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# European Populism in the Shadow of the Great Recession

Edited by  
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## Chapter One

# Populism in Europe During Crisis: An Introduction

*Hanspeter Kriesi and Takis S. Pappas*

### **Populism and the crisis**

This volume aspires to be the first large-scale comparative work on the impact of the early twenty-first century's Great Recession on European populism. At a time when the former Italian Prime Minister Mario Monti appealed to electorates to avoid 'a return to populism', the French President Francois Hollande warned against 'dangerous populist excesses', and former European Union (EU) President Herman van Rompuy sent alarming messages about the 'winds of populism' threatening Europe, we propose an assessment of whether, and to what extent, populism has interacted with the crisis. Furthermore, distinguishing between the economic and the political aspects of the crisis, and remaining sensitive to the timing of events in each of our country cases, we attempt to assess the different effects of the crisis on populism at both a national and EU level. Finally, we hope to be in a position to offer a theoretically robust and dynamic evaluation of contemporary European populism.

In the aftermath of the Lehman Brothers' bankruptcy in September 2008, populist arguments have been made in political discourse throughout Europe, and populist short-cut solutions have been proposed. As austerity became the new policy norm, economic and social inequalities grew larger, and as European integration appeared to many constituencies as a hopeless project, newly emergent populist leaders rose in some countries to defend the powerless people against sinister elites including politicians (both at national and the EU levels), bankers and industrialists – in short, the powerful and the wealthy. In some countries, formerly mainstream political formations went into decline, some irreversibly, and new populist parties appeared, some of which skyrocketed to electoral success.

The economic crisis included three intertwined dimensions (Shambaugh 2012): First, a competitiveness crisis, which caused the slowing down of economic growth in most of Europe; second, a banking crisis, due to undercapitalisation of banks and their consequent lack of liquidity/solvency; and, third, a sovereign debt crisis, especially in countries that could no longer fund public debt on their own because of rising bond yields. To be sure, the economic crisis was not uniform in terms of its causes, manifestations and outcomes. Not all European countries endured all three dimensions, nor was the crisis felt in the same way throughout the

continent. A few countries (most notably Norway and Switzerland), did not really experience a crisis at all, while others were spared some of its dimensions. For those countries faced with an excessive sovereign debt, the problem became the most acute. Unable to refinance their respective governments' debts, some of them (including the herein examined Greece, Hungary and Ireland) had to be bailed out by the IMF or by the so-called 'Troika' (consisting of EU, ECB and IMF).

Although the crisis initially appeared as a purely economic one, it also had important political consequences. However, one has to distinguish between degrees of political and social disturbances. In most countries, the crisis led to the punishment of incumbent governments – a phenomenon widely observed across Europe. Only in very few countries (most notably Germany and Sweden) incumbents were able to maintain their position. In several countries, new political actors emerged forcefully during the crisis on both the radical right and the radical left (e.g. SYRIZA in Greece or the True Finns in Finland), while already established parties of the radical right were reinforced (e.g. FN in France). In addition, some countries saw the rise of new populist contenders rallying against the old political order (e.g. Beppe Grillo's M5S in Italy, or Jon Gnarr's 'Best Party' in Iceland). Everywhere, the crisis contributed to the erosion of existing party systems. In the countries hardest hit, the economic crisis developed into a deep political crisis. In some countries, it gave rise to intense social unrest, including mass mobilisation and the occasional use of street violence, and even led to the rise of political extremism on both the right and the left (most ominously in Greece and Hungary). In other countries, it caused tectonic changes in the established party system architecture (as, for instance, in Italy and Ireland) and even party system collapse (most obviously in the case of Greece).

We should not forget, however, that populism has not been the unique product of the Great Recession in Europe (Kriesi 2014). In Western Europe, the rise of populism has been a long-term process that has already been well underway at the time of the intervention of the Great Recession. This process has, for some time, been driven by the malfunctioning of representative democracy, especially by the deficiencies of the party system, the main intermediary system linking the citizens to political decision-making (*see* Mair 2002). These deficiencies of representative democracy, in turn, have different origins, depending on the countries we are looking at. In Western Europe, mainstream political parties have been less and less able to mobilise the voters: indicators are declining party membership and party identification, declining voter turnout, increasing volatility of the vote and declining shares of voters who choose the mainstream parties. Mair (2009) attributed this erosion of the mainstream parties' representation function to the increasing tension between 'responsibility' and 'responsiveness', i.e. the tension between the parties' role as representatives of the national citizen publics, and their role as governments being responsible to a range of domestic, inter- and supranational stakeholders. According to this view, the lack of responsiveness of the mainstream parties to specific new demands from society provided new challengers who appeal to the unrepresented demands arising from socio-economic change with the opportunity to mobilise successfully.

