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THE MOMENTUM OF THE RASSEMBLEMENT NATIONAL AND THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE JUNE 2024 EUROPEAN ELECTIONS

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Throughout its electoral history, the extreme-right has only recently made a real impact in the European elections (Graph 1). Unlike the presidential and legislative elections, which have been marked by a relatively steady progression by the party, the *Front national* – now known as the *Rassemblement national* - and its supporters have recorded contrasting destinies during the nine European Parliamentary elections by direct universal suffrage.

The varying fates of the extreme-right in the European elections (1979-2019)

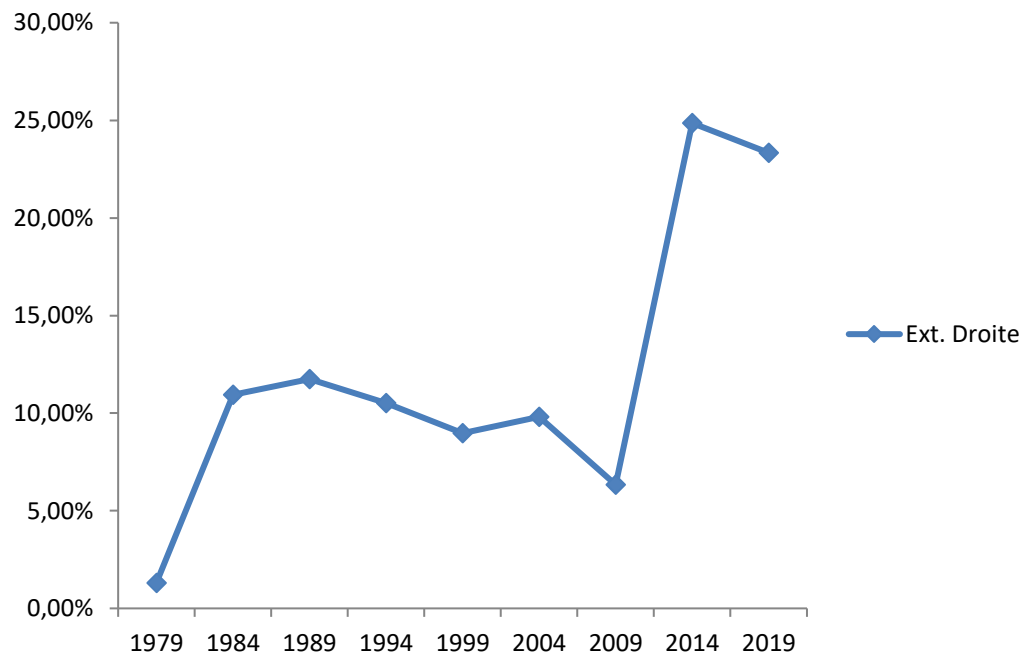
In 1984, the June European elections brought the extreme-right out of the electoral anonymity that characterised it at the time. The electoral list headed by Jean-Marie Le Pen, obtained 10.95% of the vote, thus marking the arrival of the *Front national* on the political sphere with ten of their candidates becoming deputies at the parliament in Strasbourg. This date, 1984 was the founding moment of his electoral success which, almost twenty years later, saw him making it through to the 2002 Presidential election. Following his success, his daughter, Marine Le Pen made it through to the 2017 and 2022 second round of the presidential elections. However, regarding the European elections, progress was far more laborious and uneven. After stagnating between 10% and 12% from 1984 to 1994, the *Front national* dropped to below the 10% bar from 1999 to 2009. For a period of ten years, internal divisions (the dissidence of Bruno Mégret and of the *Mouvement national républicain* in 1999), competition from the sovereignist right (Philippe de Villiers in 1994, Charles Pasqua in 1999, Philippe de Villiers' *Mouvement pour la France* in 2004 and 2009) together with the wear and tear of Jean Marie Le Pen's leadership, highlighted the erosion of the *Front national* whose list took sixth position in the 2009 European elections with just 6.3% of votes cast. Everything was about to change with the transfer of power within the party to Marine Le Pen and the establishment of a perennial strategy to "normalise" its image. The *Front national* which became the *Rassemblement national* in 2018, took off, obtaining 23%

to 25% of the vote. It became the leading political force in France for the 2014 and 2019 European elections. Such an eminent position was the forerunner to the strong performances registered by Marine Le Pen in the presidential election of 2017 (21,3%) and 2022 (23,15%) which meant that she qualified for the second round on both occasions. At the end of November 2023, the Image Barometre for the *Rassemblement national* carried out by par Verian-Epoka for *France Info* and *Le Monde*, showed that 45% of those interviewed believed that the *Rassemblement national* “does not represent a danger for democracy in France”, while 41% believed the opposite to be true. The latter opinion reached 75%, in 1997, 66% in 2005 and 58% in 2018. Of those citizens who were consulted, 65% considered that the “*Rassemblement national* could one day come into power in France”. Fully 60% esteemed that RN deputies are “deputies like all the others”. Clearly, the normalisation the *Rassemblement national* was in full swing.

