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FRANCE

Balancing Respectability and Radicalization in a Pandemic

Marta Lorimer and Ethan vanderWilden

The pandemic has hit France, like many of its neighbors, particularly hard. The country has moved in and out of lockdown three times, as caseloads, hospitalizations, and deaths have varied throughout 2020 and 2021. In this chapter, we focus specifically on the pandemic response of the *Rassemblement National* (RN, formerly *Front National*), a populist radical right party under the leadership of Marine Le Pen. The RN is one of the most well-known and well-studied far right parties in Europe. It was originally founded in 1972 with the aim of bringing the different currents of the French far right together (Camus 1989). The party's first national-level success came in the European Parliament elections of 1984, when it won 10% of the vote and elected its first Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). While it has since struggled to gain representation at the national level, the RN has grown into an electoral force representing over one-fifth of the French electorate since Marine Le Pen took over the helm of the party in 2011. When appropriate, we also consider the reactions of the left populist *La France Insoumise* (LFI). However, while the party made a notable electoral debut in the 2017 presidential election under Jean-Luc Mélenchon, it has since dwindled.

We argue that while COVID-19 did not necessarily present the right type of crisis for the RN, the party and its leadership tried to make the most of a “bad” crisis. Throughout the pandemic, the RN sought to link COVID-19 to its ideological messaging as well as discredit governing (though not scientific and technical) elites through a techno-populist critique. This strategy, we show, fell in line with Marine Le Pen's broader attempts at “de-demonizing” the RN and making it into a party of government. The chapter proceeds as follows. In the first section, we outline the development and state of the pandemic in France. We then explain the RN's rhetoric and actions throughout the pandemic. In the second section, we identify the contextual incentives that motivated the RN's

response. In the final section, we reflect on the impacts of COVID-19 on French politics and the RN.

France, the pandemic, and the Rassemblement National

The trajectory and state of COVID-19 in France

The first case of COVID-19 was reported in France on January 24, 2020. The crisis, however, was yet to be taken as a serious domestic threat. Instead, in the early months of 2020, political attention was focused mainly on the upcoming municipal elections in March as well as debates over pension reforms, which drew mass demonstrations (Schofield 2020). It was not until February 26 that France recorded its first COVID-related death.

In early March, the French government, under President Emmanuel Macron, began to take some, albeit relatively light, measures. The government banned large group meetings, fixed the price of sanitizing gels, began to prepare its face mask stock, and closed the annual agricultural fair (Baloge and Hubé 2021). Macron made his first television address on the state of COVID-19 in France on March 12, announcing that the school system would be closed on March 16, but that the first round of municipal elections, scheduled for March 15, would go on. On March 16, Macron announced a strict lockdown that would begin the following day and compared the challenge at hand to a “war.” At this time, the French government began a process of centralizing authority, convening two scientific committees in March to advise the government and somewhat sidelining existing health agencies (Rozenblum 2021).

Despite these initial measures and Macron’s strategy of centralized control, the virus spread quickly in the spring of 2020. By mid-April, France had the fourth highest caseload and the third highest death toll of any country, prompting an extension of lockdown. After May 11, restrictions were eased as cases and test positivity rates declined. Like many of its West European neighbors, cases again spiked in the autumn. The government announced another nationwide lockdown to last one month beginning on October 30. In early 2021, Macron’s government decided, despite some debate, to avoid another lockdown, though there was concern over new variants of the virus presenting a possible threat to the country. By late March, those concerns were realized as hospitals were again overwhelmed, and the government announced yet another partial lockdown, including school and nonessential shop closures and a curfew. Renewed caseloads dominated by the Delta variant of the virus emerged in the summer. On July 12, the government announced that vaccines would be mandatory for hospital, nursing, and retirement home workers and health passes that certify vaccination or negative test status would be introduced to regulate access to (indoor) public spaces.

As of August 2021, France is home to the tenth most COVID-related deaths of any country in the world (Johns Hopkins University and Medicine 2021). The

country has had over 6 million confirmed cases since the onset of the pandemic. The data suggests that France has been hit by COVID-19 in a manner somewhat between its European neighbors, while not quite reaching the same level of death and relative cases as Italy and Spain; France is well above Germany in these same statistics.

