

Research on Populism and Political Polarization in France

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Abstract: In recent years, populism has risen rapidly worldwide, especially in many European countries. Populism in France is the most typical example in Europe, which has impacted the existing order of the European Union. From the perspectives of historical origin, domestic structure, external environment, and realistic conflicts, this paper focus on the French populist party National Front (FN) and explores the nature and motivation of populist political polarization based on the theory of supply and demand. The extreme dissatisfaction of society's middle and lower classes is the root cause of populist political polarization. Economic instability and voters' distrust of mainstream politics have fueled populism. Populist parties use various tools, including polarized discourses, ideologies, and leaders' unique political personalities, to drive voters toward extremes. The refugee issue has driven populism into a fanatical far-right, posing a challenge to Western democracy and the EU order. Finally, this paper discusses the influence and significance of the current populism in French society.

Keywords: populism, political polarization, France

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

The rise of populism is one of the most important phenomena in the political development of the world today. Over the past decade, populist ideas and parties have gained prominence in Europe and the United States. This is inseparable from the in-depth economic globalization developed after the Second World War, especially in the 1970s. The worldwide capital flow and industrial transfer have completely changed countries' economic and political structures. In the context of economic globalization, manufacturing workers and farmers in European countries have become the losers of globalization, providing a political basis for the in-depth development of populism. Mudde defines populism as a thin-centered ideology, so "The people ultimately divide society into two homogeneous and opposing groups", the "pure people" and the "corrupt elite", and believes that politics should be an expression of the will of the people" [1]. So in realpolitik, populism in electoral politics often combines with left-wing or right-wing ideas to move toward polarized politics. Currently, populist political parties in Europe include the Greek Syriza and the Spanish Podemos, which represent the left, the French National Front and the Alternative Party for Germany, the Austrian Freedom Party, etc. The French National Front was the first right-wing populist party to win the French national election.

It performed prominently in many French presidential elections in the early 21st century. And its rise and fall are also regarded as a European vane of the populist wave in politics and even world politics. In recent years, the French populist parties represented by the National Front have made significant progress in the election. In the first round of French presidential elections in 2017, the National Front candidate Marilyn Le Pen entered the second round with 21.3% of the vote. This is the first time since 2002 that the National Front has advanced to the second round of the presidential election. Even when the mainstream does not support Marilyn Le Pen, she is still in the final round. In the second round, she won 33.9% of the votes. Then in the 2022 presidential election, Le Pen again reached the second round of elections, and the voting rate hit a record high of 41.4%. In addition, in the congressional elections, The National Front has won 89 seats historically. This marks that the French political situation has reached a critical turning point, and the tendency of political polarization has become increasingly obvious. The National Front is gradually becoming the third largest political force in the French political situation. If 2017 The performance of Marilyn Le Pen in the presidential election in 2019 made people realize that the populist force of the right has risen. And the general election in 2022 officially declared that the National Front under the leadership of Le Pen had become a decisive political force in the French political situation. Being in the Elysee Palace is not a far-fetched idea.

1.2. Literature Review

As Europe's established populist party, the French National Front attracted academic attention early on. Previous studies on right-wing populist parties have focused on the two major factors that contributed to their success. Factors: "specific issues" and "systems." The former focuses more on specific political and economic issues (such as immigration and unemployment). In contrast, the latter focuses on the characteristics of electoral institutions and the party itself (such as the type of electoral system and party leaders). Jason Matthew Smith finds that crime and immigration positively impact the support of right-wing populist parties [2]. Sophie Meunier points out that economic globalization and European integration championed by mainstream parties make almost all jobs in France face unemployment threats [3]. But serious immigration and unemployment The question was not answered by mainstream French parties, so A large number of French people chose to express their protest against the mainstream parties by voting for the National Front. In their research, Marcel Lubbers and Peer Scheepers proposed the concept of protest voting (protest voting) [4]. At the same time, they pointed out that voters voted for the National Front to protest mainstream political parties, requiring them to respond to interest demands closely related to middle- and lower-class voters. Paul Hainsworth argues that starting in the 1980s, the majority of the National Front's votes were protest votes by voters [5]. In addition, some scholars have paid attention to the use of propaganda methods by populist parties such as the National Front. Daniel Stockemer and Mauro Barisione believe that the National Front, under the leadership of Marilyn Le Pen, actively uses social networking platforms to publicize policy ideas and strive to create a political space for "zero distance" communication with voters [6].

