

How did we get here? Perspectives on the normalization of the far right in France

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In June 2024, early legislative elections were organized in France, following European elections in which the Macronist political offer was defeated by the far right, mainly represented by the *Rassemblement National* (RN) former *Front National* (FN). The FN-RN won this “second order” (Reif et al., 1997) election, as it had the two previous ones in 2014 and in 2019. The ensuing legislative elections mobilized in an unprecedented way: the campaign had to be fought within a tight deadline (just under three weeks), and a ‘republican front’ was reactivated, led mainly by a union of the political-left and the ecologists, in order to prevent the far right from coming to power, as the polls predicted it would win a majority of seats in the National Assembly. In this context, the French parliamentary right was also fracturing, and its president, Eric Ciotti, joined the FN-RN, along with some of his supporters, in an electoral alliance. Although the results of the first round contradicted the pollsters’ projections, the FN-RN and its new ally, the *Union des Droites pour la République* (UDR), won an unprecedented number of votes: more than ten million ballots were cast in favor of their candidates. They then formed two groups in the National Assembly: 123 deputies under the RN label, and 16 in support from the benches of the radicalized right under the UDR label.

Several explanations are given in the literature to explain the legitimization of the far-right political offer throughout the French Fifth Republic. The main research, particularly at the international level, proposes as a model of explanation the evolution of the far right into a populist right (Mudde, 2004) or radical populist right (Aktas, 2024; Mayer, 2018; Ivaldi et al., 2017). In this research, the far right can no longer really be qualified as such: it necessarily underwent a transformation by ‘converting to democracy,’ by participating in electoral rituals (elections). Its ideology also evolved on several topics (Bobba & Seddone, 2022; Ostermann & Stahl, 2022), mobilizing the rhetoric of the ‘good people’ and the ‘bad elites’ (Mansbridge & Macedo, 2019). In the French case, the role played by Marine Le Pen is supposed to be decisive: she is said to have ‘normalized’ the political offer of the FN and then the RN especially in the media (Lamour, 2024), relying on her gender (Geva, 2020; Leconte, 2020)

rallying the votes of women and the working classes. In other words, she enabled her party to carry out a kind of ‘revolution’ that helped to strengthen its electoral base.

This chapter invites to take a step back from this explanatory register. On the one hand, it seems to me that the argument for the necessary ‘normalization’ of the far-right party through participation in elections has already been discussed and set aside, particularly by historians. Critical works on the notion of populism have also long attested to the weight of this “total-screen concept” (Collovald, 2024) which aims to denounce the ‘a priori’ popular underpinnings of the far right rather than to account for its ability to capture an electoral conglomerate (Gaxie, 2016), composed of different fractions of social classes from upper to lower, a conglomerate that is not really reflected in the sociology of the party’s elites (Dahani, 2023; Delaine, 2023; Birenbaum, 1992), which is largely dominated by well-educated upper classes, following Michel’s law (2015 [1925]). On the other hand, recent literature has shown how the idea of a Marinist ‘revolution’ can represent a kind of decoy, set up by the party itself as part of its strategy of ‘*dédiabolisation*’ (Dézé, 2015). This is a strategy that only engages the audiences who believe in it. Finally, electoral sociology, particularly in the context of localized monographies (Faury, 2024; Challier, 2019) or the reasoned use of surveys, has shown how the political offer reasons in very contrasting ways according to the local areas and social groups studied, contravening the idea of a ‘Frontist electoral rise’ that would be linear and stable over time (Lehingue, 2003).

Thus, to explain ‘how we got there,’ I propose instead to reflect in a cross-cutting manner on different processes, which attest that the party itself is not the only nor the main agent of its ‘normalization’: its organization is relatively inert and resistant to change (1.) as the sociology of its leaders (2.). I therefore invite to look at other areas, especially the transformations of the mediatization of the FN-RN (2.) that has contributed to a kind of ‘*droitisation*’ (Kaciak & Klaus, 2024) of the public debate, surely allowing the far right to appear more ‘normal’ or legitimate than it was before. In doing so, we can study this party in its ecosystem (political field), in its repertoires of action (particularly in the media) while mobilizing the hypothesis of continuity (Dobry, 2001): the far right is adapting to new political configurations, like other political organizations in France and beyond. Thus, this does not necessarily mean that it is no longer permissible to think of it as such, the mainstreaming (Mondon, 2024) of the French far right relies mainly on external processes that have little to do with the way they do politics internally.