Graph 1: How the extreme-right evolved in European elections from 1979 to 2019 (% votes cast)

| 1979 | 1984 | 1989 | 1994 | 1999 | 2004 | 2009 | 2014 | 2019 |
|-------|--------|--------|--------|-------|-------|-------|--------|--------|
| 1,31% | 10,95% | 11,74% | 10,52% | 8,98% | 9,81% | 6,34% | 24,86% | 23,34% |

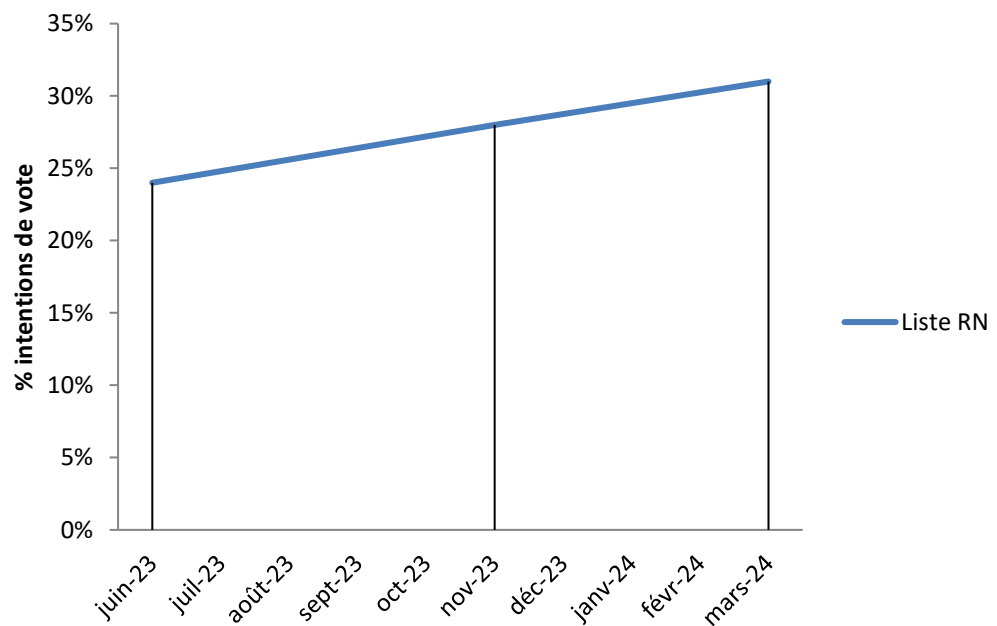
1. *The Enquête électorale française Élections européennes* carried out by IPSOS for Sciences Po CEVIPOF, Le Monde (and also the Fondation Jean-Jaurès and the Institut Montaigne for the 3rd wave) has carried out three waves: the first from June 16 to June 26, 2023 among a sample of 10,631 individuals, constituting a sample representative of the French population registered to vote aged 18 and over, the second from November 29 to December 12 2023 among a sample of 11,691 individuals and the third from March 1 to 6, 2024 among a sample of 11,770 individuals. Wave 3 included 7,148 individuals who were consulted in all three waves. This is the population I have been working on in order to closely monitor both permanence and change in voting intentions over the nine months covered by the three waves of the survey



A surprising dynamic as the 2024 European elections approach

As the June 2024 European elections approach, this dynamic seems to be continuing and indeed to be intensifying. In the French electoral survey of the European elections 2024¹ (the 1st wave took place in June 2023), the rise in voting intentions for the list led by the young President of the *Rassemblement national*, Jordan Bardella, is impressive: + 7 points from June 2023 to March 2024 (Graph 2). Starting with a level equivalent to performances recorded by *Rassemblement national* lists in 2014 and 2019, (24% of voting intentions in June 2023), the list gained 4 points in November (28%), and 3 points between November and (31%).