In particular, the lack of responsiveness of established parties to the plight of the 'globalisation losers' provided a chance for their mobilisation by the new populist right. As Kriesi *et al.* (2006, 2008, 2012) have argued, globalisation has transformed the basis of politics in Western Europe by giving rise to what they have called a new 'integration-demarcation' cleavage: processes of increasing economic, cultural and political competition linked to globalisation created latent structural potentials of globalisation 'winners' and 'losers'. According to their analyses, the mobilisation of the group of 'losers' by parties of the new populist right and by transformed established parties of the liberal and conservative right has provided the key impetus for the transformation of the party systems in the six West European countries they had studied. As they also showed, the success of the new challengers was mainly due to their appeal to the cultural anxieties of the 'losers', which, given the 'losers' heterogeneous economic interests, provided the least common denominator for their mobilisation. The long-term tide of populism was, in other words, not driven in the first place by economic, but by cultural motives. It is an open question to be analysed by the contributors of this volume whether the Great Recession has added economic fuel to the cultural fire.

For different reasons, Central and East European party systems have also been characterised by a considerable estrangement between the citizens and the established political elites long before the economic crisis intervened. In Central and Eastern Europe, party systems have not yet produced stable mainstream parties that reliably represent their constituencies: in contrast to the party systems of Western Europe, the party systems in Central and Eastern Europe have never been institutionalised to the same extent. In other words, in this part of Europe, parties have not yet developed stable roots in society, their organisation has been unstable, and they are hardly considered legitimate by the citizens of their countries. The most important empirical evidence for the lack of institutionalisation of these party systems comes from Powell, and Tucker (2014), who show that the very high level of volatility in these systems since the democratic transition has above all been due to the entry and exit of parties, and not to switches between established parties.

In Central and Eastern Europe, the low level of institutionalisation of the party systems has provided a general opportunity for the rise of new populist challengers. This opportunity became all the more important, given the widespread dissatisfaction of the Central and Eastern European publics with their political elites. The high costs of economic transition and the low level of political and administrative performance have contributed to the constitution of anti-elitist sentiments which provide a general breeding ground for populist challengers. Thus, a strong majority in all Central and Eastern European EU member states perceives public officials as acting in a corrupt manner when exercising their power. The levels of public distrust in political authorities are especially high in Bulgaria, Romania, Lithuania and Slovakia. Across Central and Eastern Europe, there is a deep-seated disenchantment of citizens with democratic politics, which is, as Linde (2012) shows, largely explained by perceptions of corruption and feelings

of unfair treatment by authorities. As a result of this particular combination of circumstances, ‘centrist’ populist mobilisation, i.e. a ‘pure’ version of populism that is reduced to anti-establishment posture without any other ideological element (Učeň 2007: 54a), has characterised Central and Eastern Europe already before the crisis. These ‘centrist-populist’ parties have ‘largely arisen as a reaction to the general disappointment of East European electorates with mainstream parties and the high cost of economic reforms’ (Pop-Eleches 2010: 232).

The most general question we try to answer in this volume is whether and to what extent the Great Recession has served to enhance these overall trends and contributed to the general ascendancy of populism across Europe. At the outset of our endeavour our hunch is similar to that of the politicians we cited at the beginning of this introduction: whether of a rightist, leftist or centrist hue, represented by old as well as brand new parties, we expect populism in its many manifestations to have been a beneficiary of crisis at the expense of liberal democracy as it developed during the long postwar decades.

### Definitions

Of course, populism needs clear defining. Remaining fully aware of the term’s slippery nature, the contributors to this book rely on well-tested concepts of populism. We define populism as an ‘ideology’ that splits society into two antagonistic camps, the virtuous people and some corrupt establishment, effectively pitting one against the other (Canovan 1999: 3; Laclau 1977: 172–3; Mudde 2004: 543; Wiles 1969: 166). More specifically, following Mudde (2004: 543), we conceive of populism as an ideology which ‘considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups – ‘the pure people’ versus the ‘corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the ‘*volonté générale*’ (general will) of the people’. This definition includes:

- the existence of two homogenous groups – ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’;
- the antagonistic relationship between the two;
- the idea of popular sovereignty; and
- a ‘Manichean outlook’ that combines the positive valorisation of ‘the people’ with the denigration of ‘the elite’.