Methodology

This chapter draws on data from my study of the Front National as part of my Ph.D. dissertation in political science (Dahani, 2022). This research, which used a combination of methods in 'difficult' fieldwork (Boumaza & Campana, 2007), focused on the party's elites. I used an internalist and emic (Avanza, 2018) approach to the political movement, in order to give an account of the everyday life of the party from the inside. From 2014 to 2018, I thus conducted an ethnography of the mobilization of the party and its leadership groups. Since 2014, I have also conducted semi-structured interviews with current and former leaders of the organization. In addition, I have produced an original prosopography of the party's elites since 1972, constructed from archival and interview data. Finally, I conducted a study of media coverage of FN spokespersons, using the archives of the *Institut national de l'audiovisuel* (INA) and the organization's digital archives.

1. All powerful presidents

The first way to account for the multiplicity of processes that have contributed to the current political configuration is to consider the institutionalization (Panbianco 1988; Randall & Svasand, 2002) of the organization. In other words, it is worth asking in what partisan configuration the election of Marine Le Pen as its leader took place during the Tours congress in January 2011. In the literature, this so-called 'populist' party then underwent a kind of metamorphosis that contributed to its repositioning in the partisan competition: it then mobilized against the established parties (both right and left) and proposed to represent a 'third way.' But beyond the redefinition of the strategy of presentation in electoral spaces, it remains difficult to attest to the *aggiornamento* of the organization as such. In other words, this partisan enterprise, led by Jean-Marie Le Pen from 1974 to 2011, did not undergo any particular transformations during Marine Le Pen's presidency (2011–2022). Both the daughter and the father dominated a centralized party in which they represented the main authorities that could delegate the political capital of the organization. The party authorities and the internal administrative and political rules (investitures) were therefore already stabilized and the arrival of Marine Le Pen represented a first continuity.

This organization, which I study as relatively inert (Dahani, 2022), is first and foremost characterized by a particularly stable mode of internal way of functioning throughout its history. On the side of the governing bodies, for example, the functioning between the Executive Bureau, the Political Bureau, the Central Committee, the National Nominating Commission and the Conflicts Commission has been rel-

actively constant from one president to the next. Within the FN-RN, these spaces are supposed to represent places of power (Dézé, 2016) where the leaders meet and allegedly work together. The elements of stability can be found on several levels.

First, in terms of the composition of these governing bodies: unlike other parties that have embraced deliberative, participatory, or platform-based processes (Scarrow, 2014; Gerbaudo, 2022), the FN-RN remains essentially focused on its president when it comes to deciding which leader can sit in which group. Moreover, the Executive Bureau (about ten members, including the vice presidents and treasurers), the Political Bureau (BP, up to 40 members, supposedly representing the party's board of directors), the National Nominating Committee (NCC, supposedly selecting candidates for local and national elections), and the Conflicts Committee (supposedly deliberating on violations of internal regulations by activists and leaders) are personally composed first by Jean-Marie and then Marine Le Pen, who also personally appoint(ed) the organization's vice presidents, treasurers, and general secretaries among other positions. Alongside this prerogative of personal appointment, there is a division of political labor that has remained relatively stable throughout the party's history: interviews and ethnographic data attest to the fact that top-level decisions remain in the hands of the president him- or herself: sometimes the procedures to get a candidacy at an election are then not that clear. Some are auditioned by the National Nominating Committee, others by the Political Bureau, and for others, Marine Le Pen is said to make the decision herself. The cases of Léon and Pascal show the vagueness of the internal procedures during the selection of the candidates for the 2015's regional election. In the first case, Léon, who joined the FN in the early 2010s, is interviewed by the dedicated commission, in front of an audience of FN leaders, and has to explain his candidacy. For Pascal, an activist since the 1980s and the leader of a local federation, things are more complex: while he believes that the president herself should choose the head of the list, he realizes, late and without warning, that it will ultimately be the Political Bureau.

