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Down South, up North: party strategy and performances of the Extreme Right in municipal office in France

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Abstract

This paper aims to assess the French Front national's performances in municipal office following its success in securing a majority in four city councils in the mid-1990s. First, a brief account of the local political opportunity structures that participated in the municipal success of the FN is provided. The paper then suggests a characterisation of two divergent models of policy and vote-seeking styles of municipal governance whilst pointing at the commonality in the classic far right agenda underpinning social and cultural policies across the four localities under FN administration. As will be discussed, this strong authoritarian tropism translated into sectoral re-allocation of council financial resources and the targeting of the party's traditional constituency at local level. The building of an electoral clientele paved the way to the development of political corruption and municipal nepotism, which in most cases would later account for the rejection of incumbent FN mayors by voters. Wherever possible, the above framework for analysis is applied to exploring the strategic attempts by the extreme right to get hold of the Northern city of Hénin-Beaumont in the recent 2008 and 2009 municipal elections. The emphasis is on how a more pragmatic line of political communication was again replicated in combination with the populist anti-tax and anti-corruption agenda that had already contributed to the municipal rise of the party in the South in the mid-1990s.

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“I would never vote FN in a presidential election, that would be too dangerous. But in the municipals, it’s not the same. Briois is well known here and even if we wanted to, I don’t think he would have the power to throw foreigners out” (voter in Hénin-Beaumont, July 2009).

“Stop it with the FN! Bompard has been in post for six years and we haven’t seen any concentration camp” (voter in Orange, March 2001).

Over the past few decades, right-wing populist and populist radical right parties have succeeded in establishing themselves as key competitors across Europe. The electoral consolidation, increased legislative weight and systemic integration of those parties have paved the way to their entering government at local, regional and national level. The emergence of this pattern of 'populist incumbency' has in return prompted a number of questions which form the bulk of a new research agenda on populists in public office and, perhaps more generally, the issue of those parties' position across the integration / exclusion spectrum. The wide range of national experiences of accommodating populist parties in government illustrate the complexity of political and party system factors behind the dynamics of strategic co-operation, coalition bargaining and policy making (see for instance Gallagher, 2000; Minkenberg, 2001; Bale, 2003; Heinisch, 2003; Luther, 2003; Delwit and Poirier, 2007; Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008).

This paper offers to reflect more specifically on the experience of the French Front national (FN) holding municipal power in the mid-1990s. The party’s success in securing four city councils of Southern France in 1995 (Toulon, Marignane and Orange) and 1997 (Vitrolles) was the first occurrence of the extreme right in public office since the fall of collaborationist Vichy regime¹. In line with the emerging comparative literature on populist parties in office, the analysis of this period of the Front national assuming local power raises a number of issues regarding patterns of management and policy-making by the far right at municipal level, as well as some of the most relevant features of the local political scene in France.

To begin, the paper provides an outline of the political opportunity structures that existed at local level, which largely facilitated the accommodation of the far right by the RPR/UDF cartel over the 1986-1998 period, and later participated in the municipal success of the FN. Beside the electoral weight of the party in those particular localities, the emphasis is placed on the ideological proximity and organisational ‘porosity’ between the mainstream and the extreme right, the specific sociology of the FN constituency in Southern France as well as the electoral appeal of a ‘winning formula’ combining anti-tax demagoguery with traditional anti-establishment politics. An interesting comparison can be drawn here with the political conditions that have prevailed in the rise of the FN in Hénin-Beaumont and more generally in the consolidation of the party in the North-East part of the country since 2002.

¹ Notwithstanding the short-lived experience of FN-led local administration of the city of Saint-Gilles (Gard, 12,000 inhab.) following the party’s success in the 1989 local elections. The joint FN/RPR list led by Charles de Chambrun won a 3-party ballot by a narrow 39.5 per cent of the votes in the second round of the municipal election. However, the city council was lost in a by-election in June 1992, where a broad coalition of all mainstream parties stood up against the FN mayor and achieved an overall majority of 55.5 per cent of the vote cast.

The above exploration of the FN's position within the local party system will then be complemented with a qualitative evaluation of the party's performances in municipal office in Toulon, Marignane, Orange and Vitrolles. A characterisation of two distinct models of policy-seeking vs. vote-maximising styles of municipal governance is suggested. As will be discussed, the examination of the (so far) unsuccessful campaigns of the extreme right in Hénin-Beaumont shows a number of similarities with the tactical line of 'non-partisan' and locally based canvassing adopted by some local leaders of the FN in the mid-1990s. Yet this attempt at toning down the traditional political message by the FN should not be considered a significant departure from ideological orthodoxy. Nor would it fit an always moving line of intra-party opposition between so-called hard and soft-liners. On the contrary, reviewing social and cultural policy-making across the four localities under FN administration will stress the persistence of a common far right agenda, together with the development of nepotism and political patronage.

1. Political opportunity structures at local level

Looking back at the French political scene of the mid-1990s, one must recall the continuing electoral strength of the FN and its impact on the overall balances of forces within the party system (Martin, 2000). Despite its increasing weight, the party had not managed to escape the margins of the national political system, where it had been confined by its anthropology from within the post-1945 historically de-legitimised neo-fascist and national-conservative camp (Camus & Monzat, 1992). As early as 1985, however, this political isolation and lack of coalition potential by the FN nationally had come in sharp contrast with the actual development of collusive strategies by leaders of the mainstream right at local level and the recurrent building of tactical alliances *in the field*.