Graph 2: Changes in voting intentions for the RN list led by Jordan Bardella (June-November 2023-mars 2024)



Source: Waves 1 to 3 of the French electoral survey of the European elections carried out by IPSOS for Sciences Po Cevipof, the Fondation Jean-Jaurès, The Institut Montaigne and Le Monde (n=7148)

The last time a list managed to go beyond the threshold of 30% of voting intentions was as far back as 1984. This was the list made up of a union of opposition for the defence of Europe and of liberties led by Simone Veil who won 43% of the votes on election day. Since then, no list who has taken first place whether it be socialist (list headed by François Hollande in 1999), UDF-RPR (list headed by Valéry Giscard d’Estaing in 1989, list headed by Dominique Baudis in 1994) or the FN-RN (list headed by Marine Le Pen in 2014, list headed by Jordan Bardella in 2019) has gone beyond the threshold of 30% of the vote.

Permanent, Won-over and Disappointed Voters

This surprising dynamic within the list headed by Jordan Bardella can be understood by looking at the 7,148 respondents in the sample who are present in the three waves of the panel. This will allow three different populations to be identified: permanent RN voters who confirmed their voting intentions for the Jordan Bardella list in all three waves; voters who have been won over and rallied to the list between June 2023 and March 2024 and finally, disappointed voters who have abandoned the RN list².

2. My warmest thanks to my CEVIPOF colleague Pierre-Henri Bono, who carried out the survey data processing for the first three waves of the French electoral survey of the European elections

The permanent electorate has all the characteristics of the traditional *Rassemblement national* electorate over many years: in terms of gender they are relatively balanced, they are relatively older, (53,8% are between 50 and 69) and more especially are a working class electorate (48,6% of them are white-collar and blue-collar workers) (Table1). In terms of political alignment, they are massively located on the right (67,8%), more than one in three (34,6%) of these voters locate themselves in the extreme category (9 and 10) on the Left/Right axis. Fully 85.3% of these voters voted for an extreme-right candidate in the first round of the 2022 presidential election and over 88% voted for Marine Le Pen in the second round Table 2). This loyal part of the electorate has not budged in terms of voting intentions between June 2023 and March 2024. These are the voters who provide a strong and solid base to the electorate who will vote for the list headed by Jordan Bardella on June 9 next.

Table 1: Socio-demographic profile of the various sections of the *Rassemblement national* electorate

| | Permanent (n=1134) | Won-over (n=534) | Disappointed Wave 2 (n=159) | Disappointed Wave 3 (n=231) | Total population (n= 7148) |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Male | 52,3% | 51,5% | 51,6% | 49,8% | 49,2% |
| Female | 47,7% | 48,5% | 48,4% | 50,2% | 50,8% |
| Age | | | | | |
| 18-24 | 1,4% | 1,7% | 1,9% | 1,4% | 1,9% |
| 25-34 | 4,9% | 6% | 8,8% | 5,6% | 6,3% |
| 35-49 | 19,1% | 19,5% | 20,1% | 20,3% | 20,4% |
| 50-59 | 27,8% | 25,8% | 30,2% | 21,2% | 22,5% |
| 60-69 | 26% | 21,4% | 18,9% | 27,3% | 22,9% |
| 70 + | 20,7% | 25,7% | 20,1% | 24,2% | 25,9% |
| Socio-prof. category | | | | | |
| Farmer | 0,4% | 0 | 0,6% | 0 | 0,6% |
| Artisan, Business, CEOs | 4,2% | 3,2% | 0,6% | 3,5% | 4% |
| Senior executive. | 14,1% | 21,7% | 13,8% | 18,6% | 23,8% |
| Intermediary professions | 24,3% | 25,5% | 24,5% | 28,1% | 27,4% |
| White-collar worker | 31,2% | 26,6% | 27% | 29% | 25,7% |
| Blue-collar worker | 17,4% | 15% | 18,2% | 11,7% | 10,6% |