“The NNC interviewed me [...]. It's not done systematically, it was because there were several candidates for [my region]. And they ask you questions in turn. It started with '[Leon], you are here to take the lead, you will have to introduce yourself and then you will answer a number of accusations.’” [laughs] (Léon, personal archive of interview, translated by the author)

“A month or two months later I learn that the case is going to be judged in the Political Bureau. [...] That's new because I thought it was Marine and it's the Political Bureau.” (Pascal, personal archive of interview, translated by the author)

This is also noteworthy with regard to *exit* procedures: all activists or leaders who have not fulfilled their 'duty of loyalty' to the organization or have not complied with

all the clauses of the internal regulations or the membership charter are not summoned to appear before the members of this body. Sometimes, it is the president who simply and directly administers reprimands or temporary and permanent expulsions from the organization, without necessarily going through a hearing and a collegial decision with the leaders who are usually dedicated to this task. The decision-making process thus appears to be highly centralized around the person who holds the presidency of the organization. Finally, it should be noted that this centralization of decision-making is also evident when one looks at the role of other governing bodies, such as the Political Bureau or the Central Committee. In the case of the Political Bureau, for example, the archives of former leaders and interviews with leaders during Marine Le Pen's first two terms (2011–2018) show that it is more a 'deferential' body, where discussions often lead to decisions that are in line with those of the president. This account of a political bureau meeting dated 2011, for example, shows so-called 'wait-and-see' leaders who wait for the Le Pens to speak and who do not necessarily dare to speak during the meetings:

"Once the exchanges were over, everyone in the political bureau basically waited... There were two or three people who dared to give their opinions, but in general, the others waited to see what Jean-Marie Le Pen and Marine Le Pen have to say. So, I could see them doing it. People were very much waiting to see what would happen. So, in fact, it was Jean-Marie Le Pen who had spoken that day, I remember, who had said [that he agreed with me]. So, I had won that side of the argument, and Marine had generally been along the same lines." (Dimitri, former member of the PB, personal archive of interview, translated by the author)

As for the Central Committee, which is supposed to represent the 'parliament' of the party, it rarely meets and has no particular internal prerogatives. However, it is the only body in which the members who have paid their dues have the prerogative of making appointments: its members are directly elected by vote at each congress (100 of them), while others (a minority) are directly appointed by the president (20 people).

While these elements are reminiscent of the personal dimension of this political party (Kefford & McDonnell, 2018; Calise, 2002), they attest to a very strong continuity in the logic of centralizing power within the organization. In this respect, the Marinist 'revolution' announced for the 2010s cannot be confirmed. But even more than the personal appointments in the governing bodies, the discretionary power of the presidents, from father to daughter, can also be seen in the management of the political careers of the leaders. Thus, it is within the framework of a particular political recruitment channel that the latter can hope to prosper within the organization.

This network, which manages the upward (from local to national) or reverse (through direct access to the center) careers (Gaxie, 1993) of Frontist leaders, is both

patrimonial and presidential. It can be seen throughout the history of the organization and its weight is important in the acceleration of careers, within the framework of the different electoral configurations in which the FN-RN has developed. It is primarily patrimonial, in the Weberian sense of the term (Weber, 2015), because it is part of a form of sultanic rule of the presidents, who surround themselves with a court (Elias, 1969) and select their relatives according to logics that are not necessarily correlated with questions of political competence or the recruitment of political personnel with specific qualities. The history of the FN-RN, for example, is marked by the recruitment of members of the political bureau and locally (European or regional) elected representatives to the Le Pens' 'entourage:' babysitters, butlers and personal bodyguards. In 1998, for example, the conflict that led to a major split within the party began with the ineligibility of Jean-Marie Le Pen, who chose his wife to head the party's electoral list instead of a party leader. The line then went to the presidency, as personal relationships with the president or his and later her inner circle were an important factor in explaining certain recruitments. Typically, in the case of defectors from the right (Birenbaum, 1992; Dahani, 2023), graduates of 'Grandes écoles,' many of whom have held positions in right-wing parties more established in the French political arena, their recruitment takes place within the framework of personal meetings (lunches, dinners) with the president, who can then offer them different positions, when it is not the respondents themselves who indicate the functions they wish to occupy.