With particularly high levels of popular support in Southern France, the FN had become a serious challenger to local actors of the mainstream right. In the 1988 presidential election, Le Pen had achieved his best scores in Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur with 25 per cent of the vote. In the subsequent legislative ballot, a number of prominent party leaders –including Le Pen himself– had travelled to this new electoral eldorado hoping for 'safe-seat' constituencies. By the time of the 1995 municipal election, the FN had surpassed the 30 per cent threshold across a significant number of localities in the region. In a similar vein, the more recent attempt by Marine Le Pen to set foot on Northern territories is largely accounted for by the changing balance of forces and the growth of the extreme right vote in the large working class areas of Nord-Pas-de-Calais (in the first round of the 2007 legislatives, Le Pen polled no less than 29.2 per cent of vote).

In the Southern part of France, in particular, the many opportunities offered to the FN by local leaders of the mainstream right to enter *ad hoc* coalitions in the earlier stage of its development contributed a significant deal to establishing the status of the party as a legitimate political actor within the system and laying the foundations of future public acceptance of municipal incumbency by the extreme right².

² In the 1986 regional contest, the RPR/UDF cartel called for the support from the far right to achieve an overall majority in 7 out of the 22 regional councils (Aquitaine, Franche-Comté, Languedoc-Roussillon, Haute-Normandie, Picardie, Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, Midi-Pyrénées). In return, Le Pen's party was entrusted with executive vice-presidencies in four of the above regions.

In the highly ideologically polarised context of the mid-1980s, the ‘incorporative’ approach – as then theorised by Mediterranean UDF leaders Jean-Claude Gaudin or Jacques Blanc for instance – was predominantly seen as part of the response to the shock caused by the victory of the left in 1981 and the consequent alternation in power by the socialist-led alliance with the PC. The virulent anti-communist ideological element in the legitimisation of local agreements with the FN had, for example, already been central to the tactical manoeuvring in the critical municipal by-election of Dreux in September 1983. What was to become the founding event in bestowing political respectability upon the Front national was countenanced by a number of key representatives of the RPR/UDF on the ground that the FN was less an immediate danger than the ‘socialo-communist’ leftist cartel and the participation of the so-called ‘Red Fascists’ in government. The period also coincided with the FN’s attempt at building links with the mainstream right through conservative factions and think-tanks, most notably the Club de l’Horloge. The FN’s tactics of opening-up attracted a number of defectors who helped sustain the party’s efforts to acquire political legitimacy and a more acceptable public image. For the vast majority, these ‘showcase’ politicians subsequently left the FN (Birenbaum, 1992)³.

Paving the way for populists: ideological congruence and organisational ‘porosity’ in the mainstream right

The *de-facto* recognition of the FN as part of the right-wing family had been facilitated by the high level of ideological congruence that existed among representatives of the mainstream and extreme right regionally. To some extent, the hard stance on immigration or crime taken historically by a number of local right-wing politicians paved the way for the advent of FN in municipal power. Widespread anti-Arab prejudice was pervasive in the regional elite’s political culture as was evident from the development of an openly racist discourse throughout the 1970s and the 1980s. Most notably, Maurice Arreckx, UDF mayor of Toulon from 1959 to 1985, built part of his longstanding electoral career on the controversial politicisation of immigration issues and the recurrent use of xenophobic mobilisatory slogans such as ‘Toulon wants to stay Toulon’ or ‘more than 10 per cent foreigners is not tolerable in our cities’. To quote Arreckx from a (in)famous interview that he gave to Swedish newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* in 1976: ‘Racism has nothing to do with politics. It’s in our guts. Arabs are different from us. They like to live their way with 7 or 8 people in one room. They have different habits. Go take a look at what’s happening down on Theatre Square: a French girl just can’t sit down more than two minutes before three Arabs come and start to brandish what’s down their trousers’. His successor, François Trucy (UDF) did follow in his mentor’s footsteps: “I am not xenophobic but I believe unemployment, North-African overpopulation and tramps are the root causes of crime (...) There is at the moment one race that is driving another one out, just like the red ants from Argentina have driven the black ants out of Provence. I just want the Toulonnais back in Toulon” (*Le Monde*, 23.04.1986).

³ This collusive strategy of *notabilisation* was politically formalised in 1986 through establishing Rassemblement national proportional lists bringing together Le Pen’s Front national, Mégret’s Confédération pour l’Avenir et le Renouveau (CODAR) and parent Comités d’Action républicaine (CAR), as well as members of the Centre National des Indépendants et Paysans (CNI/CNIP) such as Olivier d’Ormesson, Yvon Briant, Edouard Frédéric-Dupont, Michel de Rostolan or Philippe Malaud.