As has been pointed out by Stanley (2008) and Stanley and Učeň (2008), this conceptual core is distinct, but ‘thin’, in the sense established by Freedman (1998: 750) of an ideology unable ‘to provide a reasonably broad, if not comprehensive, range of answers to the political questions that societies generate’. Populism’s ‘thinness’ is a product of the vagueness and plasticity of its core concepts, which allows it to be combined with a variety of ‘thick’ ideologies, such as conservatism or socialism, that add more specific content to it. As Stanley and Učeň (2008: 8) observe:

Conceiving of populism as a thin ideology resolves the persistent problem of how to account for the variety of political content associated with manifestations

of populism whilst simultaneously positing a set of common elements, but it also illustrates the dependent relationship of populism on ‘fuller’ ideologies that project a more detailed set of answers to key political questions.

For populists, ‘the people’ is paramount and whatever their specific view of the people, they share a ‘monolithic’ conception of the people. As Canovan (2002: 34) points out, the concept of the people is always conceived as a homogenous category, a unity, a corporate body capable of having common interests and a common will – a *‘volonté générale’*. All populists also share the notion of the people as sovereign, and all of them deplore that democracy is not working because the sovereignty of the people has been eroded and is threatened with being ever-further eroded. In addition to this conceptual core notion and depending on the ‘thick’ ideology with which the ‘thin’ ideology of populism is combined, ‘the people’ may also be conceived as ‘the nation’ (right-wing populism) or as the ‘common man’, the ‘little guys’, the ‘poor’, the ‘99 per cent’ or the ‘exploited’ (left-wing populism).

The monolithic conception of the people as a homogenous unity not only implies the antagonism between the people and the elites, but also opens the possibility of the ‘exclusion of others’ – non-elite groups who do not belong to ‘the people’. Depending on the ‘thick’ ideology that is complementing the thin populist core, specific groups of ‘others’ may be singled out as scapegoats who, in addition to or in combination with the elites, are to be blamed for the predicament of ‘the people’. Examples of groups excluded by right-wing populists comprise all kinds of ethnic minorities (e.g. Roma or Jews), immigrants and the undeserving beneficiaries of the welfare state (those who benefit from social security without having contributed to it).

While populism is ‘a shadow cast by democracy’ (Canovan 1999: 3) and populists see themselves as true democrats, it is important to keep in mind that their ‘thin’ ideology implies quite a specific ‘illiberal vision of democracy’ (Pappas 2013, 2014b). We can identify three illiberal components of the populist vision of democracy: it takes ‘government by the people’ literally and rejects liberal checks and balances (the ‘constitutionalist dimension of democracy’ in the terms used by Mény and Surel 2002); it is hostile to intermediaries between the people and the decision-makers, especially to political parties (Pasquino 2008: 21), and pleads for a more direct linkage of the masses to the elites (Taggart 2002: 67); and it is also illiberal because of its monolithic (or unanimous), and, we should add, predetermined conception of the will of the people, which leaves no room for pluralism or deliberation (Mastropalo 2008: 34f.; Urbinati 2014: 132ff.).

Populism as an ideology manifests itself in specific discursive patterns for identifying foes and solidifying the community of friends. Jagers and Walgrave (2007) and Hawkins (2009) have introduced the conception of populism as a discursive pattern or political communication style. This notion does not add another theoretical element to the definition of populism, but it is very helpful for attempts to operationalise populist ideology. Populist ideology becomes visible in the political communication strategies or discursive patterns of the populist

## Chapter Two

# Institutionalised Right-Wing Populism in Times of Economic Crisis: A Comparative Study of the Norwegian Progress Party and the Danish People's Party

Anders R. Jupskås

### Introduction

It is widely held that different kinds of crises – political, economic or cultural – fuel populist support (e.g. Mudde 2004: 547; Laclau 1977: 196). Taggart (2004: 275), for example, argues that ‘populism tends to emerge when there is a strong *sense of crisis* and populists use that sense to inject an urgency and an importance to their message’. The argument is that a crisis tends to delegitimise the existing political parties, which in turn creates a window of opportunity for new untainted political players claiming to represent the will of the people rather than the interests of the established elites. But how are populist parties affected by the existence of a crisis if they are already fairly integrated in the respective party system at the time that the crisis emerged?

