

# France: The historic victory of the *Front National*

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France went to the polls on Sunday, May 25.<sup>1</sup> France elected 74 Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) (two more than in 2009) using a proportional system with a 5% electoral threshold and closed lists.<sup>2</sup> Political parties establish the order of candidates on the lists; voters can only cast a vote for the list and not for individual candidates. Seats are thus attributed according to the order in which the candidates are presented on the list. The national territory is divided up into eight constituencies (including one for all of the overseas territories).

## The election campaign

In France, as in several other European countries (e.g., the Netherlands, UK or Italy), the electoral campaign has been influenced by the strong presence of a Eurosceptic party—*Front National* (FN)—the extreme-right party headed by Marine Le Pen. Beforehand, the preelection polls already captured the unprecedented result FN was heading for, estimating (correctly) that FN would become the largest party in France.

The fervently anti-European FN campaign was supported on the national level by the strong economic crunch that heavily affected President François Hollande's popularity (which went from 61% in March 2012 to 18% at the be-

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<sup>1</sup> With the exception of the overseas departments that started voting on Saturday, May 24.

<sup>2</sup> The closed-list system for the European elections is used in France, Germany, Hungary, Portugal, Romania, Spain and the United Kingdom (except Northern Ireland).

ginning of May 2014<sup>3</sup>) and that of his party, the *Parti Socialiste* (PS), in power since 2012.

FN did not meet strong opposition, not even on the right, even though the *Union pour un Mouvement Populaire* (UMP, the main conservative party) gave it a try by reintroducing ex-president Nicolas Sarkozy into the political fray and in turn launching an unequivocally anti-European campaign by using slogans that talked about the suspension of the Schengen treaty and the transfer of half of the European Union's (EU) competences back to member states.

In general, it was FN that dictated the terms and issues of the campaign to the two large moderate parties, who did not succeed in imposing a different agenda nor managed to sufficiently mobilise voters. In fact, according to the preelection polls, abstention would reach a new record high, beating the already historical level of the 2009 European elections (59.9%).

Besides the issues, the tone of the campaign was way calmer compared with that of other countries. Marine Le Pen conducted a campaign void of shouting matches, merely pointing to the simple nature of its program and the clarity of its message: no Europe, more France, exit from the Euro and abolition of the Schengen treaty.

## The results

Forecasts did not lie: according to official results, FN confirmed expectations by becoming the largest party in France, with a whopping 25%, whereas the two big moderate parties (PS and UMP) underwent a substantial erosion of their popular mandate compared with the 2009 European elections, as illustrated in Table 1.

As far as the PS is concerned, the loss is dramatic, especially when compared with the results of the 2012 presidential elections in which Hollande won the second round with 58.5% of the votes (in the first round, he scored 35.4%). The day after the election, the prime minister of the current socialist government, Manuel Valls, described the 2014 electoral results as being 'an earthquake', declared that the government will not change its course, but that they already scheduled a tax reduction.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Baromètre OpinionWay: [http://www.opinion-way.com/pdf/opinionway\\_-\\_le\\_barometre\\_clai\\_metro\\_lci\\_du\\_changement\\_dans\\_l\\_action\\_politique\\_mai\\_2014.pdf](http://www.opinion-way.com/pdf/opinionway_-_le_barometre_clai_metro_lci_du_changement_dans_l_action_politique_mai_2014.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Le Monde: *Après la débâcle électorale, Valls veut « de nouvelles baisses d'impôts »* [http://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2014/05/26/apres-la-debacle-electorale-valls-veut-de-nouvelles-baisses-d-impots\\_4425913\\_823448.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2014/05/26/apres-la-debacle-electorale-valls-veut-de-nouvelles-baisses-d-impots_4425913_823448.html)

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Table 1. Results of the 2014 European Parliament elections – France

Party	EP Group	Votes (%)	Seats	Votes (change from 2009)	Seats (change from 2009)
National Front (FN)	NI	25.0	24	+18.6	+21
Union for a Popular Movement (UMP)	EPP	20.8	20	-7.1	-9
Socialist Party (PS)/Radical Leftist Party (PRG)	S&D	14.0	13	-2.5	-1
Alternative (Alt)	ALDE	9.9	7	+1.4	+1
Ecology Europe–The Greens (EELV)	G-EFA	8.9	6	-7.4	-8
Leftist Front (FG)	GUE-N-GL	6.3	3	-0.1	-1
Different Left (DVG)	NI		1		
Others		15.1	–		
Total		100	74		+2
Turnout (%)		43.5		+2.9	
Legal threshold for obtaining MEPs (%)		5%			

