

# Contesting the EU in times of crisis: The Front National and politics of Euroscepticism in France

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## Abstract

This article examines the performance and party system diffusion of Euroscepticism of the French Front National (FN) during recent European crises. The article argues that Europe's successive crises since 2008 have been essentially 'absorbed' by the FN into its existing Eurosceptic framework which is guided by its radical right-wing ideology. While allowing the FN to successfully mobilize issues and grievances about the European Union (EU), Euroscepticism is, however, significantly impeding its strategy of governmental credibility. The article identifies the main political outcomes of these crises and finds differences in impact between the different EU crises on party competition over Europe. These findings provide insight into the relationship between the radical Right, Euroscepticism, and party competition. They also inform our current knowledge of Euroscepticism in French politics, and changes that EU crises have triggered, according to party system location and whether FN influence can be postulated.

## Keywords

EU crises, Euroscepticism, Front National, populism, radical right

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## Introduction

In the past decade, the European Union (EU) has been hit by three crises – a financial crisis, a refugee crisis, and the results of the 2016 UK referendum. These crises have created a new context for party competition across EU member states. The crises have augmented the level of politicization of European issues and increased voter pessimism with the EU, thus creating a propitious context for Eurosceptic actors.

As advocates of national interests, Populist Radical Right (PRR) parties are often found to be driving forces behind the contestation of European integration (Dolezal and Hellström, 2016; Gómez-Reino and Llamazares, 2013). These parties share a common

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nativist and populist ideology, but they adopt varying anti-EU stances, however, and their positions may also change over time (Mudde, 2007; Vasilopoulou, 2011). As suggested by Pirro and Van Kessel (2017), PRR parties may respond to crises in different ways, according to contextual incentives. Their electoral success may also affect mainstream party positions differently over Europe (Meijers, 2017).

This article focuses on the Front National (FN) in France. The French case provides a relevant case to the study of the PRR's route towards politicization of the EU during crises and repercussions on its party system. The French FN is considered the prototype of the PRR party in Western Europe (Mudde, 2007: 41). Since the mid-1990s, the FN has also been a significant vehicle for Euroscepticism in French politics (Goodliffe, 2015; Hainsworth et al., 2004). France has been hit, albeit to a varying degree, by each European crisis and the FN has made significant electoral gains since 2008.

This article asks two main questions: first, how the successive EU crises have been channelled by the FN into its Eurosceptic framework and may have affected its supply of radical right-wing populist Euroscepticism, that is, the FN's performance during crises and, second, the impact this has produced on the other political actors and may have affected the overall structure of party competition over Europe in France, that is, party system diffusion. Based on an empirical analysis of the FN's positions on the EU since the early 2000s, this article argues, in contrast to Reungoat (2015), who sees a radicalization of the FN, that EU crises have produced little change to the party's core Eurosceptic positions and frames, and that the FN has primarily adjusted its issue priorities to exploit the opportunities produced by the crises.

A second set of questions in this article concerns the main party system outcomes that these crises have produced, and the extent to which these outcomes may be seen as a consequence of the influence of the FN. Successive EU crises have fuelled support for the radical Right in France (Evans and Ivaldi, 2018; Goodliffe, 2015). As Meijers (2017) demonstrates, a rise in electoral support for Eurosceptic challenger parties may have significant effects on mainstream party positions. Mainstream parties in France may have been incentivized to co-opt FN Eurosceptic strategies to enhance their electoral competitiveness during crises, which in turn may have caused factionalism and internal division (Taggart, 1998). Moreover, other peripheral parties may have recognized opportunities to adjust/change their positions to exploit popular distrust of the EU.

This article is structured around four main sections. The first lays down the theoretical foundations for the analysis of FN Euroscepticism and party competition during the EU crises. The second provides justification for a French case study and the methodology. The main outcomes of the EU crises are then examined across our two main dimensions, that is, FN performance and party system diffusion. The findings are discussed in conclusion. The case of the French FN suggests that PRR parties may channel European crises into their nativist and populist ideology to mobilize a wide range of issues and grievances about the EU. Euroscepticism may significantly impede those parties' ability to achieve governmental credibility, however, and therefore it may not be a viable long-term strategy for PRR parties like the FN operating in a broadly pro-European context.

These findings also inform our current knowledge of Euroscepticism and the impact of EU crises in French politics. This article suggests notable differences between the impacts of the different crises on party competition over Europe, according to party system location, and also to whether FN influence can be postulated. Essentially, this article identifies three main political outcomes of the EU crises: the rise of new Eurosceptic alternatives,

amplification of existing tensions over Europe within the dominant parties, and mainstreaming of the FN agenda on immigration.

## The FN and Euroscepticism in France

The French FN is widely acknowledged in the literature as an archetypal case of the Western European PRR party (Mudde, 2007: 41). Since its electoral breakthrough in 1984, the FN has established itself as a major PRR actor in French politics. Ideologically, the FN exhibits the key characteristic features of the PRR, that is, nativism, authoritarianism, and populism (Mudde, 2007). As recent literature suggests, a typical PRR ideology has persisted since Marine Le Pen took over the party in 2011 and most changes concern the FN's communication strategies (Crépon et al., 2015; Ivaldi, 2016; Stockemer, 2017).