This chapter compares the impact of an economic crisis on two institutionalised right-wing populist parties, namely *Fremskrittspartiet* (The Progress Party, FrP) in Norway and *Dansk Folkeparti* (Danish People's Party, DF) in Denmark. More specifically, the chapter will analyse how these two parties were affected discursively and electorally by the international financial crisis which emerged in late 2008. Moreover, while the study is primarily concerned with the impact of the crisis, the Danish and Norwegian cases also allow for an intra- and interparty comparison of the electoral and discursive effects of government participation. While the DF moved from being a stable support party of the Danish government to a clearer role as an opposition party in the post-crisis period, the FrP moved the other way entering office for the first time.

Following the general guidelines given in the introduction of this edited volume, this chapter proceeds as follows. The first section briefly sketches out the general evolution, ideological legacy and degree of institutionalisation of FrP and DF in the pre-crisis period. Then, the impact of the international financial crisis in Norway and Denmark will be systematically assessed based on standard economic indicators such as growth rates, unemployment and public debt. However, acknowledging that crises tend to be evaluated in relative terms, the development of the economy of these two countries will also

be seen from a European and regional perspective. The third section focuses on the discursive development – the populist elements as well as other core ideological features – of the two right-wing populist parties in the post-crisis period, including a comparison of the period in which these parties were in government (or supporting the government) with the period in which they were in opposition. Since the DF has not published any new electoral manifestos in the post-crisis period, the data are primarily internal party magazines (i.e. *Dansk Folkeblad* for the DF and *Fremskritt* for the FrP). The fourth and final section considers the complex interplay between the international financial crisis, the discursive reaction of the populist parties, their position inside or outside the government and their electoral development. Some of the main findings will be summarised towards the end of the chapter.

### **Populism until 2008: Institutionalised right-wing populism**

Prior to the financial crisis, right-wing populism in Scandinavia was in contrast to many, if not most other countries in Europe, characterised by long-lasting presence and high level of institutionalisation, which means that the parties existed as ‘social organisation apart from its momentary leaders’ and that they demonstrated ‘recurring patterns of behaviour valued by those who identify with it’ (Janda 1970: 88). Populism, defined as a specific thin ideology which pits the ordinary and virtuous people against the corrupt and ignorant elite (Stanley 2008; Mudde 2004) and which is often led by a charismatic leader (Zaslav 2008), emerged as a political force already in the so-called ‘electoral earthquakes’ in 1973 in both Denmark and Norway (e.g. Andersen and Bjørklund 1990). While *Fremskridtspartiet* (The Progress Party, FrPd) gained 15.9 per cent in Denmark, Anders Lange’s *parti til sterk nedsettelse av skatter, avgifter og offentlige inngrep* (Anders Lange’s Party for a Strong Reduction in Taxes, Duties and Public Intervention, ALP) gained 5 per cent of the votes in Norway.

As part of what von Beyme (1988) calls the ‘second wave’ of far right mobilisation in postwar Europe, these parties were primarily anti-tax movements rather than nationalist parties. Both FrPd and ALP were organised around rather charismatic leaders who frequently committed a breach of established political etiquette; tax lawyer Mogens Glistrup and editor Anders Lange in Denmark and Norway respectively. Programmatically, they were opposing rising taxes, growing bureaucracy, expansion of the Scandinavian welfare state and foreign aid. The two leaders were particularly hostile towards the established parties, though Glistrup also criticised bureaucrats and intellectuals (Bjørklund 1981: 4).

Contemporary right-wing populist parties are either an organisational continuation with a different name (as in Norway) or a split party (as in Denmark) of the parties which entered the party systems in the early 1970s. In Norway, the ALP changed its name to FrP a few months before the national election in 1977. At this point, the party had already experienced a temporary party split; abysmal results in the sub-national elections in 1975; and demonstrated low levels of

parliamentary cohesion. The party elite was profoundly divided as to what extent a more traditional organisational structure was needed, and without Lange who died unexpectedly in 1974, the party dropped out of parliament in 1977.

The electoral loss created a 'window of opportunity' for Carl I. Hagen, a former secretary of the ALP, who was elected chairman in 1978 and remained so until 2006. With Hagen as a media-savvy and charismatic chairman, the party slowly regained its electoral strength and started building a traditional organisation combining the logic of mass party and business firm (Jupskås 2014). The ideological appeal, however, remained fairly constant, though the party drifted towards Kitschelt's (1995) famous winning formula in the 1980s – namely, a comprehensive and explicit neoliberal, xenophobic and authoritarian position (Bjørklund and Andersen 2002). While this appeal seemed to be electorally successful, it simultaneously reinforced – together with the increased saliency of the European Union (EU) question in the Norwegian public debate in the early 1990s – existing tensions between a liberal, a nationalist, and a Christian-conservative faction. Internal disagreements were repeatedly played out in public, and popular support decreased rapidly. After an agonising party convention in 1994, the liberal faction – including part of the party leadership, a majority of the youth organisation, and four members of parliament – left the party.