EP group abbreviations: EPP, European People's Party; S&D, Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats; ALDE, Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe; G-EFA, The Greens–European Free Alliance; ECR, European Conservatives and Reformists; GUE-NGL, European United Left–Nordic Green Left; EFD, Europe of Freedom and Democracy; NI, Non-Inscrits. Note: Vote totals have been calculated, as is customary in France, by taking into account metropolitan France (thus excluding the overseas departments)

Source: French Ministry of Interior ([http://www.interieur.gouv.fr/Elections/Les-resultats/Europeennes/elecresult\\_\\_Resultats-des-elections-europeennes-2014/\(path\)/Resultats-des-elections-europeennes-2014/index.html](http://www.interieur.gouv.fr/Elections/Les-resultats/Europeennes/elecresult__Resultats-des-elections-europeennes-2014/(path)/Resultats-des-elections-europeennes-2014/index.html))

Also for the UMP, the comparison with the presidential elections shows a net decline: in 2012, Sarkozy got 26.1% of the votes in the first round and 41.5% in the second one. FN not only quadrupled its vote share in comparison with the 2009 European elections, but they also gained 15 percentage points compared with the 2012 presidential one in which they got 10.1%.

Among the other parties, the centre-right party *Alternative* (a union of the two centre parties: the *Union des démocrates et indépendants* founded by Jean-Luis Borloo in 2012 and the *Mouvement Démocrate* of the centrist leader François Bayrou) is the only one that—together with FN—managed to increase its vote share compared with that in 2009. The good result of *Alternative* and the hard loss suffered by its natural ally UMP could lead to a readjustment of the power balance within the centre-right. We also see a net decline

for *Europe Écologie Les Verts* (EELV—the left-wing, ecologist party) that goes from 14 MEPs to 6. At the 2009 European elections, it scored exceptionally well (16.3%) under the leadership of the famous French-German writer Daniel Marc Cohn-Bendit (who officially withdrew from politics in April 2014).

Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the leader of *Front de Gauche* (FG), which hoped to clear the 10% threshold but instead stayed level compared with 2009, declared they were disappointed by the results.<sup>5</sup> Finally, one seat also went to the candidate of *Divers Gauche*, who got elected by the overseas departments. *Divers Gauche* is not a party per se, but rather a group that includes left-wing candidates that are members of minor parties or do not belong to any party.

### An interpretation

The main result of the election, however, remains the fact that FN for the first time in its 30-year existence managed to become the largest party at the national level, beating its eternal rival UMP. For the European level, it is also worth remembering that FN presented itself to the voters not being part of any EU party group. When asked which party group they would join after the elections, Marine Le Pen answered that she wants to found a new party group.

Apart from being the largest party in France, FN is also the largest extreme-right party in all Europe in which the expansion of the right-wing Eurosceptics is undisputable<sup>6</sup>: the Eurosceptics now hold 142 seats compared with 64 in 2009.

Concerning the levels of participation, contrary to the predictions of a new abstention record, the level of abstention actually even diminished slightly: 56.5% compared with 59.5% in 2009.

Several scholars have underlined the second-order nature of the European elections, which means that instead of being an expression of preferences concerning European issues, it tends to assume the role of a referendum on the national government in power (see, for instance, Reif and Schmitt, 1980). In this sense, considering the low levels of appreciation for the current socialist president François Hollande, a good result for the opposition should not have

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<sup>5</sup> Le Nouvel Observateur: *Européennes : le Front de gauche échoue à capter les mécontents et finit 6e* <http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/elections-europeennes-2014/20140526.OBS8461/europeenne-le-front-de-gauche-echoue-a-capter-les-mecontents-et-finit-6e.html>