Notwithstanding proximity in policy positions, there is also a clear evidence of the links that existed between the constellation of far right small groups and think-tanks, on the one hand, and the more established parties of the mainstream conservative or centre-right on the other, most evidently in Southern France where organisational 'porosity' was perhaps higher (Blöss et al., 1999). At local level, the ideological promiscuity of the mainstream right with the FN has been historically maintained by the close links built through a number of interconnected groups which served as bridging organisations and locus for political networking. As put by UDF leaders in Marseille in the early 1990s as an attempt to justify past and future accommodation of the FN: 'There has been enough quibbling. This problem is a pain for everybody [sic] and we are not happy about making such deals. But the FN representatives are people we have always mixed with and with whom we have talks that we often don't have with the Socialists' (*Le Monde*, 06.06.1990). The blurring of partisan differences is similarly well in evidence in the Marignane case where the FN candidate Daniel Simonpieri had initially served as deputy-mayor for UDF-PR mayor Laurent Deleuil from 1989 to 1995 before turning to the extreme right.

Throughout the late 1960s and 1970s, the particularly strong anti-Gaullist element brought together former OAS and Tixier-Vignancour supporters with members of the *Républicains Indépendants* (RI) (Rémond, 2005) among whom were found some of the instigators of future political co-operation with the far right such as Jean-Claude Gaudin, Jacques Blanc, Jacques Médecin, Laurent Deleuil, Maurice Arreckx or Jacques Peyrat. A significant number of FN regional candidates in 1986 were drawn from the ranks of the UDF-PR (e.g. Jacques Vaysse-Tempé, Jean-Marie Le Chevallier, Jean-Yves Le Gallou or Jean Durieux). The Bouches-du-Rhône and the Var cases are of particular relevance to analysing the significance of this pattern of collusion in the local political elites across the wide spectrum of the non-Gaullist right, from Republican centrists to right-wing extremists. In the 1985 cantonal elections, local representatives of the UDF and the FN coalesced in order to defeat RPR candidates in Marseille. In 1986, the PACA region was won by Gaudin with the support of the FN. In 1988, the FN and the mainstream right agreed again on reciprocal withdrawal procedures in the legislative election in Marseille, whereby eight of the extreme right representatives were able to stand alone in opposing the left in the second round, and the FN stepped down from 6 constituencies in the Bouches-du-Rhône department and a total of another 10 constituencies in the whole of the PACA region. In the Var department, Maurice Arreckx would have no hesitation in calling for voters to support FN candidate Yann Piat against the socialist party.

In Mediterranean France, the above ideological, personal and organisational connexions were reinforced by the social base of support inherent in the large community of French *pieds-noirs* settlers repatriated from Algeria following the country's independence in 1962 (Delpard, 2002; Verdès-Leroux, 2001). The *pieds-noirs'* influence on the dissemination of anti-Arab feelings in local party politics, and how the latter were instrumentalised by right-wing political actors has been well documented (Stora, 1999). In the city of Nice, for instance, the strategy of seduction by the longstanding municipal dynasty of the Médecin family is a very interesting occurrence of this process of electorally integrating French repatriates from North-Africa through the distribution of patronage and the allocation of political symbols such as 'French Algeria' memorials (Olivesi, 2002; Branche, 2005). At local level, the specific contribution by the *pieds-noirs* to building party structures (Rouhan, 1997; Comtat, 2009) and, to some extent, the electoral constituency of the extreme right (Veugelers, 2005) would later be manifest in other areas with high density of ex-colonials such as Marignane, Carpentras, Bollène or Toulon. From an historical perspective, it must be recalled that pro-French Algeria candidate Tixier-Vignancour had come in the third place in three

Mediterranean departments (Bouches-du-Rhône, Var, Alpes-Maritimes) with over 15 per cent of the vote in the first round of the 1965 presidential election (as opposed to 5.2 per cent nationwide). In Toulon, links between the extreme right and the *pieds-noirs* community were further formalised in 1987 through the creation of a FN-flanking organisation (i.e. Cercle National des Rapatriés, CNR) by former *Algérie Française* proponents and OAS activists such as Albert Peyron or Pierre Sergent. The effect of political canvassing by a number of *pieds-noirs* voluntary associations during the FN municipal campaigns of 1995 in Toulon and Marignane was acknowledged by the newly elected city councils building symbolic memorial stones associated with historical figures of the clandestine fight for French Algeria.

Anti-tax demagoguery and the anti-corruption agenda.

One last important element of contextualisation is that of political corruption and financial mismanagement. In France, mass dissatisfaction with the traditional political elite can be considered a key factor of the electoral dynamics of the FN since the mid-1980s. At national level, political resentment has been fuelled by the anti-system rhetoric of the far right and has in return allowed for cross-cleavage mobilisation (Perrineau, 1998; Mayer, 2002). Locally, profound public discontent with the political elite must be regarded as a crucial determinant of the FN's ability to take over city councils. Most prominently, the success of the party in Toulon was closely associated with the fall of the 'Arreckx' system of corruption that had been uncovered by the assassination of then-UDF parliamentarian Yann Piat. The unfolding of the scandal had led to the arrest of Arreckx and his imprisonment on multiple charges of corruption in 1994. To a lesser extent, a similar situation arose in Vitrolles where charges of falsification and corruption were brought against PS candidate Jean-Jacques Anglade in December 1995. Electoral consequences were foreseeable in an opinion poll conducted in October 1996, which showed the citizens' growing lack of faith in the local administration: no less than 58 per cent of the population were dissatisfied with the outgoing mayor while only a mere 5 per cent would see him as 'honest' (SOFRES-*Le Nouvel Observateur*, February 1997). More recently, political corruption topped the agenda of the 2008 and 2009 municipal elections in the Northern city of Hénin-Beaumont where FN vice-president Marine Le Pen came close to winning. Following suspicion of fraud, incumbent PS mayor Gérard Dalongeville was arrested together with members of his cabinet in April 2009 on charges of forged invoices and fictitious deals. Media exposure of corrupt dealings by the city administration resulted in a significant electoral boost for the far right: in the first round of the July 2009 by-election, the FN list won 39.3 per cent of the vote, an increase of 10.8 on the party's score in the previous municipal ballot of March 2008.