The Rassemblement National's response

Two main trends have defined the RN's response to COVID-19 and the French government's handling of the pandemic. First, the RN has sought to link the crisis to its nativist ideology and key issues from before the pandemic. Second, as would be expected of a populist party, it has criticized the government and "elites." However, the critique is distinct in its willingness to embrace technocratic ideas and policy prescriptions.

The RN is ideologically rooted in nativism, authoritarianism, and populism, not health management (Mudde 2007). However, the party did not shy away from discussing the pandemic, dedicating similar attention on Facebook to COVID-19 as *En Marche!* and *les Républicains* (vanderWilden and Lorimer 2021). When it did discuss the pandemic, it often sought to connect it with more long-standing "crises" familiar to the RN. Early on, several party figures (unsuccessfully) sought to link the COVID-19 crisis to migration, a key issue for the party (Camus 2020). For example, on April 15, Marine Le Pen wrote a Facebook post lamenting "masks for migrant centers and not for our retirement homes" (Le Pen 2020). The linkage continued throughout different policies and time periods. For example, in August 2021, Le Pen tweeted, "very quick to stop any measure against illegal immigration, the Constitutional Council finds no fault with a law hindering the freedom of movement of the French, in their own country, on the basis of vaccination" (Le Pen 2021).

Immigration was not the only issue linked with the crisis. In July 2020, the party published a "Black Book on Coronavirus." Central to this booklet was the perceived connection between French suffering throughout the pandemic and open borders, the political and economic decline of France, and the ill effects of globalization and the EU. The party writes:

The failures of the State's political machinery observed during the crisis [...] are caused by the ideological idiosyncrasies that the *Rassemblement National* has been condemning for years: the abandonment of industrial and political sovereignty, the ideological opposition to borders, an excessive and paralyzing bureaucracy, the ultraliberal functioning of the state, the ceding of powers to the European Union....

(*Rassemblement National 2020b*, 59)

These points directly align with the key political issues that the RN has been advancing for decades. Whether through bureaucratic inefficiencies, the voluntary remission of sovereignty, or the unwillingness of leaders to prioritize French

citizens above liberal and globalist ideals, concern over the decline of France has been a foundational part of the RN's message since its inception (Lorimer 2019). Relatedly, criticism of the EU and the negative effects of globalization have become increasingly central to the party's stance since the early 1990s (Ivaldi 2018; Lorimer 2021). This discourse was recycled throughout the pandemic, with the party claiming that France chose to align with the ineffective, sovereignty-stripping, and burdensome EU. It even claimed that projects such as the recovery fund were just another way to restrict France's national sovereignty (Rassemblement National 2020a).¹

In addition to connecting the COVID-19 crisis to its core ideological issues, the RN deployed a "techno-populist" critique of the government. The term is here used to convey a combination of populist and technocratic appeals that reflect Manichean worldviews pitting "the people" against "the elite" as well as inherently "good public policy" against "special interests" (Bickerton and Invernizzi-Accetti 2021, 34). Accordingly, a techno-populist critique need not suggest a government by experts, but rather a government that listens and adheres to the *right* experts at the *right* time. Since the onset of the pandemic, the RN advocated for testing, masking, and adherence to distancing measures. It directed blame toward Macron and his government, but not toward the scientists and experts supplying information and recommendations for dealing with the crisis. For example, the RN accused the government of failing to quickly and effectively follow scientists advocating for compulsory mask-wearing and the imposition of a test and trace system (Rassemblement National 2020b, 34–35). The party did not minimize or cast doubt on the seriousness of the crisis, but rather cast doubt on the competence and trustworthiness of Macron and his government.²

The critique aimed at Macron and his government took multiple forms. First, the government was accused of mismanaging the supply chain to ensure a proper preparedness for a surge in COVID cases and hospitalizations. It was also criticized for its unwillingness to explore alternative treatments for the coronavirus such as chloroquine. While not generally peddling conspiracy theories throughout the pandemic, Le Pen supported the use of chloroquine and one MEP for the party accused the government of silencing early advocates of it (Collard 2020). Lockdowns were also later criticized, but not necessarily for their value as a health measure, but rather for the ways in which the government implemented them, which the RN argued, "took away important freedoms of the people" (Rassemblement National 2020b, 70). Similarly, the RN (and LFI) has been a vocal critic of health passes, claiming that they discriminate against the unvaccinated and increase a worrisome trend of government surveillance. The RN's grievance is thus not with scientists, but rather with what it deems to be fundamentally bad public policy implemented by an incompetent political elite.