### *Euroscepticism and the PRR*

The French FN exemplifies the relationship between radical right politics and Euroscepticism. As defenders of national interests, PRR parties are often found to be driving forces behind the contestation of the EU (Dolezal and Hellström, 2016; Mudde, 2007). These parties are more likely to politicize European integration in order to maximize electoral support (Gómez-Reino and Llamazares, 2013; Werts et al., 2013). However, the intensity and content of their opposition may vary (Mudde, 2007; Pirro and van Kessel, 2017). As suggested by Vasilopoulou (2011: 223), while sharing a common nationalist ideology, radical right parties adopt varying stances on Europe and their positions have also varied over time.

For more than two decades, the FN has been a significant vehicle for right-wing populist Euroscepticism in French politics (Goodliffe, 2015). Euroscepticism may refer to 'contingent or qualified opposition, as well as incorporating outright and unqualified opposition to the process of European integration' (Taggart, 1998: 366). During the 1980s, the FN expressed ambivalent stances regarding the EU, showing support, for instance, for a common European defence and currency. The FN's Eurosceptic shift occurred after the Maastricht Treaty as the party went into opposition against the deepening of European integration (Fieschi et al., 1996).

Since the mid-1990s, the FN has been calling for a restoration of French sovereignty, advocating that the EU should revert to a loose coalition of cooperating member states within a 'Europe of Nations' (Hainsworth et al., 2004: 47). FN Euroscepticism is embedded in a wider ideological framework which postulates a structural conflict opposing 'patriots' to so-called 'globalists' (*mondialistes*) (Ivaldi et al., 2017). This framework provides a rich set of arguments tapping into the various political, cultural, and economic dimensions of European integration, and it is also linked with the FN's populist ideology.

### *FN performance, party competition, and the outcomes of Europe's crises*

This article examines how the FN has mediated each of Europe's crises into electoral politics since 2008 and the impact this has had on party competition over Europe in France. Moffitt (2015) argues that crises achieve relevance in party politics when performed or mediated by political actors. The political outcomes of Europe's crises are

examined across two dimensions, that is, FN performance and party system diffusion – looking also at how these may interact to produce specific outcomes.

First, Eurosceptic strategies are linked to party goals and location within the party system (Sitter, 2002). Peripheral parties ‘may use their position on the EU as one means of differentiating themselves from established parties’ in order to gain electoral attention (Taggart, 1998: 382). In the case of the FN, Euroscepticism interacts with the strategy of ‘de-demonization’. As Ivaldi (2016) suggests, ‘de-demonization’ reflects the trade-off that the FN has traditionally established between PRR voter mobilization and office-seeking objectives. Since the mid-1990s, Euroscepticism has been used as a strategic device to antagonize the ‘permissive’ pro-EU elite consensus, thus helping the FN set itself apart from the other actors in the party system (Goodliffe, 2015). This has allowed the FN to make significant electoral gains, operating on the persistent fracture between pro- and anti-EU voters in France (Belot et al., 2013; Evans and Ivaldi, 2018).

Based on a qualitative analysis of FN manifestos and discourses since the early 2000s, this article looks at how the FN has adapted its supply of Euroscepticism to the crises. According to Pirro and Van Kessel (2017), PRR parties may adapt their agendas to fit new political opportunities such as those provided by the EU crises. Their responses are informed by specific contextual opportunities, as well as by strategic considerations linked to changes in party leadership.

EU crises have provided a favourable context for Eurosceptic responses. Recent research sees a radicalization of the FN over European integration since 2012 (Reungoat, 2015). In contrast, this article argues that the FN has essentially channelled European crises into its established Eurosceptic framework to mobilize a wide range of cultural, economic, and political issues and grievances about the EU. Euroscepticism is significantly impeding the FN’s ability to achieve a governmental profile, however, which suggests that Euroscepticism may not be a viable long-term strategy for PRR parties operating in a broadly pro-European context.

The EU crises have produced a new context for party competition, increasing the salience of European integration (Hutter and Kerscher, 2014; Meijers and Rauh, 2016). Europe is a potentially divisive issue and that Euroscepticism often manifests itself in the form of party factionalism when it occurs in mainstream parties (Taggart, 1998: 383). In France, the dominant parties on the Left and Right were deeply fractured over European integration during the 1990s, which resulted in organizational splits and the formation of new Eurosceptic fringe parties. Mainstream factionalism over European integration persisted during the 2000s and it has remained latent ever since (Belot et al., 2013). Moreover, as recent literature on ‘contagious Euroscepticism’ suggests, the electoral success of radical parties may incentivize mainstream parties to co-opt the populist Eurosceptic agenda (Meijers, 2017; Meijers and Rauh, 2016). It can also be assumed that the rise of support for the FN has produced incentives for other non-governing radical parties to intensify their opposition to European integration.