In contrast to the Danish party, which was never able to recover from a similar though not identical party split in mid-1990s (*see* next section), the Norwegian party rapidly re-gained its electoral and organisational strength. Ideologically, the party became more pro-welfare at the beginning of the 2000s, while simultaneously remaining the most right-wing oriented party in Norway on most economic issues (e.g. taxes, privatisation, economic incentives, labour market and trade unions) and, with a few exceptions, the most authoritarian on cultural issues (Jungar and Jupskås 2014: 9). The paradoxical position of being in favour of more welfare and drastic tax cuts at the same time was mainly resolved by suggesting that Norway should spend more of the income from the oil industry today, rather than saving the revenues for future generations and growing welfare expenses. In terms of Norwegian membership in the EU, the party has no official position as it remains fundamentally divided among voters, members, and members of parliament (Jupskås 2013: 217–18).

In this period, the party also became (more) institutionalised, at least according to the indicators suggested by Janda (1970: 88–89). Electoral support and legislative representation were stabilised, and even though the leadership succession from Carl I. Hagen to Siv Jensen in 2006 did not involve 'an overt process of criticism' (Janda 1970: 89), the party proved to be fully capable of survival without its longstanding chairman and party builder. Actually, with Jensen as chairman, the party increased its electoral support in the subnational elections in 2007.

When the financial crisis emerged towards the end of 2008, the FrP was the dominant right-wing party in Norway. In fact, according to opinion polls, the party was twice the size of the Conservative Party. Yet it was the only parliamentary party

without governmental experience. Although the FrP had been office-seeking since the early 2000s, it was not perceived as *salonfähig* by the other non-socialist parties in 2001 or 2005. Suffering from limited influence in opposition and experiencing a generation shift among party elites, however, the non-socialist parties gradually accepted the FrP as governing party. Thus, when the incumbent left-centre coalition lost in 2013, all four non-socialist parties joined the government negotiations resulting in a minority government with the Conservatives and the FrP.

The DF is a more recent party formation than the FrP, but the legacy connects it to the political earthquake in the early 1970s. The party was founded in 1995 after several prominent MPs defected from the FrPd, most notably the former chairman, Pia Kjørgaard. Initially, the main difference between the two right-wing populist parties in Denmark was not related to ideology, but related to party organisation and parliamentary behaviour; the party elite in DF wanted a party with a more centralised organisation and reliable behaviour *vis-à-vis* other non-socialist parties (Ringsmose and Pedersen 2005; Meret 2010). However, the DF also gradually developed a new ideological position. The party adopted a more explicit nationalist position: anti-immigration and Euroscepticism became two of the party's core issues. Moreover, it slowly abandoned the anti-tax and anti-welfare position promoted by FrPd (Meret 2010: 102ff).

DF quickly replaced the FrPd as the dominant right-wing populist party at the Danish electoral arena. Already in 2001, the FrPd failed to pass the electoral threshold, whereas the splinter party increased its electoral support to 12 per cent (up from 7.4 per cent in 1998). And even though the party was probably still quite leadership-dependent prior to the financial crisis (e.g. Andersen and Borre 2007), it had become quite institutionalised (again according the indicators suggested by Janda). Most importantly, the DF did not experience any organisational discontinuity (although one MP defected in 2007), and both the legislative and electoral stability were remarkable compared to the FrPd, especially since the early 1980s. In the national elections in 2005 and 2007, the party gained 13.2 and 13.8 of the votes respectively, and the number of MPs have only varied between twenty-two (in 2001) and twenty-five (in 2007).

This process of institutionalisation is perhaps all the more impressive knowing that the party simultaneously was a stable support party of the Danish right-wing minority government which seized office after the national election in 2001. Although the party did not hold any government portfolios, it was included in almost all legislation including the preparation of the bills. Moreover, the government consistently passed the annual state budget with DF's support – ten in total between 2001 and 2011 (Christiansen 2012). In the mainstream media, the government was symbolically labelled the VKO-government, which represents the Liberals, the Conservatives and DF respectively. In the first years of the financial crisis, the DF was therefore closely linked with the incumbent government and expected to support (at least some of) the policies proposed by the Liberals and the Conservatives. However, this political situation changed when the right-wing block (i.e. Liberals, Conservatives and DF) lost its majority in the first post-crisis election in 2011, and was replaced by a centre-left government

(i.e. Social Democrats, Socialists and Social Liberals). Consequently, DF lost its pivotal position as government support party.