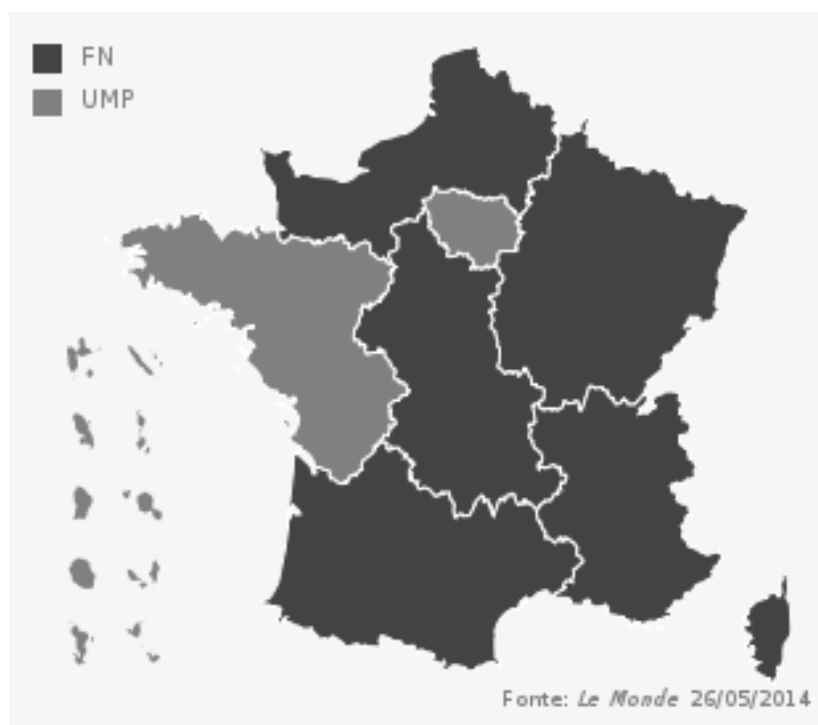
<sup>6</sup> Results of the extreme-right parties at the 2014 European elections: France 25%; Denmark 23%, United Kingdom 22%; Austria 20%; Hungary 15%; Finland 13%; Greece 12%.

come as a big surprise—if it would not be for the fact that traditionally this result should have been achieved by the moderate, conservative UMP party and not, as has been the case, the extreme-right.

Notwithstanding the fact that the victory of FN was largely forecasted, the width of the gap between FN and the centre-right UMP remains an impressive result. If we look at the result of the 2009 European elections, in five years, the balance of power on the right-hand side of the French political spectrum has radically changed and the roles have been reversed: looking at the 6% FN vote share in 2009, it has practically quadrupled its support (24%), whereas UMP lost 7 percentage points and got 21% (down from 28%) and has thus become the second right-wing party in the country instead of the leading one.

The PS debacle (and to a lesser extent that of the UMP as well) and the success of FN become even more evident when we look at the geographical distribution of the votes. Figure 1 shows the largest political party in each of the eight electoral constituencies for the European elections.

Figure 1: Largest political party by constituency



The map of the votes shows the picture of a country that is skewed to the right. FN is the largest party in five of the constituencies. In the other ones, the UMP leads the way.

When we take a look at the role of age groups, FN—differently from PS or UMP—is characterised by a young electorate. According to Ipsos-Steria, FN scores best among voters younger than 35 years (approximately 30%), while with the electorate, older than 60 years, the results are below the national median (21%).

On the contrary, the UMP is remarkably more popular among those older than 60 years, with a vote share of 25%, which is approximately 4% more than the national median. Also the PS cannot claim it was successful amongst young voters: only 15% of voters younger than 30 years chose PS.

Finally, it is interesting to note that it is amongst lower social strata that FN gets its best scores: in the last European elections, 43% of the workers voted FN, whereas only 8% voted PS.<sup>7</sup>

## In conclusion

European Parliament elections are not general elections, which is why we should be very careful in interpreting these shifts in popular support at the polls. It has in fact been remarked that because it is in the very nature of European elections that they do not have a direct national effect and that voters therefore tend to express their votes free from considerations on government formation and favour smaller parties (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). However, the French result clearly carries weight on the European level, but especially on the national one. It suffices to refer to the fact that it were in fact the 1984 European elections that marked the historical rise of FN in the first place (Hainsworth, 2004).

Interpreting the victory of FN solely as an anti-European vote would definitely be a mistake. The European elections in France were held in a context of economic crisis, high unemployment levels and low support levels for President Hollande. These elements could have played an important role in reinforcing the tendency to use the European elections as an opportunity to voice protest (Pertusot and Rittelmeyer, 2014). This interpretation appears to be plausible in the light of some results recently put forward by the Pew Re-

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<sup>7</sup> Le Monde, *Le FN obtient ses meilleurs scores chez les jeunes et les ouvriers* [http://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2014/05/25/le-fn-obtient-ses-meilleurs-scores-chez-les-jeunes-et-les-ouvriers\\_4425625\\_823448.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2014/05/25/le-fn-obtient-ses-meilleurs-scores-chez-les-jeunes-et-les-ouvriers_4425625_823448.html)

search Center (2014) according to which the majority of French is in favour of the European Union and supports the common currency (i.e., the euro).

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