In general, most scholars and articles explain the reasons for the rise of the National Front in three main ways. First, the mainstream political parties in France failed to respond to the political and economic demands of the middle and lower classes, while the National Front responded. Second, regarding propaganda methods, the National Front is closer to the voters; third, voters voted for it mainly to express their protest against mainstream political parties and elites. However, most of these studies only focus on a single aspect of the rise of the National Front for descriptive research and do not analyze the cause and effect of the rise of the National Front as a whole.

1.3. Research Framework

Therefore, this article will focus on the political supply and demand of right-wing populist parties represented by the French National Front, based on the theory of supply and demand. The first part gives the political supply in French populism, then focuses on examining the voter base of the National Front, and finally discusses the influence and significance of the current populism in French society.

2. Methods

This paper mainly adopts the case analysis method and Roderick's theory of supply and demand for research. The case study mainly focuses on the development of the French National League to reflect the development and evolution of populism in France. By analyzing the National League's election platform and the leaders' speeches, we analyze the guidance and utilization of the populist by the populists. This article adopts Roderick's theory of supply and demand to analyze the formation and development of French populism. From the perspective of supply, it studies how populists and populist parties mobilize the masses through their political programs and narratives and shape the opposition between elites and the masses, citizens and immigrants. From the perspective of demand, it mainly explains how the French domestic market is impacted by globalization. The economic and social crises, as well as a series of failed consequences of the government's improper response, have given birth to populism to a certain extent and have nurtured the soil for the emergence of populism.

3. Result

3.1. The Economic Crisis: The Economic Basis for the Rise of the French National Front

The rise of right-wing populism in France is not a simple social wave that rests only on identity politics and cultural identity. It results from changes in economic factors such as the world economic pattern and France's economic situation in recent years passed on to the political field.

On the whole, the recession of the French economy is a long-term and gradual process, but it has become more obvious after the European debt crisis. After the rapid economic development during the "Thirty Years of Glory" period, facing the challenges of economic globalization and the trend of global industrial transfer, France entered a period of economic restructuring. The economic crisis in 2008 had a huge impact on France. After the outbreak of the financial crisis in 2008 and the following 2009, France's economic growth rate fell below -4%, the lowest point in history. In the next few years, France's economy maintained a slow low-speed, or even negative growth, for a long time, and its economic strength continued to weaken. As of 2021, France's economic aggregate will be surpassed by India, and its ranking will drop to seventh in the world. The weakness of the French economy is manifested in the lack of domestic consumption, foreign investment motivation, and the domestic industry's low competitiveness. In addition, the domestic government's policy mistakes and limited control capabilities have made the economic problems more and more serious.

Since the two industrial revolutions, France has always been an industrial powerhouse and one of the most important developed countries in Europe and the world. Textiles, steel, and agriculture have always been the mainstays of the French economy. However, since the 1970s, a new round of globalization has led to the decline of traditional French manufacturing and the rise of high-end service and high-tech industries. With the intensification of international competition brought about by globalization, it is increasingly difficult for France's textile and steel industries to compete with lower-priced counterparts in developing countries. Since the 1970s, French steel production has fallen by more than a third, and labor demand has fallen by 70%. In addition, France's other middle and low-end manufacturing industries are also facing huge challenges from developing countries and

emerging economies. In order to cut production costs and expand the share of products in overseas markets, many companies in France choose to move overseas to find cheaper labor. As a result, France's "deindustrialization" and "industrial hollowing" trend has become increasingly serious, and the unemployment rate has remained high. In the past 20 years, manufacturing employment in France has decreased by about 10 million [7]. French manufacturing employment fell by 15% from 1977 to 1985 and 25% from 1985 to 1993 [8]. The overall unemployment rate has climbed by more than 10% since the financial crisis in 2008 and has declined in recent years, but it remains at a high level of more than 7%.