To summarise briefly, then, both Norway and Denmark had right-wing populist parties that were electorally successful and institutionalised prior to the outbreak of the international financial crisis. They were both characterised by legislative and electoral stability, as well as organisational continuity. And while the DF to some extent remained a highly personalised party though not a ‘personal party’ (McDonnell 2013), the FrP had demonstrated its ability to outlive its long-standing chairman and ‘party builder’. Ideologically, the two parties were both characterised by anti-immigration policies, anti-establishment rhetoric and a pro-welfare position. However, only the Norwegian party promoted a neoliberal economic agenda with massive tax cuts, privatisation and less bureaucracy, and only the Danish party promoted a soft Eurosceptic position. Before analysing the extent to which these two institutionalised right-wing populist parties have been affected discursively or electorally by the emerging international financial crisis, the next section will briefly assess the domestic economic development in the two Scandinavian countries in the post-crisis period.

### **Diverging patterns of economic crisis**

To what extent has there been an economic crisis in Denmark and Norway since the beginning of the international financial crisis in 2008? The answer obviously depends on how we conceptualise and operationalise ‘an economic crisis’. Generally speaking, an economic crisis refers to a situation in which there is a rapid and profound slowdown of the national economy. This kind of crisis is well captured by economic indicators such as (1) annual growth of the gross domestic product (GDP), (2) unemployment rates, and (3) the level of public debt (*see* also the introductory chapter of this edited volume). However, in addition to these objective indicators measuring the current situation of the national economy, there is also a subjective or relative aspect inherent in the notion of a being in a state of crisis. Given that the baseline for evaluating the economic situation in a particular country is usually affected by previous experience and/or the situation in ‘similar countries’ (e.g. countries in geographical proximity, same size or shared cultural legacy), there might be a feeling of crisis even though the national economy performs relatively well. This relative aspect of the crisis is particularly important when assessing the Danish development.

Being two small and open economies, neither Denmark nor Norway were unaffected by the international financial crisis in 2008. The economic activity in both these two countries is highly interwoven with other countries, most notably in Europe and North-America.<sup>1</sup> Despite the economic openness, however, only Denmark experienced an economic crisis based on the aforementioned indicators,

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1. In 2012, Denmark’s most important trading partners were Germany, Sweden, UK, US, Norway and The Netherlands, whereas Norway’s most important partners were UK, Germany, The Netherlands, France, Sweden and US (CIA World Fact Book, 2012).

## Chapter Five

# The Revenge of the *Ploucs*:<sup>1</sup> The Revival of Radical Populism under Marine Le Pen in France

Hans-Georg Betz

### Introduction

In France, the inability of successive governments to solve the severe socio-economic problems engendered by the Great Recession has opened ample room for populist mobilisation. Yet the only party to seize the moment has been the *Front National* (FN) under the new leadership of Marine Le Pen. Attempts by the far left behind Jean-Luc Mélenchon to occupy populist terrain proved largely unsuccessful. Mélenchon's 'meta-populist' discourse was much too highbrow (Cassely 2013), his hesitant bid to advance a radical alternative too timid to capitalise on widespread popular political disenchantment and discontent (Bernier 2014). By contrast, Marine Le Pen's emphatic embrace of populist rhetoric and strategy has proved highly successful.

When Marine Le Pen assumed the party presidency in January 2011, the FN was at a crossroad. The party was in serious financial trouble after a series of significant reversals at the polls following the presidential election of 2002 (Igounet 2014: 403–404). The low point was reached in the 2009 European election, where the FN lost four of the seven seats won in 2004. Organisationally, the FN was significantly weakened after the defection and expulsion of a number of leading cadres. After the 2007 presidential election, the party was in such bad shape that TNS-Sofres decided to discontinue its annual survey on the FN's public image (they resumed in 2010). In this situation, Marine Le Pen had the choice between continuing to serve as the point of reference for the anachronistic obsessions of various extreme-right *groupuscules* (such as Catholic traditionalists, Petainist ultra-nationalists, anti-Semitic conspiracy theorists and racists) or pushing the party in a radically new direction. She chose to embark on a project of organisational rejuvenation and programmatic reform designed to '*dediabolise*' the FN's image and gain political respectability for its new leader. The result has been astounding. Most significantly, Marine Le Pen managed to reverse the FN's fortunes: in the presidential election of 2012, the FN candidate received 6.4 million votes (17.9 per cent of the vote), 1.8 million more than her father had garnered in 2002. In the subsequent legislative election,