A second set of questions in this article concerns the impact of EU crises on party competition over Europe in France, the way in which the crises may have affected the policy and discursive trajectories of the main actors in the party system, and the extent to which this was influenced by the FN. As recently illustrated by Szczerbiak and Taggart (2017), there may be differences between the impacts of the different crises on party-based Euroscepticism. For instance, we can expect the financial and Eurozone crisis to have increased the salience of EU economic issues, affecting mostly left-wing parties, while the refugee crisis would emphasize immigration, a more salient issue for the Right.

Finally, as Szczerbiak and Taggart (2017) argue, we may expect the Brexit referendum to have had more limited impact, essentially reinforcing existing pro- and anti-EU positions among French parties.

The article suggests that there may be differences between the impacts of the different EU crises, according to party system location, and according to whether FN influence can be postulated. Essentially, the analysis identifies three main political outcomes of EU crises: the rise of new Eurosceptic alternatives, the amplification of existing tensions over Europe within the dominant parties, and the mainstreaming of the FN's immigration agenda. This suggests that opposition to Europe is increasingly interacting with economic and cultural issues, in a way which could be profoundly reshaping party competition in France.

### Case selection and methodology

The French FN is a relevant case for the study of the radical Right's route towards politicization of the EU's crises. Like most EU member states, France has faced major challenges arising from Europe's three crises. The economic impact of the 2008 global financial crisis was strongly felt. In 2009, the country entered its worst recession since World War II, unemployment rose sharply as a result of the crisis. Both the Right and Left in government adopted unpopular austerity packages to reduce the budget deficit and meet the EU target. Against this difficult economic background, the unprecedented influx of asylum seekers from Syria into the EU in 2015 increased immigration fears which also resonated with the anxiety caused by Islamist terrorism. Finally, the outcome of the Brexit referendum of June 2016 provided new opportunities for Eurosceptic contestation of the EU.

The multiple stresses to which France has been exposed since 2008 have produced a new context for party competition. First, the crises augmented the level of politicization of European issues (Dehousse and Tacea, 2015; Hutter and Kerscher, 2014; Meijers and Rauh, 2016). Second, the EU crises increased voter pessimism with the EU (Moffitt, 2015; Rohrschneider and Whitefield, 2016). Europe's crises galvanized electoral support for the FN in France, and Euroscepticism is a significant factor in voting for the FN (Belot et al., 2013; Evans and Ivaldi, 2018; Mayer, 2013). Le Pen received 17.9% of the vote in the 2012 presidential election. Her party topped the 2014 European and 2015 regional elections at about a quarter of the vote. In 2017, Le Pen won 21.3% and 33.9% in the first and second rounds of the presidential election, respectively.

This case study examines the Eurosceptic trajectory of the FN since the early 2000s. The main empirical focus in this article is on a qualitative content analysis of FN party manifestos. Party manifestos are generally considered reliable sources of information on the policy emphasis and political parties' positions (Marks, 2007). The data in this article are drawn from FN presidential platforms over the 2002–2017 period (see Appendix A). It is important to look at the FN's supply of Euroscepticism before the outbreak of the 2008 financial crisis, which provides a benchmark against which to assess subsequent developments. The time span of the data also helps control for the change in party leadership from Jean-Marie to Marine Le Pen, which occurred in 2011. Additionally, this article considers key speeches and published statements by FN leaders, which are deemed most relevant to the analysis of how the party framed European issues before and during the crises.

Finally, the article looks at changes in party competition over Europe during the EU crises. It examines the main political outcomes that these crises have produced and asks the extent to which these developments may be seen as a consequence of the politicization

of the crises by the FN. The article suggests making a distinction between the crises in terms of impact. ‘Strong’ impact refers to cases where parties have become more fragmented over Europe and/or significantly shifted their EU policies. ‘Moderate’ impact concerns cases where parties have essentially changed their discourses on European integration. Finally, ‘limited’ impact is hypothesized when parties show both unity and ideological coherence over Europe.

## Outcomes of European crises

The first question in this article concerns the extent to which EU crises have affected the FN’s Eurosceptic course. Taking the 2002 matrix of Euroscepticism as our ‘baseline’, there is no evidence that the FN adopted more radical positions during the crises. Strong Eurosceptic stances were already explicit in the 2002 presidential platform which professed that France should ‘free itself from the yoke of the EU’. The FN pledged that it would ‘terminate all European treaties’ and, most significantly, that ‘France should urgently leave the EU’ (FN, 2002), thus advocating ‘Frexit’ long before Brexit was ever on the agenda.