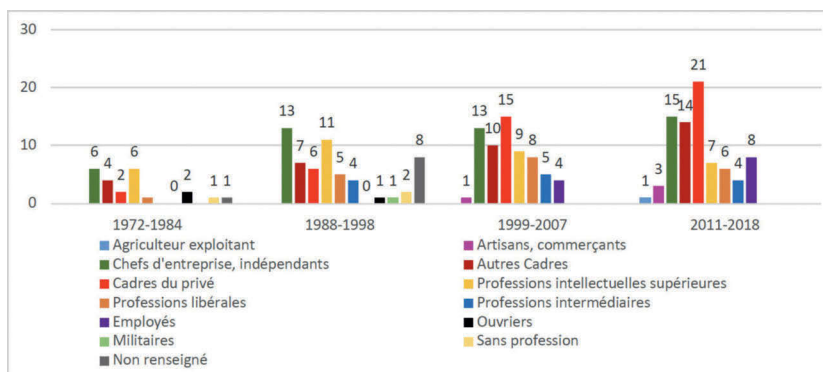
In this way, the institutionalization of the organization of the FN-RN takes place in a form of significant continuity, from father to daughter. From the point of view of the constitution of the governing bodies, the division of political labor or even the management of the partisan recruitment channels, the presidencies under Jean-Marie Le Pen and Marine Le Pen remain almost the same. Finally, it should be noted that during the Lille congress in March 2018, the change of name of the FN, which then became the RN, and of the governing bodies (the Political Bureau became the National Bureau, the Central Committee became the National Council) did not include an update of the party's software or organizational processes.

2. The accentuation of the social iron law

As I mentioned in the introduction, work on populism has put on the agenda the appeal that parties labeled as such can have on different sections of the working class, which is often not much studied as such. However, the FN-RN is no exception when it comes to studying the way in which the iron law of oligarchy operates within partisan enterprises. Thus, the study conducted among the party elites confirms that throughout its long history, the party has been mainly led by different factions of the upper class, especially private sector executives. Similarly, in line with the work

that has established the proximity of the far right to the world of ‘business’ (Mayer, 1986), this party continues to seek to recruit various ‘independent’ professions, not necessarily the heads of very large companies, but at least individuals who are the owners of their means of production.

Graphic 1 – Professional positions of the leaders of the FN (1972–2018)



Sources: Research data collected in archives, interviews and observations by the author

Legend: Green: business owners; Dark red: other executives; Red: private sector executives; Dark yellow: higher intellectual profession; Orange: liberal professions; Black: workers; Yellow: no profession; Pink: craftsman, tradesman; Blue: intermediate professions; Violet: employees; Light green: military; Grey: no data

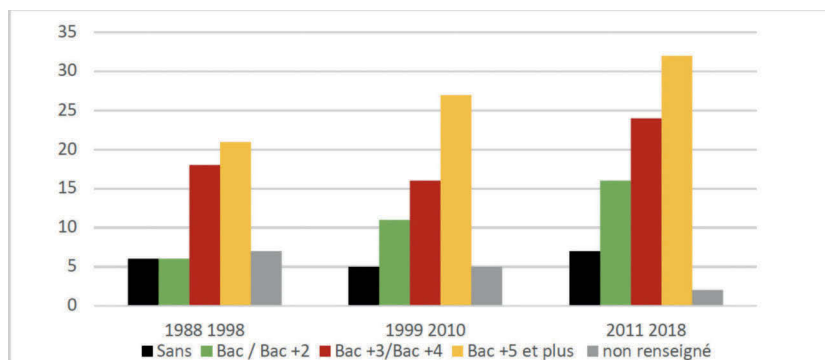
A study of the evolution of the social recruitment of FN leaders (starting with the members of the Political Bureau) over the long history of the organization reveals a number of patterns, helping to demonstrate the relative inertia of recruitment from one president to the next. Firstly, the sociography of the party’s executives suggests that they are recruited from the upper classes, who are over-represented in the BP compared to the French population as a whole. The (social) “rate of representation” (Gaxie, 1980, translated by the author) of far-right leaders is therefore low, as it is in other political organizations on the right (Haegel, 2002) and left (Bachelot, 2008). Next, it is important to look in detail at the social class fractions represented in this leadership space. Here, as in other parties, we find particular affinities with certain social sub-spaces. While it is a well-known fact that the political left tends (historically) to recruit public-sector executives and teachers, while the political right is closer to private-sector executives and the liberal professions, the far right finds its main bastions of executive recruitment among at least two fractions of the upper classes: company directors (with self-employed status) and senior private-sector executives. From a diachronic perspective, the evolution of the social