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1. French term for a hick, yokel or bumpkin.

the FN received 13.6 per cent of the vote and managed to win two seats. Two years later, in the local elections, the party elected a dozen mayors and re-established itself as the third national political force. Finally, in the European elections a few months later, the FN caused a political earthquake when, with roughly 25 per cent of the vote, it outdistanced all other major parties. Secondly, Marine Le Pen established herself as a tough yet personable politician, who increasingly managed to push her ideas and demands onto the political agenda. Last but not least, Marine Le Pen's strong personality did much to improve the party's image, even if the media continued to characterise the FN as a right-wing extremist party (Mestre 2014).

Personality accounts, however, only in part for the FN's political revival. Marine Le Pen also benefitted from the profound economic, political, and particularly psychological crisis that continues to traumatise the country. This crisis allowed Marine Le Pen to reinvent herself as an uncompromising promoter of French sovereignty; an untiring, disinterested advocate of ordinary people against the ravages of globalisation; the only credible alternative to the political establishment; and the sole genuine defender of the country's historical heritage, cultural identity and fundamental values.

In response to the crisis, Marine Le Pen not only shifted the party's programmatic centre of gravity from its formerly preponderant focus on immigration toward broader questions of political economy; she also sharpened its populist profile relentlessly charging the political establishment of perpetuating a system that benefited a small oligarchic elite at the expense of ordinary people (Mestre 2012). At the same time, she adopted a social-populist programme that borrowed heavily from the traditional and dissident left. The explicit goal was to recover the manual and routine non-manual vote (the *couches populaires*) the FN had lost to Nicolas Sarkozy in 2007, broaden the party's electoral appeal, and thus turn the FN into a catch-all party of protest, strong enough to bolster Marine Le Pen's self-proclaimed presidential ambitions (Le Pen 2013).

The remainder of this chapter offers an account of these developments. It starts with a short discussion of the socio-economic impact of the Great Recession in France, followed by an extended analysis of the evolution of the FN's doctrine and programme under Marine Le Pen. The final part of the chapter provides a brief assessment of the main factors accounting for Marine Le Pen's success and its impact on French politics and society.

### **The Great Recession and French malaise**

The immediate impact of the Great Recession of 2008 on France was relatively mild. Output and employment losses were less significant than in Germany and the United States. Unlike the latter, however, France has had a hard time recovering from the crisis. In 2012, French output and employment levels were still below pre-crisis levels. Unemployment continued to rise, France's manufacturing base to decline, and the country to lag behind its main competitors in Western Europe and overseas (Bellone and Chiappini 2014).

The slump brought to light the structural weaknesses of the French economy: stagnating productivity; a deteriorating balance of trade; declining attractiveness for foreign investors; a continued high number of annual bankruptcies; a dramatic increase of the national debt (from roughly 64 per cent of GDP in 2006 to more than 90 per cent in 2013); rising socio-economic inequality (Boulhol and Sicari 2014; Mongereau 2013; Altares 2014; Clerc 2014). Most important of all, the crisis brutally exposed the widening competitiveness gap between France and Germany, reflected, among other things, in the two countries' divergent ability to attract FDI (EY Advisory 2013: 12–16; Visot 2014). This was a function of both French companies' low profitability rate (in 2013 the lowest in the euro area) and high indebtedness and France's overall structural 'weakness in innovation' primarily due to its firms' limited capacity to absorb available knowledge (European Commission 2013a: 9; European Commission 2014: 42).

The economic slump has had a profound psychological impact on large parts of the French population, with growing gloom pervading society. Take INSEE's monthly consumer confidence index, for instance: in mid-2013, four years after the onset of the Great Recession, it was at the same level as in 2008 (INSEE 2013). Opinion polls tell a similar story. In 2012, almost two thirds of respondents rated France's competitive position as bad (Ifop 2012). By comparison, in late 2010, some 75 per cent of German respondents considered their country well-positioned with regard to global economic competition (Perrineau 2011: 82). In 2013, three out of four respondents thought France was 'in decline'; for two-thirds, France was in the midst of a 'crisis without precedent' (CSA 2014: 4–7). A mere 36 per cent said they had confidence in France's future, whereas 75 per cent said the same about Germany's future (Viavoice 2013). As a result, in May 2013, *Le Monde* characterised the French as the 'champions of pessimism in Europe' (Gatinois 2013). Many put the blame on globalisation. In late 2013, more than 60 per cent of respondents considered globalisation a threat to the country (Ipsos 2014). A large number agreed that only protectionist measures could counter the impact of globalisation (TNS-Sofres 2011).