The 2002 FN manifesto provides a rich set of Eurosceptic justification frames. Politically, the EU is described as an ‘insane and totalitarian legal system’ under the rule of an ‘oligarchy’, and a ‘jail for its peoples’ (FN, 2002). Culturally, the FN’s supply of Euroscepticism is dominated by nativism. The EU is depicted as an immigration ‘sieve’ leading to a ‘Euro-globalist magma’ (FN, 2002). Finally, economic nationalism and anti-globalization policies dominate the 2002 platform. The FN opposes what it sees as the EU’s ‘unbridled freetrading’ and ‘market liberal orientation’. It calls for economic protectionism, notably in the farming sector, while vilipending the EU as a ‘Trojan horse of globalization’ and a threat to France’s welfare state (FN, 2002). In particular, the FN states its firm opposition to the Euro as a single currency – for example, ‘we are against the Euro which suppresses France’s sovereignty in the economic realm’ – and calls for its transformation into a common currency (FN, 2002).

### *FN performance during crises*

As Table 1 suggests, all FN platforms since 2002 feature the party’s key proposals to revise existing European treaties and revert the EU to a ‘Europe of Nations’, attesting to the permanence of the party’s opposition to the EU as a polity. While formulation varies across manifestos, all FN presidential programmes include the party’s core EU policies, most particularly the pledge to restore national sovereignty over borders and currency – which implies leaving both Schengen and the Eurozone. With the exception of the 2007 platform, all programmes also feature the claim to renationalize the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).

There is little evidence of any substantial shift in the party’s salience of European integration issues during the crises.<sup>1</sup> Average EU salience was 11.8% before the crises, compared with 12.3% after 2007. Overall, the data suggest that the FN has not significantly expanded its EU policy programme during the crises and has continued to rely primarily on national sovereignty claims guided by its PRR ideological principles. This corroborates recent research suggesting that the FN has sustained its PRR ideological profile under Marine Le Pen’s leadership (Crépon et al., 2015; Ivaldi, 2016; Stockemer, 2017).

Table 1. EU positions and salience in FN presidential manifestos (2002–2017).

Year	2002	2007	2012	2017
Leadership	Jean-Marie Le Pen	Jean-Marie Le Pen	Marine Le Pen	Marine Le Pen
EU positions				
Revise European treaties	Terminate all EU treaties	Tour of European capital cities to renegotiate a radical change in EU treaties	Invoke article 50 to renegotiate European treaties	Negotiations with European partners to restore national sovereignty over currency, borders, economy, and laws
Europe of independent Nations	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Renationalize CAP	Yes	Not mentioned	Yes	Yes
Exit Schengen	Yes	Yes	Recover national sovereignty over borders	Yes
Leave the Eurozone	Yes	Reform of the ECB to foster growth, return to French Franc only if institutional impasse	Euro as a common currency, together with French Franc. Referendum on single currency	Restore national sovereignty over currency
Leave the EU	Leave the EU urgently	Referendum on France's EU membership after a short delay	Article 50 to renegotiate European treaties	Referendum on France's EU membership following negotiations and within 6 months
EU salience				
Total size <sup>a</sup>	108,424	30,809	6876	6054
Total EU <sup>a</sup>	13,571	3417	964	641
% EU <sup>a</sup>	12.5	11.1	14.0	10.6

Source: Author's calculations from FN party manifestos.

EU: European Union; CAP: Common Agricultural Policy; FN: Front National.

<sup>a</sup>As number of words, EU-related issues are defined as all general orientation, constitutive issues, and policy-oriented issues related to European integration, that is, which explicitly refer to the EU.



Moreover, this stable Eurosceptic platform has provided the basis for the politicization of the EU crises by the FN. The FN has been able to draw from its established Eurosceptic platform in order to 'perform' the crises and has adjusted its issue priorities accordingly.

While traditional immigration issues were prioritized in the 2002 and 2007 campaigns, European issues were moved to the forefront of the 2012 and 2017 programmes. In 2012, amidst a context of economic crisis and austerity, the FN emphasized its Euro policy along with a range of socioeconomic issues like purchasing power, jobs, public debt, and pensions. In 2017, European issues topped the FN agenda and were associated with democratic reform, immigration, and security. This reflected first the specific context produced by the refugee crisis and Islamist terrorism in France. The emphasis on popular referenda and the need for direct democracy suggest that the FN has also been seeking to exploit the strategic opportunities offered by the results of the Brexit referendum.

Overall, this rich pre-existing Eurosceptic framework has allowed the FN to 'absorb' the novel issues arising from the crises. The 2008 financial crisis has been primarily framed by the FN using its traditional economic arguments against the single European currency. As early as October 2008, the FN advocated a 2-year temporary exit from the Eurozone invoking the safeguard clause of the Maastricht Treaty. In May 2011, at the height of the Eurozone crisis, the FN released a 12-part plan to shed the Euro. The party objected strongly to EU bailouts that would impose an unacceptable burden on the 'French taxpayer' (Le Pen, 2012).

As Ivaldi (2015) demonstrates, the FN adopted a more egalitarian socioeconomic package during the economic crisis. It espoused state regulation, government spending, and public services expansion. The salience of economic issues has increased and the claim to leave the Euro has been re-emphasized. In 2012, the FN pledged that the Euro should be transformed into a 'common currency' – thus reiterating its 2002 proposal – and that France should also hold a referendum on leaving the Eurozone (FN, 2012). The 2014 EP election campaign repeated the FN promise of a French exit from the Eurozone, portraying the single currency as an 'anomaly' and a 'jail' serving the 'sole interests of bankers and the wealthy'.