Under a competitive electoral system, the party system often reflects social differentiation on multiple dimensions. In order to gain the support of a certain segment of voters in the election, political parties will formulate their election platforms according to these voters' preferences. In mobilizing the middle and lower classes, populist parties have developed a binary value of "the people" against the "other". "Others" can be either elites and elites, resulting in "anti-elite/anti-establishment" anti-establishmentism, or foreign immigrants and international capital, resulting in "anti-immigration/anti-economic globalization" nativism/ Nationalism. Since populist parties have made anti-globalization a core content of their campaign platforms, when voters lose their interests due to globalization, they will vote for populist parties if they do not receive a response from mainstream parties.

3.2. Social Crisis: The Social Supply of the Rise of the National Front

3.2.1. The Squeeze on Employment by Immigration

The ongoing terrorist attacks and the refugee crisis that broke out in 2015 have made the issue of European migration and refugees a constant focus of debate in European society and within the EU. Right-wing populist parties took the opportunity to rise, openly advocating anti-EU integration, anti-immigration, anti-Islam, and propagating fierce nationalist sentiments. However, the refugee and immigration issue has triggered a series of chain reactions in European society, impacting the society's political, economic, cultural, religious, and multicultural identity.

With the development of globalization and the turbulent world situation, the number of immigrants to France has also increased significantly. According to the statistics of the United Nations, France accepted 8 million immigrants in 2019 alone [9]. These immigrants are mainly from North African countries such as Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria, most of whom are unskilled laborers. Therefore, most immigrants are engaged in low-end jobs in France, such as logistics, warehousing, construction, cleaning, maintenance, and other low-end jobs. France has relatively fierce employment competition with the unskilled labor force.

3.2.2. The Impact of the Refugee Crisis on Society

In addition to legal immigration, France is also affected by the flow of refugees triggered by external unrest. Since 2012, the number of refugees received by the EU has grown rapidly, from 335,290 in 2012 to 626,960 in 2014, 1,322,844 in 2015, and 1,260,908 in 2016. After that, the number of refugees began to decline with policy adjustments. From 2008 to 2017, More than 5.74 million refugees applied for asylum each year. In addition to legal applications for asylum, there are more illegal immigrants whose numbers are difficult to calculate accurately. The number of officially documented illegal immigrants in the European Union increased from 77,932 in 2012 to 1,822,260 in 2015. It then declined as policies tightened and border management intensified, but many illegal immigrants are still trying to enter Europe. From 2014 to 2018, at least 30,510 people died in smuggling, according to the International Refugee Agency.

The economic and social impact of the refugee flow on France is enormous.

First, it drags European economic development and threatens the social welfare system. The cost of resettlement of refugees and the provision of social welfare for migrants require a large number of government funds, which hinders the pace of economic recovery in Europe. In France, for example, the resettlement cost per refugee in 2014 was 9,000 euros. Labor demand in Europe is saturated in low-wage jobs, and this trend will likely become more pronounced. The influx of a large number of refugees has made the social welfare system difficult to bear, which may reduce the welfare level of the domestic people, increase the confrontation between ethnic groups, and generate xenophobia.

Second, the influx of refugees has increased the difficulty of French social governance. Currently, the refugees accepted by France are mainly from North Africa and Muslims. French society has great differences in economic conditions, religious beliefs, living habits, social concepts, legal systems, employment policies, etc. This difference also makes French society face impacts in all aspects. The extended cultural identity and social issues such as public security and terrorist attacks have made it more difficult for the French government to govern.