Attacks on corruption, financial malpractices and growing deficit in the municipalities were central to the local election agenda of the far right, with a particular emphasis on local taxes and public distrust in politicians. To some extent, this shift was a departure from the more established nativist and welfare-chauvinist policies promoted by the party nationally. A core feature of the FN's neo-liberal agenda in the 1980s, anti-tax protest had indeed lost some of its salience in the subsequent programmatic development of the FN, as the party chose to adopt more 'centrist' positions on the socio-economic cleavage to consolidate its leadership among working class and lower social strata voters (Ivaldi 2003). At local level, however, fiscal issues regained prominence with protest being directed against increasing council taxes, misdirecting of public monies and financial distress. In Toulon, for instance, the city administration was over € 300 million in debt on the eve of the 1995 election. In 2008, the municipal election in Hénin-Beaumont was predominantly fought over taxes and law-and-

order: the latter were considered the most salient issues by 41 and 45 per cent of the voters respectively (IFOP-*La Voix du Nord*, 13.02.2008). In 2004, a report by the Regional Financial Audit Chamber had revealed a €12 million consolidated deficit and pushed for debt repayment action in the form of a 85 per cent increase in local taxes. The municipal platform presented by the FN in December 2007 made fiscal protest a cornerstone to the party's claim to 'streamline the city's financial management' by cutting down the current administration's 'sumptuous lifestyle', conducting a 'drastic reduction in the number of municipal staff' and putting 'a halt to fictitious jobs'.

2. Models of local governance

The account of the local opportunity structures that fostered the FN municipal success in the 1990s stresses the political process whereby right-wing extremist leaders obtain mainstream legitimacy and get their passport to power. The significance of this process of pulling ostracised peripheral actors in the region of political acceptability should not be overlooked and, as suggested, cannot be reduced to the simple arithmetic of change in the electoral balance of forces. On the other hand, the ability by extremist parties to enter the arena of regular party co-operation is equally dependent upon adaptative strategies and policy alterations on their part. In the case of the FN, the early 1990s were a time of growing realisation by the party leadership that prospects of gaining parliamentary representation were almost null and therefore their national coalition potential waning. In response, the FN shifted its own position and moved away from a conciliatory attitude towards a 'neither left, nor right' repositioning of the party as a radicalised third competitive bloc (Ivaldi, 2003). With the 1995/97 local successes coming at this critical strategic juncture, the political and symbolic management of municipal office became of the utmost importance. Diverging strategic views led to bitter top-down intra-party conflict.

'Policy-seeking' vs. 'vote-seeking' style of municipal governance

In this specific context, the qualitative analysis of the FN's performances in municipal office suggests a characterisation of two relatively distinct patterns of municipal governance: one 'policy-seeking' found in Vitrolles and Toulon, the other 'vote-maximising' in Marignane and Orange. These two models were connected to personality factors and the diverging strategic goals by the local representatives of the party across the four localities.

The unprecedented experience of holding municipal power was obviously considered by Le Pen's party an opportunity to prove itself a credible and legitimate alternative to the RPR/UDF condominium. The crucial strategic value of the localities was acknowledged by the FN leader: 'these mayors have been elected on FN lists and on the party's platform, under the patronage of the FN and its president (...) Their cities must become the new bases and a window for national reconquest' (*Le Monde*, 31.10.1995). In the immediate aftermath of the 1995 municipal success, a number of key national speakers of the party took strong positions in the media to stress the need for the newly elected mayors to bring forward visible measures of 'national preference'. As put for example by Marie-France Stirbois with regard to council housing: 'if the applicant is French, he will get a council flat. If he is a foreigner, then he shall be put at the bottom of the waiting list' (*Le Monde*, 18.06.1995).

This notion of a locus for almost experimentally implementing some of the key measures of the FN political agenda, and therefore establishing the viability and applicability of the far right's programme at national level, was central to the policy-oriented style of local governance developed in Toulon and even more visibly in Vitrolles. In the latter especially, it was clear that some of the most controversial measures by ruling Mégret couple were given particular emphasis in order to attract as much publicity as possible, thereby serving the party's national goal of policy differentiation. Hence for instance some of the contentious interviews by Catherine Mégret with regards to the most cherished 'national preference' discriminatory scheme or her unconditional supporting of Le Pen's highly controversial statement on 'fundamental racial inequalities' (*Berliner Zeitung*, 24.02.1997).