Economic Euroscepticism was central to the FN's 2017 presidential campaign which castigated 'financial and corrupt globalism, of which the European Union, the finance and most of a domesticated political class are zealous servants' (Le Pen, 2017). The FN platform featured protectionist policies including taxes on foreign imports and companies hiring foreign workers while advocating state intervention in the industrial sector and opposing free-trade agreements like TAFTA and CETA. Euro-exit was embedded in a more general claim to 'restore national sovereignties' (FN, 2017a).

Nativist arguments have been central to the FN's framing of the EU refugee crisis. During the 2015 regional election campaign, Le Pen claimed that the influx of Syrian refugees 'could be similar to the invasions of the Fourth century' (*Le Figaro*, 2015a) while stigmatizing migrants as carriers of diseases (*Le Figaro*, 2015c). According to Le Pen, the 'terrifying wave' of immigration would cause 'advanced destabilisation of France's national identity'. She accused migrants of representing both a 'criminal threat' and a 'burden' for France's public finances and healthcare system (*Le Monde*, 2015). Le Pen strongly criticized the EU-Turkey Refugee Deal of March 2016 while reiterating the FN opposition to Turkish membership of the EU.

The FN's xenophobic rhetoric was further fuelled by Islamist terrorism. After the Paris attacks of November 2015, the FN promptly linked terrorist attacks with the EU refugee



crisis, calling for immediate closure of borders. Le Pen argued that France should veto Germany's policy of asylum, while pledging that the government should expel all foreign criminals and persons suspected of terrorist activities. In January 2016, Le Pen seized the opportunity offered by the sexual attacks in Cologne to denounce the threat of asylum seekers to women's rights, chastising Angela Merkel's 'irresponsibility' and François Hollande's 'weakness' (*Le Monde*, 2016).

Le Pen (2017) presidential manifesto featured traditional FN anti-immigration policies, emphasizing security issues together with the claim to leave Schengen and re-establish national borders. Le Pen pledged that she would repatriate all illegal immigrants and foreign offenders and put an end to legal immigration. She claimed that she would terminate the EU directive on posted workers and give priority to French citizens for jobs, housing, and social benefits. She also opposed family reunion rights for migrants and advocated a drastic reduction in asylum. She promised to close all 'extremist' mosques and called for anyone associated with the Jihadist movement to be stripped of their French citizenship and deported (FN, 2017b).

Essentially, the Brexit referendum provided performative resources for the FN to legitimize its existing opposition to the EU as a 'prison of peoples'. Immediately after Brexit, the FN launched a new 'Brexit, now France' campaign which galvanized a French referendum as a choice for 'freedom' (*Le Point*, 2016). In February 2017, Le Pen launched her presidential campaign by promising to liberate France from the 'tyranny of globalisation, Islamic fundamentalism and the European Union'. EU-related issues were prioritized in the 2017 manifesto, and they were closely associated with democratic reform, reiterating the FN's previous call for a French referendum on EU membership within 6 months into the presidency (FN, 2017a).

While a successful short-term electoral strategy during the crises, Euroscepticism interferes, however, with the FN's search for credibility, which is the other facet of 'de-demonization' (Crépon et al., 2015; Ivaldi, 2016). Euroscepticism impedes the FN's ability to establish a governmental profile and reach out to moderate voters. In 2017, FN EU-exit positions were rejected by an overwhelming majority of the French. Eurosceptic policies have also become a significant factor in ostracizing the FN: during the 2017 presidential campaign, both Fillon and Macron repeatedly attacked Le Pen's plan to leave the Eurozone as 'unrealistic' and 'dangerous', accusing her of fuelling 'nationalism' and preparing an 'economic war' (Europe 1, 2017). The FN continues to be secluded behind a 'cordon sanitaire', and it has not yet shed its profile as a political pariah in the French party system. Since 2012, the *Rassemblement Bleu Marine* (RBM) has notably failed to build a broader nationalist coalition.

There are strong incentives for the current FN to soften its stance on Europe in order to achieve governmental credibility and coalition potential. The need to play down Euroscepticism was recently illustrated by the recalibration of Le Pen's campaign in the 2017 presidential runoff. The campaign strategically signalled that leaving the Euro was no longer a priority. This was part of the 'national unity' pact the FN sealed with Nicolas Dupont-Aignan's *Debout La France* (DLF). In a joint statement released between the two rounds, Le Pen and Dupont-Aignan (2017) indicated that 'the transition from the single currency to the European common currency is not a prerequisite for any economic policy'. During the campaign, the FN showed a fracture between advocates of leaving the Eurozone, like Florian Philippot, and those, like Louis Aliot, Gilbert Collard and Marion Maréchal-Le Pen, who favoured downplaying the single currency issue. The dispute led eventually to the decision by Philippot to leave the FN and create a new party, Les Patriotes, in September 2017.

