

Sam Barney-Gibbs

Professor Janet Laible

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### **Attracted to New: An Analysis of Marine Le Pen's Populism**

Jean-Marie Le Pen founded and led the a far-right French political party previously known as the National Front. His politics, which were poured into the philosophies of his party, were riddled with xenophobia and anti-Semitism often disguised as French nationalism and thus nodding to populist ideas. This party is now referred to as the National Rally, and it has undergone structural changes by his daughter for over a decade to better keep up with the developing needs of the French people. This unique political force, Marion Anne Perrine Le Pen, better known as Marine Le Pen, gained ranks within the party under her father's control and beat him for control of party leadership in 2011 ([Ray](#), Paragraphs 1-6). This new era has been widely characterized as populist, especially in the eyes of political scientist Cas Mudde: "Populism is an ideology that separates society into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite,' and that holds that politics should be an expression of 'the general will' of the people ([Mudde](#), Pages 25-26). Though her father instigated this distinction between purity and corruption mainly through exclusionary manners, Marine successfully refined and mobilized his efforts at a time of globally shared concern that the current understanding of democracy is "not performing well," which motivates voters to turn to where they feel their individual wants and needs will be met ([Patterson](#), Paragraph 9). This rush to find political comfort and advocacy for those supposedly left behind can be seen in a study done by The Guardian, which found in 2018

that 25% of Europeans were voting for populist politicians, tripling their votes in the past two decades. In France, there was a boom in populist voting when Marine Le Pen first took party power of the National Front and made party history by placing third in the first round of the 2012 presidential election; another, even greater populist voting boom hit following her second-place bid in the 2017 presidential election. Swirling around her then was the historical nationalist move of Brexit, the potent conservative and populist successes of Donald Trump, and more people — including French citizens — attracted to the conservative populism that promises they will be heard, understood, and part of some actionable change ([Barr, Clarke, Holder, Kommenda, Lewis](#), Page 1). I will discuss in this paper how Marine Le Pen embodies illiberal politics and claims to improve democracy by introducing an alluring sense of newness — I will specifically examine the exclusiveness of her policies and vigor in her leadership to prove illiberalness and also examine the power of rebranding her party to give an impression of continued democracy.

Assessing the needs of the French people is a difficult task, yet defining their nationhood is a necessary step in contextualizing Le Pen's political motivations. Political scientist Lowell Barrington aggregated the political philosophies of numerous political thinkers and found that a nation is signified not by its statehood nor a people's shared ethnicity or culture but rather by a combination of shared cultural characteristics and a communal sense of "territorial self-determination" ([Barrington](#), Pages 712-713). The French people tend to be culturally diverse with a sense of belonging to the French land. However, the ongoing debate over the acceptability of diversity in the nation points to fractures in the understanding of what it means to 'belong' in France.

Le Pen's illiberal political identity is rooted in a string of exclusionary agendas: both she and her father have supported anti-big government, anti-social welfare, anti-immigration, anti-globalization, anti-European Union involvement (Euroskepticism), and overall anti-pluralist agendas that aim to make the 'desired' French person feel increasingly seen while shunning the undesired and ill-fitting 'other.' This anti-other phenomenon can be understood as "heritage populism," which places emphasis on the historical significance and anti-Islamic, anti-European Union, and anti-current establishment ([Reynie](#), Pages 47-48, 51-52 Encoded in these political desires is a dedication to a white France (when considering racial and greater significances), by outcasting global minorities such as Black Muslims. In doing this, she is homogenizing and centralizing French power to white citizens, perpetuating an 'us versus them' narrative, placing herself as their savior-like figurehead who can fix what other French parties and citizens can not. Following this thought regarding leadership, her ego as a political leader is exemplified and fed by the aforementioned increased populist voting, the literal kicking-out of her father from his own party and rebranding it in 2018, and transferring party leadership to essentially her new human puppet — a young, impressionable Jordan Bardella — in 2022. She continues to have control not only of the intraparty sphere but also the interparty political debate across France and seeping beyond its state borders. This ominously alludes to metastasizing unchecked power as she crawls her way toward a destructive view of the French presidency and deeper into illiberal politics. Political scientist Cas Mudde said the prime minister of Hungary, Viktor Orbán, heavily influenced Le Pen's politics since 2010, when he openly shared plans to build an "illiberal new state based

on national foundations” — dismissing preexisting governmental programs and processes and replacing them with revolutionary ones that give a more efficient, central power (Mudde, Page 28). Le Pen can certainly be seen to have been touched by and has incorporated this exclusionary thinking into her platform. French political scientist Nonna Mayer predicted that if Le Pen were to win the 2022 presidential election, the consequences of her policy promises would put France “at odds with its international engagements, and with the very norms and values of the European Union, turning France into an illiberal democracy.” Mayer references Le Pen’s core plans to bolster French national identity, crush multiculturalism, halt immigration, and (contrary to normal processes) use a referendum to reform the French Constitution as prime examples of legitimate illiberal action that could ensue and, regardless, identify Le Pen as an illiberal politician ([Mayer](#), Paragraph 8). Her platform is and has been attractive to many, specifically low-income and less-educated individuals in France who feel left behind by growing political globalization and liberalism. Some voters may choose to give up on (and many already have given up on) democratic ideals for a novel illiberal government if they feel their specific voices will be heard and their sense of struggle will come to an end.