Not surprisingly, the first actual experience of implementing measures of 'national preference' locally was found in Vitrolles in January 1998 after the FN city council had decided for a specific child-allowance to the sole benefits of French or EU citizens. As explained by Bruno Mégret: 'It is normal that the French have priority at home just like Europeans in Europe'. Despite previous judicial setbacks⁴, the national preference card was played again in the 2001 campaign where the FN candidate circulated a pamphlet entitled '*Bien de chez nous*' against the so-called 'reverse colonisation by immigration'. The tract announced the city council's intention to by-pass the legal framework in order to 'give priority to the French in terms of municipal jobs, social benefits and council housing'. Similarly, in Toulon, there undoubtedly were more or less hidden discriminatory practices. This was for instance acknowledged in veiled general terms by FN municipal councillor Eliane de la Brosse: 'it's true that we tend to help French families first. We do indeed ask for identity cards and other documents. We are first concerned about the French who are experiencing great economic difficulties, and only after do we take care of others. It's not about rejecting others, rather it is putting the interest of our children and families first, if they don't have everything they are entitled to' (interview, 02.03.1999). Similar practices were uncovered for instance by the case brought against FN deputy-mayor Philippe Viard in May 1998 following a complaint lodged by a local shopkeeper of Harki origin after her application to purchase a burial plot had been turned down (*La Dépêche*, 06.05.1998).

At variance with the programmatic goals set by Le Pen, the model of governance that dominated in Marignane and Orange was rather one of shedding political skin in favour of a more neutral style of management (Viard, 1996). Here the main goal was to focus on personal entrenchment at municipal level and avoid the amount of media scrutiny under which their counterparts were going in Vitrolles and Toulon because of the more overt ideological stance taken in decision-making. In Orange, for instance, visible urban development programmes were carried out by the FN administration to improve main streets and gardens in the city centre, or provide for local car parks free of charge. The 'apolitical management' put forward by Simonpieri and Bompard later allowed its two proponents to move away from the FN to join Sarkozy's UMP and Villiers' MPF respectively.

⁴ In examining conditions of eligibility for this special allowance, the Aix-en-Provence Court later ruled against a clear infringement of fundamental principles of equal rights. It gave Catherine Mégret and deputy-Mayor Hubert Fayard a suspended three-month prison sentence, together with 2 years of ineligibility for public office and a fine of about 15,000 Euros.

Internally, the municipal success of 1995/97 triggered a ‘centre/periphery’ cleavage between national leadership and newly elected local notables, a line of conflict which was relatively new to the FN’s highly centralised and hierarchical party organisation. The incapacity to incorporate those antagonist views showed the strong constraints imposed on the party’s development at local level. In 2004/05, the bitter dispute between Bompard and Le Pen led eventually to the former being expelled from the Front national. The struggle confirmed that Bompard’s pragmatic governance had formed part of a broader political strategy whose priority was to consolidate the party at local level rather than pursuing what was considered a ‘pointless’ presidential ambition, be it with Le Pen’s populist charisma and voluminous media coverage.

In many respects, the ‘non-partisan’ and locally based canvassing by the FN in the municipal campaigns of 2008 and 2009 in Hénin-Beaumont showed that lessons from the past had been learned. Following Marine Le Pen’s successful personal endeavour in the 2007 legislative elections, the municipal ticket that was put forward in the 2008 municipal ballot was a clear attempt at cross-cutting the local/national cleavage. With Marine Le Pen placed in second position on the party list, the priority was given to FN local representative Steve Briois, a well-known ‘*enfant du pays*’ (born-and-bred) figure of the regional political scene and municipal councillor since the mid-1990s. Although there is very little doubt that the Hénin-Beaumont campaign was primarily a vehicle for Marine Le Pen’s personal ambition nationally, the low-profile approach manifested in many ways. Symbolically, it was obvious in the changes made to the 2008 electoral posters (see below) which put her in the background while carefully avoiding any mention of the FN name or logo.

Figure 1. FN electoral posters for the 2008 municipal campaign in Hénin-Beaumont



Such strategic attempts by FN representatives at playing down the partisan card locally were closely associated with personality factors and candidate notability. The promotion of a strong ideological policy-seeking agenda was found in the two FN municipalities where the actual leaders did not originate in the local political inner circles. Instead they had been tactically brought in from national party apparatus by the late 1980s. Marine Le Pen's move to Pas-de-Calais in the 2007 legislative ballot was another clear instance of electoral 'airdropping'. This was also the case for both Jean-Marie Le Chevallier and Bruno Mégret whose political installation in the Var and Bouches-du-Rhône departments respectively had begun in the 1988 legislative elections after both of them had defected from the mainstream right to join the FN a few years earlier. In contrast, Orange's mayor Jacques Bompard was for instance an historical figure of the far right in Vaucluse and had led the party's departmental federation since 1975 after participating in some of the most radical nationalist groups such as Occident or Ordre Nouveau. Even more paradoxically perhaps, proponents of policy-oriented governance at local level such as Mégret or Le Chevallier were regarded as representatives of a group of 'moderate' elites –at least more open to political co-operation with the mainstream right– amongst the various factions constitutive the FN national leadership at the time.

Ideological constraints and the authoritarian agenda

That forms of 'non-partisan' governance were found in Orange or Marignane should by no means be interpreted as a significant move away from political orthodoxy: on the contrary, reviewing actual policy-making across the four localities under FN administration shows the persistence of the classic authoritarian agenda of the far right. Across all four city councils, priorities were indeed very similar, beginning with a strong emphasis on social and cultural policies.