Aside from these more policy-oriented critiques, Le Pen and her party accused the government of mismanaging information and being guarded in its

relationship to the French public. From the beginning, Le Pen advanced a narrative of a “State Lie,” in which Macron’s government had more interest in hiding its incompetence than protecting the French (Camus 2020). Accordingly, the party was unwilling to support Macron’s calls for national unity throughout the pandemic. The President’s perceived failure to deliver the truth and adequate policy solutions reflected both an untrustworthy political elite and an inability to deliver the proper public policy to handle the crisis.

Summing up, the RN’s response to COVID-19 was broadly consistent with its pre-pandemic ideological commitments, both in terms of drawing on nativist arguments and on anti-elite sentiments. To some extent, the party’s response is a “typical populist (radical right) response” in the ways that Moffitt (2015) outlines. The RN invoked aspects of “the people”—for example, consider Le Pen’s narrow definition of who is worthy (nursing home residents) and unworthy (those in migrant centers) of personal protective equipment—against an incompetent political elite. However, while it was highly critical of governing elites, the party was also willing to draw on the expertise of the scientific community to construct its critique. In this way, the RN distinguishes itself from other populists around the world (see chapters on Brazil, the Netherlands, and the US in this book). While some populists may seek to “perpetuate” a crisis for their own strategic political aims (Moffitt 2015), the RN, from the onset of the pandemic, mostly avoided such a practice. Instead, it largely supported policies and measures put forward by scientists and argued that Macron’s government failed to follow this expert advice. In the next section, we examine why the RN engaged in this response, drawing out the contextual incentives present for Le Pen to pursue her strategy.

Understanding the pandemic response

The RN’s decision to link the COVID crisis to its core ideological message and deploy a techno-populist critique of the government fits with Marine Le Pen’s broader strategy of “de-demonizing” her party while still maintaining the allegiance of the RN’s base voters. Since taking over in 2011, Marine Le Pen has sought to turn the RN into a party of government. To achieve this, she has softened the rhetoric of her party compared to its harsh quality under the leadership of her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen. She embraced republicanism, backtracked on some of the party’s more controversial stances, and expelled militants holding exceedingly radical views. Following a series of comments by Jean-Marie Le Pen about the Holocaust, she went as far as breaking with her father and expelling him from the party. Finally, in an attempt to symbolically complete the transition from “eternal opposition” to “government in waiting,” in 2018 she changed the party’s name to RN.

Le Pen’s choice to de-demonize the RN should be understood in the context of the French electoral system. The country uses a two-round majoritarian system. In the first round, several candidates bid to pass a critical threshold to advance to the second round. In the presidential election, only the top two

candidates from the first round advance. While the first round features disparate candidates and a normally fractionalized vote, in the second round candidates are rewarded for attracting a broad swathe of voters and gaining the endorsement of their opponents from the previous round. Accordingly, the system tends to favor more moderate candidates. The RN has historically been disadvantaged by this system. When an RN candidate advances to the second round, they are often faced with a “republican front,” whereby the remaining parties and movements are willing to coalesce around the RN candidate’s opposition. For example, in 2002, Jean-Marie Le Pen advanced to the second round after winning 16.9% of the vote. He gained only one percentage point in the subsequent round while his opponent, Jacques Chirac, went from winning 19.9% in the first round to 82.2% in the second round. Marine Le Pen and the more modern RN’s de-demonization strategy attempts to address this electoral obstacle.

De-demonization, however, carries risks for Le Pen and the RN. Excessive moderation on its part may indeed alienate some of its most faithful voters, requiring that the party perform a careful balancing act between moderation and radicalization (Dézé 2015). The dominant trends identified in the previous section (linking the pandemic to the RN’s issues and creating a techno-populist appeal) helped the party strike this balance. Framing the pandemic in terms of familiar issues, for example, made it possible for the RN to speak to its traditional electorate. It also offered opportunities to advance its agenda without being labeled “extremist.” Because elements such as the closure of borders were justified based on accepted practices in health management, or opposition to the EU’s intervention was connected to less divisive issues of state sovereignty (Lorimer 2020), the RN managed to appear less radical while still pushing forward its key ideological agenda.