**Table 2.** Summary of party system impact of EU crises since 2008.

Party system location	EU crises		
	Financial and Eurozone crisis	Refugee crisis	Brexit
Left	Strong	Moderate	Limited
Right	Limited	Strong	Moderate

EU: European Union.

Philippot's departure primarily reflected disagreement over party strategy and European issues. Immediately after the split, Les Patriotes adopted a harder Eurosceptic stance unambiguously endorsing 'Frexit', that is, a unilateral French exit from the EU (Les Patriotes, 2017). In contrast, the FN has strategically toned down its positions on the EU since the 2017 elections while keeping its core principle of a Europe of independent nations. In November 2017, the party adopted a so-called 'Euro-reformist' stance, advocating in particular a 'phased transition' towards 'Europe of European nations', while emphasizing a common European civilizational heritage and identity and the need for a more democratic EU (FN, 2017b). More recently, Le Pen (2018) has indicated that her party has not changed its positions on the EU and will continue to advocate leaving both Schengen and the Eurozone, but that priority should go to securing France's national borders.

### Party system outcomes

Turning to the outcomes of Europe's crises, there are notable differences between the impact of the different crises on party-based Euroscepticism, in terms of the changes the crises have triggered, according to party system location – that is, Left and Right, and mainstream versus periphery– and also according to whether FN influence can be postulated. These aspects are summarized in Table 2 and discussed below.

**Strong impact.** We found two cases of strong impact of EU crises, namely, the financial crisis on the Left and the refugee crisis on the Right. In both cases, these European crises activated mainstream party fragmentation, highlighting existing tensions within dominant parties, also resulting in significant policy shifts. New political entrepreneurs seized opportunities offered by these crises to politicize public discontent with the EU and making substantial electoral gains.

On the Left, Hollande's presidency was poised with profound fragmentation of the Socialist parliamentary group over distributional issues, exacerbating tensions over EU fiscal and economic policies. As early as October 2012, rebel Socialist MPs – the so-called *frondeurs* – opposed the government's budgetary and economic policies, notably the adoption of the European Fiscal Compact. From 2014, mutiny amplified over disagreement with Hollande's social liberal platform, culminating with the highly controversial Labour Law of 2016. Eurosceptic positions were transported into the PS presidential primary of January 2017, which featured no less than four former proponents of the 'no' vote of 2005. Members of the party's left flank like Benoît Hamon endorsed a leftist platform opposing austerity and calling for a moratorium on the stability pact. Arnaud

Montebourg formulated soft criticism of the EU, advocating national sovereignty and economically protectionist policies, as subsumed in his 'Project France' platform (*Le Monde*, 2017b).

The period was marked with the rise of Jean-Luc Mélenchon's *France Insoumise* (Rebellious France, FI), the successor party of the former *Parti de Gauche* (Left Party, PG), a radical left-wing party founded in 2009 to mobilize against the Lisbon Treaty and the 'Capitalist' nature of the EU. In 2012, Mélenchon received 11.1% of the presidential vote. During 2016, FI adopted a harder Eurosceptic stance and a populist orientation which pledged to 'sweep away the oligarchy and abolish the privileges of the political caste' (LFI, 2017). This strong populist radical leftist profile allowed Mélenchon to ride the wave of discontent among left-wing voters, capturing 19.6% of the vote in the 2017 presidential election.

On the right of the party system, the strongest impact was seen in the refugee crisis which exacerbated existing divisions over EU-immigration issues. The Republican primary of November 2016 clearly showed different stances. Juppé's pro-EU approach was strongly opposed by Sarkozy and Fillon who both pledged to reform the Schengen agreement and restrict access to welfare benefits for foreigners, adopting a nativist tone which contrasted sharply with Juppé's cultural liberalism. Criticism of the EU was transported into Fillon's presidential campaign in 2017, which advocated renegotiating Schengen, the EU directive on posted workers and the European Convention on Human Rights while simultaneously rejecting Turkey's accession to the EU and calling for immigration quotas (Fillon, 2017).

On the periphery, the neo-Gaullist and 'sovereignist' DLF led by Nicolas Dupont-Aignan was given a significant electoral boost during the crisis. DLF originated as a minority faction of the Right in the late 1990s before launching itself as an autonomous party in 2008. It gained political traction during the second half of Hollande's presidency, adopting anti-establishment populism and hardening its Eurosceptic stance. DLF advocated national sovereignty and tighter immigration controls while rejecting free-trade agreements and calling for France to shed the Euro which was described as a 'racket' by Dupont-Aignan.

While changes that have occurred on the Left of the party system as a result of the impact of the financial crisis can be seen primarily as endogenous, FN influence can be postulated as regards the mainstream Right's response to the refugee crisis, which suggests contamination by FN themes and policies. As Schain (2006: 282) notes, the established Right has traditionally 'been in competition with the FN for voters frightened by the problems of a multi-ethnic society'. In the context of the EU refugee crisis, the FN played an important role in the politicization of immigration issues. The latter were transported into the 2016 Republican primary campaign, further attesting to the permeability of the French Right to the FN. For instance, all LR primary frontrunners endorsed FN policies of restricting *jus soli*, prevalent in French immigration law, as well as suppressing the State Emergency Health Allowance (AME) for migrants, hardening conditions for migrant family reunion, and expelling rejected asylum seekers (*La Croix*, 2016).