At party level, this social-authoritarian component can be considered an expression of the national-conservative ideology of the Catholic counter-revolutionary fringe of the French extreme right, which had joined forces with the FN in the mid-1980s. Additionally, by the early 1990s, the focus on 'culture' became an integral part of the political strategy by the FN nationally (Ivaldi, 2007). With a rather dubious appeal to Gramsci and a much clearer reference to the primacy of culture in the ideology of the new right (GRECE), the 300 Measures for France's Revival (1993) called for the FN to influence the political debate by promoting traditional cultural values against the established 'intelligentsia' and 'intellectual terrorism' by the left. As was then formalised by Pierre Vial or Mégret, there was an immediate threat to traditional values of social cohesion and harmony embodied in so-called 'Rap-Tag-Lang' alternative left-wing libertarianism, which commanded to 'wage a war on the degeneration of art and culture' (*Le Monde*, 06.02.1992). These themes would be further emphasised in the party's summer university of La Grande-Motte in August 1996.

Locally, it soon became evident that all FN mayors would put those principles into practice. In Toulon, Le Chevallier made clear his intention to 'give back the Toulonnais their Provençal culture'. Fierce rejection of modernity manifested in systematic attacks on popular art festivals (e.g. Châteauvallon in Toulon or the Chorégies in Orange) or leading anti-racist organisations and youth cultural associations through drastic financial cuts in city council subsidies. The bitter controversy over the Sous-Marin café in Vitrolles, and ultimately its forcible relocation in the neighbouring city of Gardanne, together with the closing of the Lumières cinema on the account of its showing of 'unwanted' short-films on HIV/AIDS or Bompard and Simonpieri's policy of systematically excluding so-called 'cosmopolitanism'

books from public libraries in Orange and Marignane, were among the many examples of the FN's municipal politics of 'cultural restoration' inspired by social authoritarianism and sustained by the longstanding conspiracy theory on the far right. In Toulon, another controversial decision was to cancel the invitation for French-Jewish novelist Marek Halter to participate in the city's book festival to the benefit of a number of far right writers and publishers⁵.

It must be noted here that this political struggle against the alleged contemporary 'cultural diktat' of the left was not restricted to municipalities. Significantly, a similar pattern was reproduced in some of the regions where the FN had obtained a right to vote on regional council subsidies after forming alliance with the RPD/UDF in March 1998. In Languedoc-Roussillon, for instance, the FN was in a position to impose severe cuts in the monies allocated to a number of cultural associations such as the Théâtre des Treize Vents, the Centre chorégraphique de Montpellier, the Festival de Danse de Montpellier or the Festival de Cinéma Méditerranéen. Similarly, in Rhône-Alpes, Pierre Vial, the FN Regional Vice-President for Culture, led the council majority into reducing significantly the amount of financial support to a number of art and cultural events such as the Biennial Festival of Dance and that of Modern Art.

Placed under the yoke of far right ideology, FN social policies illustrated the party's inability to conceive some of the most salient issues inherent in the transformation of contemporary French society (Martin et al, 1999). The strong authoritarian tropism translated into sectoral re-allocation of council financial resources and the targeting of the party's traditional clientele at local level. This echoed the national party's aim to spread its influence across a wide range social groups, beginning with constituencies most susceptible to extreme right appeal (Ivaldi, 1998). At local level, policies were predominantly aimed at well-identified groups of supporters such as veterans, repatriates, the military, police officers, small business owners and traders, shopkeepers. Across the cities of Orange, Marignane and Toulon, the linkage was particularly strong due to the substantial contingent of military and police. In Toulon, the political influence of the local naval arsenal was perceptible in the re-allocation of municipal funds to veterans as well as in the making of Le Chevallier's support committee for the 1995 campaign, which had brought together high ranking officers of the Navy and former Arsenal executives.

These policies proved highly inefficient however in addressing crucial issues that would fall outside the extreme right's 'traditional community', such as social deprivation, youth and ethnic minorities, abortion, drug abuse, the prevention of HIV/AIDS or the development of single-parent families. In Toulon, for instance, this led to the FN stopping the city's financial support to the well-established AIDES charity on the ground that it was an 'association of homosexuals disguised in an organisation in favour of victims of HIV/AIDS' (in *Le Toulonnais*, city-council newsletter, 02.12.1995). Social discrimination was equally clear in the decision by the Orange FN mayor to withdraw from a number of local development schemes in the socially deprived and high foreign population density inner suburbs of Aygues and Fourchevieilles. Eliane de la Brosse, member of the FN administration in Toulon, accounted for policy shifts as follows: 'I speak as a member of the FN [...] We are concerned with everybody's well-being but perhaps we do turn more specifically to the elderly, those retired and families. I must remind you how important, as a concept, family is to us. Children

⁵ In a similar vein, the renaming of Vitrolles' Jean-Marie Tjibaou avenue (after former Kanak independence leader in French New-Caledonia) into Jean-Pierre Stirbois (former FN Secretary General) bore testimony to the symbolic importance given by the FN to making its own mark at local level.

must be protected by fathers but brought up and lulled by mothers. To us family is the basis of society, its future' (interview, 02.03.1999).