recruitment of FN-RN leaders shows the constant importance of company directors, as well as an increase in the recruitment of private-sector executives, thereby helping to (socially) compartmentalize the leadership group. The trend in recruitment among managers from other sectors (dark red in graphic 1) also deserves attention. Indeed, this category represents the pure professionals of politics (Lehingue, 2019) who live ‘of and for’ Front National politics over the long term of their professional trajectories: these leaders have held no other professional position than that of full-time elected official or full-time political collaborator. Their entire careers have been spent in the political arena, within the Front National. This category is particularly well represented under Marine Le Pen’s mandate (2011–2018) and is increasing over the long history of executive recruitment. All in all, the social recruitment of FN-RN leaders appears to be mainly correlated with certain fractions of the upper classes (independent, private sector, political). This recruitment dynamics, already present under the presidencies of Jean-Marie Le Pen, tend to become more pronounced between 2011 and 2018, during the first presidencies of Marine Le Pen. Under the latter’s leadership, the Frontist leadership space is becoming even more socially compartmentalized. Finally, it should be noted that the FN-RN, as is regularly the case for candidates in legislative elections, recruits a small proportion of its leaders from the working classes, but not just any working classes. While the literature generally focuses on the blue-collar vote (Rouban, 2024), the leaders tend to come from the world of white-collar workers, from the private sector. If we follow the hypothesis of a form of homology between representatives and represented (Bourdieu, 1981), this is not so surprising: the recruitment of leaders then tends to partially overlap with the electoral conglomerate that feeds the party’s supporters. Overall, the logic behind the social recruitment of FN-RN leaders can be summed up in two points. On the one hand, this party is no exception: the iron law of oligarchy applies here, as in other political organizations. Secondly, the logics studied over the long term reveal certain recruitment tropisms (among the independent upper professions, in the private sector) which became even more structured during the ‘Marinist’ period. Thus, the ‘revolution’ announced has not taken place within the management groups either: at most, professionalization has been accentuated, in view of the increase in the share of upper classes and pure professionals presented in the BP contingents between 2011 and 2018.

These elements are corroborated by other data, in particular the university career paths of executives, whose degree levels are also on the rise over the long term of the executive recruitment study. To situate graphic 2, we first need to discuss the literature on the weight of academic backgrounds in the recruitment of political elites in France. Several authors have shown that belonging to the upper classes, generally coupled with a high level of education, increases the chances of access to positions of political responsibility. What is more, academic careers in the so-called schools

of power (Ecole Nationale de l'Administration (ENA), Sciences Po Paris), predispose all the more to access to these positions (Lefebvre & Sawicki, 2006; Garrigou, 2001).

Graphic 2 – Diplomas of the members of the BP (1988–2018)



Sources: Research data collected in archives, interviews and observations by the author

Legend: Dark: without diploma; Green: High School diploma; Red: Bachelor; Yellow master or doctorate; Grey: no data

Graphic 2 shows that the FN-RN is relatively up to standard on this point. Firstly, it can be noted that in the first period studied, under the presidency of Jean-Marie Le Pen, bachelor degree holders are well represented, almost at the same level as leaders with master or doctorate degrees. This contrasts with the levels and types of diplomas in other political organizations: the French political right and left were already recruiting from among the highest university graduates in these years (Boelaert et al., 2017). However, from the 1990s onwards, the cost of joining the Political Bureau, in terms of cultural capital (Gaxie & Godmer, 2007), increased significantly. Under Marine Le Pen, the most highly qualified members of the BP were in the majority. However, this standardization with the political field is only relative. Indeed, the RN still recruits unqualified leaders (most of whom have never had a job other than in politics), or those with relatively few qualifications. This is a distinctive feature of the organization compared to its counterparts in the party arena, and one that does not seem to have been called into question since Marine Le Pen took over. The professionalization at work is particularly evident in the case of the very specific recruitment to the highest positions in the organization. Examples include Florian Philippot, vice-president for strategy and communications in the 2010s (he left the party in 2018), who attended ENA but also a top business school; Laurent Jacobelli, now a member of parliament and spokesman for the party, which he joined in 2017, who also attended a top business school; and the development of the so-called *Ho-*

racés circle, a group of senior civil servants who work with Marine Le Pen (writing memos, presence in MPs' offices, elected members of the European Parliament). All in all, in terms of the logics of leadership recruitment, the announced Marinist revolution has not really taken place either: we are mainly seeing a hardening of trends already at work (recruitment among the upper classes, recruitment among the most highly educated fractions, promotions of internal militants in purely professional career paths) in the sense of attempts to bring them into line with the logics that prevail in the rest of the political field, particularly within the most dominant organizations.