3.3. The Rise of Populism: Rise of the French National Front and Its Political Program

The development and prosperity of populism are reflected in the continuous development and expansion of populist parties. Taking the French National League as an example, an unknown political group from the beginning has gradually developed into a vital force in the French political situation, with strong anti-elite and anti-establishment characteristics. As discussed above, the rise of populism is the transmission of changes in economic and social factors to the political field. Therefore, the rise of the National Front is not only a representative of the development of populism but also a caterer and promoter of the development of populism. As the representative of the far-right populist and nationalist parties in France, in more than 40 years of development, it has gradually formed the main program of opposing immigration, opposing European integration, and defending traditional values. This has always had an impact on the French political situation. But since its inception, the National Alliance has been following the principles of modernity and pragmatism to adapt to the changing political climate, and so has changed dramatically.

Anti-immigration is one of the most important elements in the program of the French National Front. Immigrants, especially Arab immigrants, have always been the main group targeted by the National Front. The National Front believes immigrants threaten “the real war of our civilization.” The immigration of immigrants will disintegrate the French nation. The influx of immigrants has led to French society’s decline in French culture. They believe that immigrants have robbed natives of their jobs and jobs, resulting in a high unemployment rate; they have also enjoyed the welfare policies and public services of natives and harmed the interests of native residents. Therefore, the National Front’s claim is strongly nativist, demanding that the French have national priorities in employment, housing, and welfare. On this basis, they put forward the slogan of “defending France and the French people, opposing immigration”, and made a radical appeal to “stop all legal immigrants”, strengthened the supervision of the border, shortened the duration of migrant visits, and stopped the construction of Muslim landmark buildings. In addition, the National Front attributed the high crime rate to the influx of immigrants.

In addition, the National Front’s primary goal was to restore social stability in France, as opposed to the fact that the National Front linked immigration issues to rising crime rates. To this end, the National Front advocates implementing strict policies to ensure social order. Marilyn Le Pen pays more attention to the role of the law and the police in maintaining social order. Its policies include: increasing the number of police, adding more prisons, and rewriting outdated laws. It has made “Islam” the focus of the attack, demanding control of the number of Muslim immigrants entering the country and the deportation of foreigners living in France with links to radical Islam. Strengthen the management and restrictions on refugees and ensure the safety of French citizens and a series of

measures. On the issue of globalization, the National Front has also followed the changing political climate and has undergone major changes, but it is still generally opposed to European integration. In the early days of the National Front, the National Front opposed cosmopolitanism and globalism. It firmly opposed the theory and practice of European integration, believing that the supranationalism and pluralism represented by European integration would impact the cultural traditions of France itself. The National Front accuses the EU of being an elite-driven project of the people: a centralized prison. The second is the negative effects brought about by European integration. The National Front believes that the European integration process has damaged national sovereignty and will have a huge impact on national autonomy, and its potential risks cannot be ignored. As the most radical existence among them, the National League opposed all actions that would damage French sovereignty. This includes the United States and the United States-led NATO and European integration, opposed all European treaties and agreements, abolished the euro, and restored the circulation of the franc. But at present, based on adhering to the original opposition to European integration and globalization, Le Pen's thoughts are gradually becoming neutral, and "de-demonization" and "de-fascism" are regarded as important strategies for reforming the National League.

4. Discussion: The Impact of the Rise of the French National Front

Judging from the results of the two French presidential elections in 2017 and 2022, the post-transition National Front has been rising, and its influence in French politics has been further expanded. It has profoundly impacted French and even European politics mainly reflected in the following aspects.

First, it has greatly impacted the traditional French political ecology, breaking the situation in which the two major political parties on the left and right in France are in power, leading to a more obvious right-leaning trend in French politics. Like other Western countries, French politics has historically been divided between left and right parties. But in the 2017 presidential and congressional elections, the Socialist Party and the Democratic Alliance, representing traditional left and right parties, lost their leadership. It was defeated by the "Republic Forward Movement" led by Macron and the "National Front" led by Le Pen. It lost its original political appeal and influence. A series of "de-demonization" and "normalization" reforms carried out since Marine Le Pen took over the National Front in 2011 have further improved the popular support rate and political influence so that the support rate in the 2017 general election exceeded 20%. And Then, it entered the second round of the election for the second time in the 2022 general election, shaking the entire French political scene. It can be said that the National Front is now in a position to compete with mainstream political parties. This changes the original dual-party multi-party system in France and shows that the French political party structure is beginning to develop towards "fragmentation" and a new trend of multi-polarization.