Attempts to reinforce existing electoral loyalties by political patronage were equally clear in the management of city council subsidies to local charities and selective re-allocation of municipal funds and facilities to FN flanking organisations such as Fraternité Française (FF) or the Front Anti-Chômage (FAC)⁶ at the expenses of long established associations tackling poverty and social exclusion such as the Secours Populaire or the Restaurants du Coeur, as well as a number of local humanitarian initiatives e.g. the Oustao charity in the socially deprived area of L'Aygues in Orange, the Kiffa association in Vitrolles or Les Amis de Jéricho in Toulon.

Political patronage and nepotism

This building up of an electoral clientele by distributing city council largesse and delivering social benefits conform to the interests of the FN core electorate was in many cases accompanied with political corruption and municipal nepotism. Covert discriminatory practices took the form of sanctions on politically undesirable left-wing political supporters or trade union members among city council staff. One tangible and particularly dramatic effect of this witch-hunt was to force a number of people into resigning from their positions within the local administration while others were made redundant for alleged reasons of budgetary discipline. Across all localities, political favouritism was channelled through local bureaucracy. Party members and supporters were rewarded by appointments in public posts. In May 1998, Cendrine Le Chevallier, deputy-mayor in Toulon, was for instance charged with discrimination in appointments to the city council's flanking organisation *Jeunesse Toulonnaise* following her attempt to distribute all available positions to FN sympathisers.

Local nepotism was also manifest in the long list of job opportunities offered to family members and personal friends. The attempt by the FN to establish new familial dynasties at local level was best evidenced in the party choosing to put forward both Catherine Mégret and Cendrine Le Chevallier in replacement of their husbands. Beside these most visible attempts, it is important to note that a significant number of appointments were made to promote relatives, friends and party members. In this, the extreme right in office did undoubtedly fit the long established tradition of municipal clientelism, personal fiefs and notability in Mediterranean France (see for instance Briquet and Sawicki, 1988). Although hardly measurable in a strict quantitative perspective, the scale of political patronage under FN administration might have been of smaller magnitude than that observed under the earlier reigns of regional barons of the mainstream left and right. What was more significant however was that the development of patronage in the FN localities came at total variance with the national party line of claiming exemplarity and an immaculate record (recall for instance the '*Tête haute, mains propres*' campaign against political corruption in the 1990s).

⁶ The FAC was founded within the FN by Noël Lantz et Jacques Deschanel as early as 1987 but remained marginal to the party's strategy of spreading its electoral influence through peripheral organisations. In February 1994, the FAC merged with the newly formed Association de recherche pour l'emploi des jeunes (ARPEJ) under the auspices of the FNJ leader, Samuel Maréchal. FF was founded in 1988 by Pierre Vial et Jean-Pierre Stirbois, and has since been chaired by Mireille d'Ornano, head of the FN in Hautes-Alpes.

Lastly, the outcome of the FN holding executive local office is one of financial mismanagement, poor budgetary control and underdeveloped expertise in the party at the time of entering municipal councils (see Samson, 1997; Ferri & Turc, 1996). Largely a consequence of political favouritism, there were also occurrences of financial embezzlement. For instance, the complete failure by Le Chevallier to develop the *Vallon du Soleil* youth recreational centre in Toulon, or the sharp criticism contained in the report on the Vitrolles administration by the Regional Audit Office, provided strong evidence of recurrent malpractices in municipal management. By the end of the Chevallier's mandate, the city of Toulon was no less than € 215 million in debt with an increase of about 30 per cent in the number of staff employed by the council. The private audit commissioned by the newly elected majority in 2001 pointed to 'non sincere accounting' and revealed that the various semi-public companies (SEM) operated by the council would add a financial burden of € 61 million to the existing debt load. In Vitrolles, the public audit conducted in May 2002 unveiled a complex system of balancing the city's main budgetary deficit with an increase in prices for water distribution by a satellite company, whose sole political purpose was to allow for an electorally rewarding reduction in local taxes. The report pointed also to a number of side payments out of city council resources to cover for preparation of Mégret's presidential campaign of 2002 (including the purchase of mobile phones, substantial post and telephone bills or the refund of campaigning costs). More recently, former Marignane mayor Daniel Simonpieri was charged with suspicion of fraud and misappropriation of funds in negotiating public contracts during his time in office from 1995 to 2008.

Conclusion

The assessment of the FN assuming local power in France in the 1990s sheds a particular light on the more general phenomenon of populist parties in office. First because it offers a relevant case of the extreme right exercising power on its own, without coalition building constraints imposed upon junior partners in more general collaborative settings. Second, because of the hardly contestable extreme right pedigree of the party and Le Pen's long record of anti-system struggle within the nationalist camp since the mid-1950s. This unequivocal anthropology of the FN presupposed to identify the mechanism whereby the party managed to escape the fringes of the political system to proceed to the arena of normal politics. The above analysis has tried to outline the influence of crucial historical and ideological factors in Mediterranean France, which contributed to the electoral rise of the FN and facilitated its installation as a legitimate contender for municipal power.

With regard to the party in municipal office, what has been suggested is to distinguish between two models of governance along a 'policy' vs. 'office-seeking' line of division. In many respects, the recent attempt by Marine Le Pen to take hold of Hénin-Beaumont would fit the second category quite well, although a closer connexion with national party leadership would for obvious reasons be maintained.