Thus, if we confine ourselves to the processes at work within the party itself, it is hard to grasp the logic behind the 'normalization' or 'mainstreaming' of the French far right. The sociology of the party or of the recruitment of its leaders attests to significant forms of continuity over the long history of the institution. We must therefore turn away from the party itself and the party space, and look to fields outside the political arena, in particular the journalistic field.

3. A media anomaly? The mainstreaming of the far right through traditional media

On this point, it has to be said that the hypothesis that French public and media debate is becoming more right-wing has been consolidated by recent studies in France (Kaciaf & Klaus, 2024; Lefébure et al., 2024). More generally, this may echo the increasing media visibility of far-right parties across Europe (Esser et al., 2016; Mazzoleni, 2008). The general idea that unites these studies, with their contrasting scientific backgrounds, is that the traditional media space has welcomed far-right spokespersons through two processes that need to be considered in correlation: the first is an increase in the visibility of far-right spokespersons in terms of invitations, reports and dedicated broadcasts, which increases their media presence; the second is a form of 'normalization' through the depoliticization of framings around the far right. In the French case, to grasp the weight of the journalistic field in the participation in the 'normalization' of the FN-RN, it is first necessary to explain the structure of the space of information production, which has been affected by recent transformations at several levels.

Historically, France's most dominant traditional media (television, daily press) have long excluded Frontist spokespersons from their productions (Le Bohec, 2003). While the party's leaders have always sought media attention, they have tended to favor the militant press and digital media in order to circumvent the barriers to entry in the journalistic field (Dézé, 2011). Jean-Marie Le Pen's invitation to appear on *L'Heure de Vérité* in 1984, for example, marked a turning point: it was his first appearance on this prestigious TV show (Champagne, 1988), in terms of ratings and guests,

mainly leading political executives and leading elected representatives. However, media coverage of the FN in the 1980s and 1990s remains relatively low, especially taking into account the party's electoral scores at that time. In those days, the party president took advantage of his rarely televised appearances to mobilize through scandal, as illustrated by the various 'affairs,' including the 'detail affair.' In 1987, as a guest on a program during the campaign for the forthcoming 1988 presidential elections, he made denialist remarks which were later condemned by the courts. Today, the situation is completely different: the RN president and the organization's main representatives are regular guests on television, just as the main political departments of the major news organizations have organized themselves to provide the best possible coverage of the party's activities.

There are several reasons for this. First, we need to understand the reconfiguration of contemporary journalism. In France, traditional channels now face competition from all-news channels, which broadcast news and political programs throughout the day. As a result, the space for media opportunities has opened up to a 'second media market' (Leroux & Teillet, 2006, translation by the author), with greater scope for invitations to political 'second knives.' Secondly, the dual dependence of the journalistic field on politics and the economy (Champagne, 1995) has become more pronounced, particularly in view of the increased competition between editorial teams, the weight of advertising revenue in newspaper and TV channel budgets, and the concentration of media ownership by business interests (Benson et al., 2024). In doing so, a form of homogenization of traditional media agendas took place, contributing to the increased visibility of far-right spokespersons. Finally, it is important to recall the rules that apply when it comes to media coverage of political parties or 'blocs' in France: audiovisual media, for example, are required to allocate time to each political party or 'bloc' in proportion to their electoral scores and their weight within parliament.

With these structural elements established, it remains to understand how FN-RN leaders were portrayed in the media at the same time as the party was consolidating its electoral support. On this point, two elements emerge from analyses based on television archives on the one hand, and a recent survey of semi-structured interviews with political journalists on the other. On the first point, analyses of television archives confirm that Marine Le Pen remains a media 'anomaly.' Indeed, by focusing first on the media structure of her political capital well before her election as leader of the Front National (2011), the data collected (Dahani, 2022) shows that since 2009, the future party's president has already been one of the media's 'good customers': she was invited to appear on public television during prime-time political programs (i.e., those with the highest ratings), and was invited to debate with government ministers under President Nicolas Sarkozy (2007–2012). What is more, she was invited to discuss 'issues' that resonated with the party's far-right agenda, such as the growth of halal fast food restaurants in France and the 'issue'