At the same time, the majority of French voters showed little confidence in the established parties, the political class, and the political process in general. For most voters, politicians care little about what ordinary citizens think or want and are easily corrupted (in March 2014, more than two thirds of respondents thought politicians were more and more corrupt [BVA 2013]). A considerable number (50 per cent in 2011) think that politicians lack the power to improve the plight of ordinary people given the structural constraints imposed on them by globalisation, the European Union (EU), and big business (Perrineau 2011: 82). Many are disaffected with representative democracy, yearning instead for plebiscitary forms of democracy or even for a 'strong man' unencumbered by parliament and *elections*.

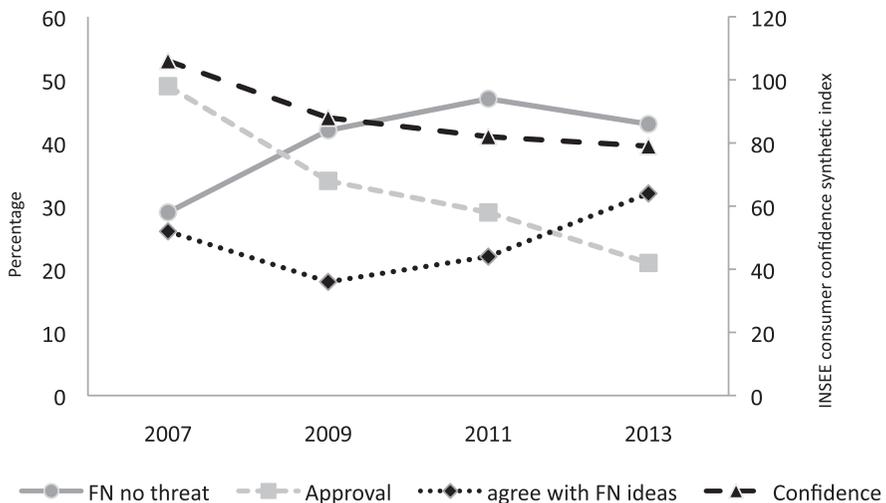
Under the circumstances, the resurgence of the FN is hardly surprising. The failure of successive governments to deal with the socio-economic impact of the crisis boosted the fortunes of the FN. As political confidence declined,

the FN’s image improved. In June 2007, Sarkozy’s approval rating stood at 63 per cent. At the end of 2011, it had fallen to 29 per cent. François Hollande fared even worse. Between June 2012 and December 2013, his approval rating fell from 55 to 21 per cent (TNS-Sofres 2014a). At the same time, the number of those who thought the FN did not pose a danger to democracy increased from 29 per cent (December 2006) to 47 per cent (January 2013) and the number of those saying they agreed with the FN’s ideas increased from 26 per cent to almost a third (TNS-Sofres 2014b). In short, as consumer confidence declined and approval ratings for the president of the republic fell, the FN’s public image steadily improved (see Figure 5.1).

### The republican turn

The Great Recession provoked substantial shifts in the political opportunity structure of the French Republic, which proved highly propitious for the FN. After all, issues such as disenchantment with politics, the inexorable decline of the country, and the threatened loss of national identity had always been central to FN rhetoric. As early as 1985, Jean-Marie Le Pen had made the alleged gap between democratic claim (*‘La France est une démocratie’*) and everyday reality (*‘La pratique, hélas est différente’*) the lynchpin of his political programme (Le Pen 1985: 17–35). According to FN reasoning, democracy in France had been ‘confiscated’ by a new ‘oligarchy’ that occupied every locus of political power. The result was a ‘profound gulf’ separating the people from their representatives charged with doing nothing to defend the French people

Figure 5.1: French malaise and public perception of Marine LePen and Front National



In the last decades, populism has been one of the most debated topic in political science. Comparative studies on populist parties have ranged from the analysis of the ideology and the policy-making to the attitude of the electorate and the relationship between populists and the so-called intermediate bodies, in particular the Parliament. Edited by Kriesi and Pappas, *European Populism in the Shadow of the Great Recession* is an early effort to investigate the growth of populist parties in Europe since the outbreak of the economic and financial crisis in 2008. The study comprises five European re