The distinctiveness in styles of local management did not relate to any structural ideological or historical cleavage within the party elite. Rather it would reveal the emergence of a new 'centre vs. periphery' line of division coming as a strong challenge to the highly centralised and hierarchical model of leadership in the FN. In concrete terms, social and cultural policies shared many commonalities across all four localities, and bore testimony to the salience of the classic authoritarian agenda in the far right. Lastly, the few years of extreme right incumbency

were dominated by the development of political patronage, nepotism and financial malpractices, which to a large extent accounted for the subsequent electoral misfortunes of the FN mayors.

Any systematic assessment of negative incumbency effects by style of management in the FN localities is made difficult by the small number of cases at hand. Arguably, there was a notable electoral 'bounty' given to proponents of the more pragmatic approach of local government in Marignane and Orange: in the former city, MNR candidate Simonpieri received 47.8 per cent of the vote in the first round –despite the FN putting forward his own candidate⁷. The outgoing mayor won the second round with an impressive 62.5 per cent against his mainstream right-wing opponent. For his part, Orange's FN mayor Bompard won the municipal contest in the first round with 60 per cent of the vote. These plebiscitary successes contrasted with the scores by MNR and FN candidates in Vitrolles and, most evidently, Toulon. In the former, Catherine Mégret achieved a narrow victory with 45.3 per cent of the vote in a 3-party second-round contest. In Toulon, the extreme right suffered massive electoral losses in 2001 after the FN group in the city council had broken up into four rival factions: ex-FN Le Chevallier's list '*Toulon d'abord*' received a mere 7.8 per cent of the vote; together, other far right candidates totalled another 7.5 per cent.

Political misbehaviour and poor financial governance by the local FN are key explanatory factors of the observed variance in electoral performances. The somehow ironic reversal of the anti-corruption vote that had originally contributed to the advent of the far right became manifest in Toulon where revelations of political and tabloid-like sexual scandals added to the already disastrous impact of blatant managerial incompetence. A similar pattern arose in the October 2002 municipal by-election in Vitrolles where Catherine Mégret failed to secure a majority vote (45.9 per cent) in the second round against the socialist candidate after both husband and wife had been charged with irregularities in party financing.

All this said, there are of course limitations to examining the significance of extreme right governance at local level. Most importantly, the ex-post analysis of populist incumbency must take into account the limited powers delegated to municipalities by national government in France. At the time of the FN seizing local administration, management by city councils concerned predominantly 'everyday life' areas e.g. road networks, crèches, water supply, retirement homes or social housing. In the absence of powers of more general competence such as those given to regional and departmental authorities, far right mayors had restricted freedom to act legally. They were not in a position to address some of the key issues that traditionally matters most to FN voters, such as immigration, unemployment or crime. With respect to the former issue, for instance, the local FN had little power to weigh effectively on immigration flows, family re-unification or legal acquisition of French citizenship by foreigners. Moreover, high-profile welfare-chauvinist policies in Vitrolles or Toulon came up against the reality of strict anti-discrimination and equal rights legislations. In a similar vein, prior to the February 2002 and August 2004 laws on 'proximity democracy', municipalities in France were not given the possibility to enter concrete economic partnerships with private companies at local level, which did place significant limitations on the possibility to fund economic initiatives that would help foster activity in the local labour pool.

⁷ Let us recall that in 1999 the national dispute between Le Pen and Mégret over party leadership was replicated at local level and led to similar conflicts between major groups of power-holders in the municipalities. After the split by the mégretiste faction, the MNR secured the city councils of Marignane and Vitrolles while the FN maintained control over Orange and Toulon.

The issue of law and order enforcement is one final example of the legal constraints on existing levers for municipal governance. The use of 'insecurity' rhetoric was a common feature in the political discourse of the far right locally. These were accompanied with claims of more repressive policies, and narratives of the newly elected authorities taking firm actions to re-establish public order. Hence Catherine Mégret claiming that 'from now on, fear will be on the other side'. During the election campaigns, this met existing fears and public concerns. Yet, in practice, the hard stance on crime was restricted to increasing municipal police workforces with little power to tackle criminality effectively, mostly because of limited control by city councils in law and order enforcement, which at that time would still fall predominantly within national government competence under the authority of departmental *préfets*.

Lastly, despite the vast amount of media attention throughout the period of municipal incumbency by the extreme right, the FN experience as power-holder remained a relatively marginal phenomenon. We should be cautious of distortion or amplification risks inherent in the short lenses employed to scrutinise the FN policy impact at local level. Beyond all questions legitimately raised by the presence of the extreme right in municipal government in France, another perhaps more crucial issue is that of the long-term policy impact by the FN on strategic re-orientations in parties of the mainstream right nationally. Since the mid-1980s, attempts by the RPR/UDF cartel to confine the FN to the margins of the party system have been accompanied with a clear process of self-appropriation of the extreme right agenda on immigration and law-and-order, as revealed significant shifts in policy-making in those areas (Fassin et al, 1997; Ritaine, 2005; Schain, 2006). This adaptative process culminated in the profound ideological revision undertaken by the French right under Sarkozy's leadership in order to reclaim votes from the FN (Ivaldi, 2008) or, most recently, in the highly instrumental and controversial debate on 'national identity' poorly orchestrated by the UMP government in 2009. The unexpected strong showing of the FN in the March 2010 regional elections with 11.4 per cent nationally up to 20.3 per cent in PACA came as a distant echo of the past and a timely reminder of dangers inherent in playing with the devil.

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