The RN’s techno-populist critique of the government served a similar purpose. By criticizing President Macron and his government while still respecting and deferring to scientific experts, the RN struck a balance between the poles of radicalization and moderation. On the one hand, the party’s reputation could be softened, and its respectability could grow: it was advancing mostly responsible and expert-advised recommendations. On the other hand, the RN could maintain its core populist message of anti-elitism, though here specifically critiquing *governing* elites. Surveys taken during the pandemic show that while RN voters are significantly more distrusting of governing elites, they trust scientists at a similar rate to other partisans (Brouard and Foucault 2020). Accordingly, pursuing this rhetorical strategy would not risk alienating the party’s existing voting core. Framing the pandemic through a techno-populist lens, in this sense, aligned perfectly well with the electoral incentives and strategic aims of the RN.

The pandemic’s long-term influence on French politics and the RN

It is difficult to say whether the pandemic will have much of an impact on the RN’s actual chances. At first glance, the results from the 2020 municipal

elections and the 2021 regional elections present a grim picture for both Le Pen and Macron. In the municipal elections, which were held on March 15, 2020, and after a delay, June 28, 2020, Macron's *En Marche!* performed poorly and the RN also failed to make significant inroads. While it won the mayoral race in Perpignan and secured reelection in several smaller cities, the RN ended up with only 840 council seats in 258 municipalities, down from 1,438 seats in 463 municipalities in 2014 (Baloge and Hubé 2021). In the regional elections held in June 2021, the mainstream right-wing *les Républicains* came out of the elections as the best performing party, with the RN falling well below expectations and Macron's party clearly struggling. However, these elections are likely not the best assessment of how the pandemic has shifted electoral fortunes, as the RN generally does not perform well locally and Macron's party lacks local implantation. Both elections have also been marked by record low turnout, a potential signal of widespread institutional dissatisfaction.

National-level polls for the 2022 presidential election suggest that the pandemic has had little to no effect on the electoral fortunes of the RN. While Politico's *Poll of Polls* shows Macron and Le Pen as clear frontrunners for the first round, with each hovering close to 25%, these figures have barely shifted since the onset of the pandemic (Politico 2021), offering little reason to believe that partisan pandemic responses have advantaged one side or the other.³

So far, then, it would seem that the RN has not received an electoral boost from its response to the COVID-19 pandemic. While populists might generally thrive on crisis, COVID-19 was the "wrong" type of crisis for the party. It required scientific expertise and complicated technical solutions rather than stoking grievances and ideological tensions. Accordingly, the RN sought to shift discourse surrounding the pandemic toward its own familiar territory, but its effort was likely overshadowed by the urgency to address COVID-19 rather than examine the root causes of the pandemic (which might better link to the RN's agenda). Furthermore, a rally around the flag effect, in which Macron's approval rating rose from around 34% in February 2020 to 41% by the end of March 2020 (Politico 2021), may have pushed some to view the RN's critical stance as inappropriate.

Nonetheless, Le Pen and her party have also not suffered electorally from the pandemic. Its response of ideological linkages and a balance of populist and technocratic critiques demonstrate a commitment to its strategy of "demonization," which could prove useful come 2022. Furthermore, the long-term outlook of the pandemic may actually begin to present a "better" crisis for the party. As concerns shift from health-related to economic and social, attention may shift toward issues better related to the RN's key ideological messaging. From a retrospective position, French voters may be more inclined to devote attention to the root causes of the pandemic rather than simply considering the necessary policy prescriptions in the short term. Here, the RN's talking points would likely gain more relevance, as the salience of issues like migration, redistribution, and the EU would rise.

Much remains to be seen regarding the long-term impacts of COVID-19 on French politics. The 2022 general and presidential elections offer an important test case to begin to evaluate the consequences of pandemic strategies. Nonetheless, COVID-19 at least did not appear to hurt the party's standing. The RN will likely emerge from the pandemic intact, with plenty of opportunities to continue advancing its ideological agenda and critical stance toward the government.

Notes

- 1 Similarly, *LFI* framed the pandemic in terms that reflected the questions and doubts that fueled the party's early success, dedicating significant focus to how the pandemic relates to economic security and national debt (Baloge and Hubé 2021).
- 2 While *LFI* also was not shy to criticize the government, their response was less focused on "blaming" elites as failures rather than "naming" the problems at hand (Baloge and Hubé 2021).
- 3 Additionally, these polls should be read with skepticism. For example, François Fillon of *les Républicains* was leading many opinion polls in 2016 and early 2017, though failed to even advance to the second round in 2017.

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