

French far-right National Front: Why does Le Pen get so much support from young voters?

Thursday 20 April 2017, by [El AMRAOUI Ahmed](#), [MANDHAI Shafik](#) (Date first published: 20 April 2017).

Contents

- [The Youth Vote](#)
- [Youth strategy](#)
- [Unlikely supporters](#)

Paris, France - Plumes of darkened smoke rose from burning tyres early on a March morning in the northern French city of Calais last year.

French gendarmes struggled to contain a rowdy crowd of around 50 protesters carrying banners demanding the closure of a nearby refugee camp and the deportation of all its residents.

Police eventually arrested 14 people, all of them from a far-right group called Generation Identitaire (GI), which organised the protest.

As the far-right National Front's (FN) Marine Le Pen contests this year's presidential candidate as a serious candidate with a realistic shot at winning, groups like GI have attracted considerable attention from foreign media outlets.

GI's membership only numbers only a few thousand across France, but its views sit closely to the far-right National Front's traditional base.

In an interview with the UK's Channel 4 news, one of the group's leaders predicted civil war within "five to 10 years" if France did not reverse its immigration policies.

Composed mainly of youths in their 20s and 30s, the group represents the extreme fringe of the far right in France, demanding not just the deportation of refugees, such as those in Calais, but also the repatriation of French nationals of non-European ethnic origin.

"While their presence goes against the strategy of normalisation, and needs to be kept quiet, it remains essential for the FN, as it allows the party to send signals to the most extreme part of its electorate."

Aurelien Mondon, University of Bath

After the ascent of Marine Le Pen to the leadership of National Front in 2011, the party has sought to distance itself from the overt racism of groups like GI.

Such groups, however, continue to be drawn towards National Front and those with similar views continue to form an important constituency for the the party, according to University of Bath academic Aurelien Mondon .

He told Al Jazeera: "While the official policy within the party is to exclude anyone uttering openly racist comments, the reality is that while the most prominent cases are dealt with publicly and decisively, many members of these openly racist groups remain closely linked to the party."

Mondon explained that tacit inclusion of such groups, allows FN to acknowledge its traditionally hardline base, while continuing to attract more moderate voters through its process of normalisation.

"While their presence goes against the strategy of normalisation, and needs to be kept quiet, it remains essential for the FN, as it allows the party to send signals to the most extreme part of its electorate." While Marine Le Pen may be breaking records [in the polls], we should not forget that the party established itself as a serious political contender under her father (Jean-Marie Le Pen) and his much less nuanced politics."

The Youth Vote

While GI's membership numbers are relatively low, support for Le Pen is considerable.

Polling for the first round of the presidential election puts Le Pen on around a quarter of the vote, which would be enough to get her into the runoff, where she currently polls at around 40 percent.

Notably, the largest demographic for National Front support comes from voters aged between 18 and 24, where Le Pen polls at 40 percent.

That number stands in stark contrast to other European countries, including the UK, where the centre-left Labour party was the most popular among the age group at around 43 percent and the anti-immigration UKIP polled at just eight percent.

According to Professor Jim Shields of Aston University a lot of the support among French youth for Le Pen comes down to ideological sympathies, but there is a clear "economic dimension" to FN's success.

"In France, polls show the desire for 'change' to be a key factor in youth support for Le Pen, a view of Le Pen as the candidate most likely to shake things up," Shields said.

"Another reason for FN support among the young is that they've no memory of the FN as a pariah party bringing together some of the most radical elements of the French extreme right."

Jim Shields, Aston University

"Polls show that she draws much of her youth support from modest households: working class, lower-middle class," he added.

Years of economic mismanagement had resulted in high levels of youth unemployment, little security for those in employment, and reduced social mobility, Shields explained, further drawing a comparison between France and its neighbours to highlight the scale of the issue.

The rate of youth unemployment in France is just under a quarter, in Germany it is under seven percent and in the UK it is 12 percent, according to data collated by the website, Trading Economics.

"Le Pen is managing to harness a sense that 50 years of right and left have resulted in relentlessly

high unemployment.”

But FN has not only struck a chord by promising to tackle these economic woes, it is also benefitting from a lack of memory among young people of its more hardline past.

“Another reason for FN support among the young is that they’ve no memory of the FN as a pariah party bringing together some of the most radical elements of the French extreme right,” Shields said.

“The version of the FN they know is the ‘Republican’ one that Marine Le Pen has been sanitising since she became leader in 2011: when an 18-year-old today would have been just 12 years of age.”

Youth strategy

While political, economic, and cultural create the anxieties that allow the far right to thrive, FN has effectively used its youth apparatus to gain as many sympathisers as possible.

Academic Nina Wardleworth, who specialises in French studies at the University of Leeds, noted several sources from which FN’s youth vote derived.

These included political allegiances inherited from families and the successful courting of the religious Catholic vote, but most significantly a deliberate strategy of courting the youth vote.

“I think the most important reason is the enormous time and effort that the FN has devoted to recruiting the youth vote since Marine Le Pen took over from her father in 2011,” Wardleworth told Al Jazeera.

“They have established various collectifs or small groups within the party machine to highlight specific issues, often of interest to younger people.” One of this is Banlieues Patriotes, a group that aims to win votes for the FN amongst the populations of France’s most deprived housing estates and communities, areas which have a much higher percentage of younger people than the national average. “According to Shields, Le Pen’s message to the youth is bolstered by the composition of its leadership.” Marine Le Pen is relatively young for a major political leader and two of the most prominent figures in the party, David Rachline and Marion Marechal-Le Pen, are in their 20s, “he said adding: “The official face of the FN is a very young one”.

Unlikely supporters

Wardleworth also noted that in its official campaigning FN’s promises applied equally to French nationals of all ethnic origins and it appears at least some support for Le Pen is coming from unlikely quarters.

An article by Politico in January described how Muslim youth were considering voting Le Pen [\[1\]](#).

According to Rim-Sarah Alouane, a researcher at University of Toulouse, a fringe within the North African community had become “seduced” by FN.

“They used to vote for the Left, but are now leaning toward Le Pen as an act of rebellion: for them, the Left and the Right have failed them and supporting Le Pen is a last-ditch effort to appeal for inclusion,” she said.

While Le Pen currently seems likely to be defeated in a second round runoff, if the scale of her support among the youth grows or even remains consistent, future elections will be more difficult to call.

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P.S.

* “Why does Le Pen get so much support from young voters?” :

<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/04/le-pen-support-young-voters-170415161404170.html>

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.politico.eu/article/marine-le-pen-surprise-muslim-islam-supporters-national-front-banlieues/>