flows (family migration and asylum-seeking). On the other hand, while the pressure from extreme right electoral successes to further restrict immigration are clear, there are also pressures to increase at least some forms of immigration that are evident in the recent German legislation and in recent reports from the European Commission to the Council.[9] How this will be resolved will depend on the ability of party systems and the structure of government to fend off pressure from populist and extreme right forces.

Notes

1 Survey numbers are from *CSA Exit Poll Survey* on 21 April 2002.

2 IPSOS Exit Poll survey by phone on election day, 21 April 2002. 1995 figures are from *CEVIPOF Exit Poll Survey*.

3 Terri Givens, "The Radical Right Gender Gap", presented at the *Thirteenth Conference of Europeanists*, Chicago, March 14-16 2002, p. 3. Available as an MS word document online at <http://www.europamet.org>.

4 IPSOS Exit Poll.

5 The study is available at <http://www.bsk.utwente.nl/skon/>

6 Herbert Kitschelt, *The Radical Right in Western Europe* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), pp. 248-50.

7 Michael Minkenberg, "Context and Consequence: The Impact of the New Radical Right on the Political Process in France and Germany," in *German Politics and Society*, Vol. 16, No. 3, Fall 1998, p. 4.

8 Jeannette Money, *Fences and Neighbors: The Political Geography of Immigration Control* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

9. See, for example, Commission of the European Communities, *Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament on a Community Immigration Policy* (Brussels, 22/11/2000, COM (2000) 757 final)