of street prayers. The year 2010 is particularly interesting for understanding the echo chamber that the media had already created for Marine Le Pen: although she had not yet been elected leader of the FN, her press conferences during the internal campaign were broadcasted on television, for example on rolling news channels. Various polls were also already testing her for the 2012 presidential election, for which the candidates had not yet been decided on and the campaign was far from underway. Marine Le Pen represented a ‘media anomaly’ in these years because she received far too much media coverage and occupied far too dominant a position in the journalistic field given her position in the political arena: she was an employee of the Front National and a locally elected official. Eric Darras’ work (2019) extends this finding: by analyzing the time devoted to politicians in television news programs (on TF1 and France 2) broadcast every evening from 8 to 9 p.m., he shows in an article that Marine Le Pen received more media coverage in the 2010s than government ministers or opposition party leaders represented in the National Assembly. Thus, well before 2017, the year of the legislative elections in which the FN won six seats and then just over 80 in the following elections in 2022, Marine Le Pen received more media coverage in these leading news programs (which attract several million viewers) than political leaders whose parties were represented in parliament. In doing so, the traditional media helped to increase the symbolic capital of the FN-RN president: although she occupied only a residual place in the political arena, leading a small party that failed in every election, particularly presidential elections, she was given the same media coverage as more established politicians belonging to dominant political parties.

On the second point, it should also be noted that the coverage of the far right by the French press, particularly the national daily press, has become normalized. While relations between the party’s press office and leading political journalists have long been conflictual (Le Bohec 2004), the professionalization of the communications department (Dahani, 2024) and the routinization of journalistic work in newsrooms helped to reconfigure the partner-rival relations between party communicators and journalists. For this again there are multiple explanations and examples. On the one hand, it is worth noting the recruitment of professional political journalists into the entourages of FN-RN leaders: coming from private radio or television, these are actors who have mastered the rules of the media game and political communication. One example that comes to mind is the role played by Marine Le Pen’s former press secretary, now a member of parliament, who previously worked as a journalist for a far-right newspaper for several decades. On the other hand, it should also be noted that, from the journalists’ point of view, their working conditions with party representatives have become more ‘normal.’ Journalists interviewed as part of a recent survey conducted¹ attest to a restructuring of press editorial offices: there are

1 Research ongoing with political journalists since 2024.

more journalists covering the party, they have stable, well-paid jobs and are graduates of prestigious journalism schools. Relations with the party's press office have become more peaceful – journalists are now rarely prevented from attending off-the-record meetings or press conferences, and they no longer face the risk of hostile reactions from security services or activists. But also the neutralization of political conflict associated with the far right – the journalists interviewed consider that the RN is no longer the FN, that it is a transformed party, and are now interested in its leaders and elected officials using the same criteria they use to frame and angle articles about other political professionals: in terms of competence, their work in assemblies, their press releases, etc. These are all ways of normalizing the far right, treating them – journalistically – in the same way as others.

Conclusion

Sociological studies offer at least three answers to the difficult question of the conditions that have enabled the 'normalization' (and legitimization) of the French far right through its leading political representative, the Front National, now known as the Rassemblement National. The first is to stop looking solely at the party: internalist and emic approaches certainly help to lift the veil of partisan secrecy and reveal how people 'belong to the party' outside of election season. However, studies using these approaches show that the organization is not the main driver of 'normalization,' given the significant inertia of the party's structure. The second is the importance of taking into account the electoral conglomerate that thinks along the same lines as the ruling conglomerate: the far right thus acts as a link between different class fractions, from the relatively popular (private sector employees, small artisans and shopkeepers) to the very upper classes (heads of large companies, private sector executives).

Finally, the last point concerns the importance of thinking about a party in its ecosystems, in connection with related political fields, such as journalism, which play a major role in neutralizing the stigma associated with the label 'far right' and 'normalizing' the ways in which its spokespersons speak and are portrayed in the media. In this sense, we should also reflect on the shift to the right of other political formations: in France, the radicalization of the so-called republican and parliamentary right, as well as the 'central bloc' that governs around Emmanuel Macron, have also contributed to 'normalizing' the far right by adopting its slogans and key ideas, as in the case of the government's inclusion of 'national preference' (a term borrowed from Jean-Marie Le Pen) on the agenda when proposing immigration laws.

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