**Moderate impact.** Another two cases suggest moderate impact of the EU crises: the Left during the refugee crisis and the Right after the Brexit referendum. Here, changes concern mostly discursive and performative strategies by mainstream leaders, showing more limited impact on policy.

During the refugee crisis, EU-immigration issues were a significant factor of division within the Socialist presidential majority, opposing secularist republicans led by Prime Minister Manuel Valls to cosmopolitan and libertarian elites led by Benoît Hamon or Christiane Taubira. Amidst growing immigration fears, Manuel Valls opposed Angela Merkel's permanent relocation mechanism, going as far as to suggest that Europe should accept no more refugees. In July 2016, the French government expressed criticism of the EU directive on posted workers as a cause of job losses in France, threatening to stop enforcing the directive (*Le Figaro*, 2016). The 2017 Socialist primary revealed disagreement over immigration: Benoît Hamon pledged that France could accommodate more refugees, a proposal which was strongly rejected by Valls. At the same time, pro-immigration stances were significantly toned down in Mélenchon's 2017 programme which, for instance, abandoned its previous claim to 'regularize all undocumented migrants'. During 2015, Mélenchon had taken an ambiguous stance on immigration, stating that 'accepting refugees was not the answer to the problem' (*Le Figaro*, 2015b). His 2017 platform opposed the EU status of 'posted worker', reflecting the need to address immigration fears among his working and middle class voters.

On the Right, the outcome of the Brexit referendum had moderate impact, showing essentially performative strategies over EU institutional issues, in particular the proposal for a French referendum on membership and the more abstract idea of a 'new European treaty'. Both proposals were strongly opposed by Juppé who did not deviate from his pro-EU trajectory after Brexit, and who received support from federalist centrist parties like François Bayrou's MODEM and the UDI. This contrasted with the Eurosceptic tone adopted by his rivals like Bruno Le Maire and Nicolas Sarkozy, as well as Eurosceptic Republican leaders like Henri Guaino and Laurent Wauquiez. Immediately after the Brexit vote, Sarkozy pledged for a new European treaty that would limit EU competence, endorsing a French referendum and criticizing the 'inflation' of European regulations and what he deemed the 'excessive' power of the European Commission. While opposing a French referendum, Fillon adopted a more Eurosceptic tone advocating national sovereignty, and pledging to limit the 'regulatory inflation of the European Commission', yet formulating no clear policy about how this could be achieved.

Brexit provided essentially performative opportunities for peripheral political actors. A supporter of Britain's exit from the EU and ally of Nigel Farage's UKIP in the European parliament, DLF joined the FN in calling for a national referendum on EU membership in 2017, pledging that France should 'denounce all European treaties to regain control of its laws, borders and budget' and that the EU should be 'replaced with a community of independent states, a Europe of nations' (Dupont-Aignan, 2017). In 2017, Dupont-Aignan won 4.7% of the presidential vote and endorsed Le Pen in the runoff. The more marginal hard Eurosceptic *Union Populaire Républicaine* (UPR) led by François Asselineau advocated Brexit, but received less than 1% of the vote in the 2017 presidential election.<sup>2</sup>

In the two above cases of moderate impact, the changes that occurred on both the Left and Right of the party system can be seen as a strategic response to the threat of the FN. As Meijers (2017) suggests, centre-left parties are generally more affected by Euroscepticism since they are susceptible to both economic and cultural anti-EU arguments. The FN and the Left traditionally compete for working-class votes in France. Contagion by FN discourse became apparent during the EU refugee crisis, at a time when sizeable shares of former Socialist voters were turning to the FN over immigration fears (Perrineau, 2017). On the Right, the Brexit crisis created a space for national sovereignty claims and populist arguments against the EU. These found their inspiration in the FN's

democratic critique of the EU and were used by the Republicans as a means of sustaining their appeal among right-wing voters dissatisfied with the EU.

*Limited impact.* Finally, two cases show very limited impact of the EU crises on mainstream politics, namely, the Right during the financial crisis and the Left after Brexit. Both cases show a much higher level of party unity and ideological coherence, and FN influence is hardly visible. On the Right, all LR leaders have endorsed fiscal orthodoxy and the EMU since 2008. The 2016 primary campaign showed a good deal of convergence on EU economic issues, and all candidates endorsed a market-liberal platform. Fillon (2017) campaign reflected his party's dominant economic views, advocating an economic government for the Eurozone and a European Treasury for pooling national debt.