An integral portion of Le Pen’s populist identity is found in her ability to convince the public of her dedication to improving democracy in France — while simultaneously planning to rip down some democratic institutions. Her use of rhetoric, specifically through rebranding the National Front/Rally and her own politics without necessarily changing her end goals, epitomizes this forced illusion of democracy. This campaign to ‘de-demonize’ her father’s National Front politics involved outward dis-alignment with its older, blatantly anti-Semitic

and racist agenda and moving left in its economic policies. Her newfound anti-racist rhetoric is a tenet of democratic ideas — something many people look for but previously did not find with her father’s ultra-conservative views — though there still exists the question of whether her intended policies match her public words. She less emphasizes the historically core beliefs of her party regarding nationalism and immigration but has transferred more energy into the woes of globalization and deindustrialization as talking points ([Bloch](#), Paragraphs 1-2). Even arguably smaller changes such as rebranding a hard climate denier stance to an energy nationalist priority or increasingly highlighting a drive for women’s and animals’ rights have made the view of Marine Le Pen’s agenda more progressive and thus acceptable to a wider voter pool. A media study in 2017 found that Le Pen’s National Front/Rally has not necessarily changed its priorities in the way they have been presented by Le Pen’s rhetoric, but rather the party’s “populist undertone and character” used to “package its propositions” has changed to appear democratic ([Barisione and Stockemer](#), Conclusion Paragraph 1).

Specifically, Le Pen has branded herself as ‘the candidate of concrete solutions,’ fixating on the young, rural, working class, typically uneducated demographics who feel they have recently been left without as much of a voice. Many of them believe themselves to be poor and marginalized, and they feel empowered by Le Pen’s arguable policy priorities. Not to mention, Le Pen has not only followed but has been a cog in the democratic voting institutions of France — she has been successfully campaigning and uniquely climbing the political ladder without allegations of undemocratic behaviors in such elections.

Some may argue that she actually is a democratic candidate because of her sustained support for the democratic voting processes in France, yet this is simply one source of

analysis regarding her democratic nature; her overwhelmingly disguised and misguided rhetoric of democracy is, within itself, undemocratic in nature as it shields voters from truthful knowledge — and thus their ability to make an educated voting decision. In addition, her illiberalness adds weight to this debate over her dedication to legitimate democracy, overwhelming even a singular democratic act such as supporting election results and processes.

Her influence on the democratic institution of voting is evidenced by the highest youth voter turnout specifically for Le Pen in the 2022 elections in party history and in comparison to other right-leaning populist parties in French history; this demographic tend to vote more on the left, yet Le Pen's rebranding has literally shifted the narrative and thus election results ([Gelix and Tower](#), Page 1). Her intentional manipulation of rhetoric and marketing/branding and thus the minds of the French populous, specifically her targeted audience previously described, points to a facade of improving democracy that thrives in a populist regime.

Marine Le Pen's political career not only takes part in but also is a changemaker in a thriving era of European and global populism. Her presence in media across the globe has defined her as a politician to watch — for the purposes of political study and out of fear for her illiberal, undemocratic future of France that can seep into other nations' politics. Marine Le Pen's political life was originally shaped by her father but soon proved that this specific populist era necessitates younger, more cunning leaders. Le Pen's populism can be organized by a sense of newness: this feature is attractive but is proving to be even more so to an increasing number of French voters and voters in other countries who feel threatened by the current state of global affairs. Her masterful use of exclusion and national isolation to

promote a conditional sense of inclusion and community causes an illiberal agenda to form. When this is accompanied by more rhetoric that promises democratic perfectionism to distract from these illiberal moves, a toxic political cocktail is made. These changes and dynamics matter because they put democracy and liberalism — pinnacles of the global community — on the butcher's block. If Le Pen were to win the presidency, a plethora of novel fears that would disrupt the status quo of the French and global communities would become reality and further legitimize populist and illiberal ideologies and actions. Analyzing politicians such as Marine Le Pen can aid in identifying this populism via signs of illiberalism and misguided promises of improved democracy so voters and politicians alike may more accurately and honestly make political decisions that benefit rather than deteriorate our future.

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