Second, populism will polarize French politics. The trend of political polarization has two meanings: First, the "politicized" populist movement has become a pole of major political forces, which can influence the political situation in France and even Europe. "Politicization" is the transformation of scattered populist sentiments into party power, which can occur and develop within the framework of traditional democratic politics and become an integral part of Western multi-party politics. Second, "political polarization" means that populist movements are becoming increasingly extreme, a political tool controlled and dominated by far-right forces. Political polarization at this level breaks the old political framework and brings traditional Western democratic politics into crisis [10].

The populist political polarization in France is affecting the stability and sustainability of France and even the entire Western traditional democratic system. Anti-elite and anti-establishment are the main features of populism. Right-wing political forces divide society into "people" and opposing "elites", inciting serious distrust of the political elite. The result exposed the deep division between the "people-elite" and deepened the crisis of Western democratic politics. In the current political

situation in France, far-left populism and far-right populism jointly oppose establishment liberalism and “white left” political forces and promote populism polarization [11].

Third, the strong rise of the National Front in the French political arena will intensify the regionalization and internationalization of far-right populist parties. As the leading force of European far-right political parties, the National Front is establishing a network of far-right political parties worldwide. Marine Le Pen, the French far-right National Rally Party leader, and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán have formed a close cooperation alliance. The two parties have very close, hard-line views on immigration and the European Union. The relationship has escalated, realizing the European right Populist political coalition. In the summer of 2010, 16 right-wing populist parties in Europe united in denouncing the EU as a supranational “union of radical forces”. After the 2014 European Parliament elections, far-right political parties in France, Italy, Belgium, the Czech Republic, and Austria organized the “European Movement for Nations and Freedom” (MENL) multinational political party organization. They occupied 16% of the seats in the European Parliament.

In addition, affected by the transformation of the French National Front, other right-wing political parties in Europe have also begun to play the slogans of “normalization” and “de-demonization”, modifying anti-Semitism to oppose Islam and Muslims. At the same time, it has narrowed the distance with the mainstream political parties in terms of image and achieved transformation. Extreme right-wing political parties are developing and spreading rapidly in the European political arena. The right-leaning trend of European political ecology marked by this is also inevitable, setting off a wave of anti-integration and anti-globalization worldwide.

5. Conclusion

This article examines the supply of the rise of right-wing populism in France, represented by the National Front. Its development and growth are rooted in economic decline, political fragmentation, and cultural and social divisions within France. Globalization and European integration since the 1970s brought economic inequality and multiculturalism to France. Immigrants and refugees have further squeezed jobs and the welfare system and brought about a new culture and religion. The rounds of shocks, the polarization between the rich and the poor, high unemployment, and social disintegration eventually became the soil for the growth of populism. This is why immigration and anti-globalization are key issues for the National Front. In France, populism exhibits a common core characteristic of anti-elite and anti-establishment. This stems from people’s dissatisfaction with the instability of the French economy and the increasing convergence of mainstream politics. The populist party represented by the National Front politicized the people’s dissatisfaction, mobilized the “silent majority” who were originally disappointed and indifferent to mainstream politics, and finally achieved a strong rise in French politics.

This article aims to analyze the reasons and complexity of the rise of populism in France. As a representative of right-wing populist parties in France and even Europe, the development of the National League will provide a reference for the development of subsequent populist parties. The evolution of ideological trends in Europe is of great significance. In addition, as France is a leader and an important driving force in the European integration process, analyzing the causes and effects of the rise of populism can help us understand the development prospects of the EU and the challenges of the crisis.

There are still some shortcomings in the research method of this paper. This article is mainly based on qualitative research based on Roderick’s theory of supply and demand, mainly using the case analysis method. There is a lack of analysis and discussion of the electoral dynamics of the National Front based on electoral data. In the future, quantitative analysis of relevant data can better study the rise of right-wing populist parties represented by the National Front.

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