Similarly, Brexit had very limited impact on the mainstream Left's EU positions. All Socialist leaders and primary candidates opposed the idea of a French referendum on EU membership while simultaneously showing little support for a new European treaty. A new Treaty was only endorsed by Montebourg during the primary campaign, however, mostly as a strategic device to mobilize the Left of the Socialist party. Essentially, Brexit provided an opportunity for Mélenchon to harden its stance against the EU, promising that he would take France out of the European treaties, while castigating the 'caste of Eurocrats' who, he argued, 'have violated the vote of [the French] people since 2005' (20 Minutes, 2016). During the 2017 campaign, however, Mélenchon significantly toned down his anti-EU message, adopting a more ambiguous stance (Le Monde, 2017a), which reflected the need to sustain his appeal to moderate voters.

## Discussion

This article examines the FN's Eurosceptic trajectory and party system ramifications in EU crises. The analysis suggests that the FN has kept its Eurosceptic identity, which is attached to its PRR ideology, and maintained its status as the 'torchbearer' of Euroscepticism in French politics. The FN did not become more radical during EU crises; it primarily adjusted its issue priorities and used its existing repertoires of Euroscepticism to exploit the opportunities resulting from the crises. While allowing the FN to make significant electoral gains since 2008, Euroscepticism has interfered with the party's office-seeking objectives which are embedded in Le Pen's 'de-demonization' strategy, however.

The article identifies significant differences between the impact of different EU crises in France, according to Left-Right location in the party system and FN influence. We found two cases of strong impact, that is, the financial crisis on the Left, and the refugee crisis on the Right. On the other hand, moderate impact concerns the Left during the refugee crisis and the Right after the Brexit referendum. Analysis found only limited impact of the financial crisis on Euroscepticism of the Right, and Brexit on the mainstream Left. Overall, the refugee crisis had the strongest impact across the whole party system, followed by the financial crisis. As anticipated, Brexit had more limited impact. Essentially the outcome of the Brexit referendum reinforced existing pro- and anti-EU positions among French parties.

Third, there is evidence that the FN's electoral revitalization and its politicization of European issues since 2008 have affected the discursive and policy trajectory of other actors. The article confirms that the impact of Eurosceptic parties on the mainstream is

heterogeneous and dynamic (Meijers, 2017). The findings suggest that the impact of Euroscepticism in France varies substantially across issues, parties, and party system locations. The impact of the FN is most visible in the area of immigration and, to a lesser extent, in the politicization of national sovereignty issues by mainstream politicians on the Right after Brexit. More generally, however, the qualitative approach employed in this article makes it difficult to establish FN influence empirically.

Finally, as regards changes that occurred during EU crises, the article identifies three main outcomes: mainstreaming of the FN immigration agenda, which was exacerbated during the refugee crisis, affecting both Left and Right; amplification of existing tensions over Europe within the dominant parties, which was particularly damaging to the PS; the rise of new political entrepreneurs, most notably Mélenchon and Dupont-Aignan, who have seized the opportunities offered by the EU crises and made substantial electoral gains in recent elections.

While this article's case study design inevitably limits the generalizability of its findings, the French case provides insight into our general understanding of the relationship between the PRR, Euroscepticism, and party competition. First, this article confirms that the nativist and populist principles that guide the PRR's ideology provide fertile ground for Euroscepticism. Nativism provides a wider structural framework of defending the nation's interests, which has the potential to absorb most cultural and/or socioeconomic issues relating to the EU. Populism, on the other hand, provides for the critique of Europe as an elite-driven project going against the will of the people.

Second, the French case corroborates Mair's (2007) argument that opposing the EU entails an 'anti-system' dimension. Euroscepticism may serve as a tool for political differentiation, whereby PRR parties set themselves apart from the mainstream, however significantly impeding those parties' ability to achieve governmental credibility. The trajectory of PRR parties, like the Italian Lega Nord, the Finns Party, and, more recently, the Austrian FPÖ, suggests that these parties must tone down their opposition to Europe and respond to prevailing pro-EU public attitudes in their countries when entering government coalitions.

Finally, this article suggests that external effects like EU crises may influence party behaviour and affect the structure of party competition. Crystallization of the European dimension of competition in France creates new electoral potential which may end up even more profoundly reshaping the country's traditional bipolar polity in the coming years.

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## Notes

1. European Union (EU) salience is expressed here as a percentage of words concerning European issues in Front National (FN) manifestos, that is, all general orientation, constitutive issues, and policy-oriented issues relating to European integration and explicitly referring to the EU (author's own calculations).
2. The *Union Populaire Républicaine* (UPR) emerged in 2007 as a splinter group from the UMP to promote France's withdrawal from the EU and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), but the party has remained largely irrelevant since then.



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### Appendix A. List of FN presidential manifestos considered in the analysis (2002–2017).

Year	2002	2007	2012	2017
Manifesto Title	<i>Pour un avenir français. Programme du Front national.</i>	<i>Programme présidentiel de Jean-Marie Le Pen</i>	<i>Mon projet pour la France. Marine Le Pen, la voix du peuple, l'esprit de la France</i>	<i>144 engagements présidentiels. Marine 2017</i>
Reference	FN 2002	FN 2007	FN 2012	FN 2017a
Leadership	Jean-Marie Le Pen	Jean-Marie Le Pen	Marine Le Pen	Marine Le Pen

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