The electorate made up of voters who were won over between June 2023 and March 2024 in terms of voting intentions have a very different profile compared to that of permanent voters. From a gender perspective, this electorate is evenly balanced between males and females. It is also considerably older - (25.7% are aged 70 and over, compared to just 20.7% of the permanent electorate). In terms of career profile, they are even more different: this electorate includes more white-collar workers (47.2%) than blue-collar workers (41.6%). The *Rassemblement national* is clearly of massive interest to an executive class which - for a long period of time was reticent about the party. This is both the result of a lengthy process of normalisation initiated in 2011 by Marine Le Pen and the leadership of the *Rassemblement national*. But it is also the result of a “Bardella effect” which managed to attract white-collar workers during the pre-campaign period for the European elections. Prior to this, these voters had not been favourable to the *Front national* or indeed to the *Rassemblement national* created in 2018. Only 30,9% of this recently won-over electorate voted for Marine Le Pen in the first round of the 2022 presidential election. These voters chose to vote for Éric Zemmour (15%), Jean-Luc Mélenchon (12.4%), abstention or a blank or spoilt vote (10.5%), Emmanuel Macron (9.9%) or Valérie Pécresse (9.4%). The positioning of these won-over voters is palpably more moderate (15.9% at the centre in position 5, 39% in favour of the classic right in positions 6,7 and 8, 15.5% in positions 2 to 4 of the moderate left). More than one won-over voter out of three position themselves on the left (positions 0 to 4) or in the centre (position 5). These figures reinforce the heterogenic nature of those who vote for the list headed by Jordan Bardella. Clearly, in winning voters over the *Rassemblement national* has managed to accentuate its reputation as a “catch-all party”³.

3.

The notion of a “catch all” party was introduced by Otto Kircheimer in a 1966 article entitled The Transformation of Western Party Systems, to designate a party which appealed to voters across the board independently of social class and classical cleavages. Joseph La Palombara, Maron Weiner (Ed), Political Parties and Political Development, Princeton University Press, 1966

For the first time in its electoral history which began in the early 1980s, the Front national now transformed into the *Rassemblement national* has become a major party capable of bringing different generations together with voters from various social backgrounds and diverse political affiliations. In former times it was the Gaulist faction and later the Socialist Party who played such a role.

However, it is entirely possible that Jordan Bardella's party will find it more difficult to cater to these changes in voter profiles given the party's extremist origin organised around a very limited number of issues (immigration, insecurity) and its serious lack of experience in government. The *Rassemblement national* has not yet acquired the attributes of a party "like any other". Even on the question of antisemitism, which is no longer at the heart of the leadership's discourse within the organisation, a there could "the return of repressed instincts" could very quickly occur. Interviewed in November 2023 in Wave 2 of the French electoral survey about Jordan Bardella's statement that Jean-Marie Le Pen was not an antisemite⁴, 66% of voters believed that « in spite of his denial, the RN continues to be a profoundly antisemitic party. This is true for voters in all generations and from all social backgrounds. Only voters who identify strongly with the *Rassemblement national* (28%) and those who have been won back to its side (15%) agree with this opinion. In November 2023, only 32% of French people believed that Marine Le Pen "would make a good President of the Republic". Clearly, Jordan Bardella's party still has a great deal of progress to make to become a veritable "catch all party".

4.

On November 5, 2023 on BFM-TV, when asked if the founder of the FN was a antisemite or not, Jordan Bardella answered "Judges talked about it, but I do not believe that Jean-Marie Le Pen was an antisemite. On November 9 on CNews, the RN President recognised a certain blunder on his part as Jean-Marie Le Pen had "had locked himself into an antisemitism which led to a political rupture between Marine Le Pen and her father in 2015

The party's difficulty in capturing a long-lasting centre-right electorate is made clear by the fact that 49.3% of voters who abandoned their intention to vote for the party in Wave 3 positioned themselves in positions 5 to 8 on the Left/Right scale. Emmanuel Macron, Valérie Pécresse and even Jean-Luc Mélenchon reached sizeable levels (between 10% and 15%) among voters in the first round of the 2022 presidential election. Disappointed voters tend to be relatively older (over 60) and from mid management and white-worker backgrounds. The ability to solidify these terrains of recently won-over voters is not yet a given for the party. Moreover, it was from this Wave 3 disappointed electorate that Marine Le Pen got her lowest score (54,5%) in the 2022 presidential election. While Wave 2 disappointed voters turned towards the *Reconquête* list (34,6%) and abstention or blank/spoilt votes (23,3%), Wave 3 disappointed voters turned to the LR list headed by François- Xavier Bellamy (18,2%), towards abstention, blank/spoilt votes (18,6%) and towards smaller lists (the ecologists, hunting/nature party, etc.). This more moderate electorate is hesitant to convert over the long term to the *Rassemblement national* list.

There have been many changes in voting intentions for the *Rassemblement national* list over the past nine months, even if the base that started in the summer of 2023 remained solid and the appeal of this list was much stronger than the reticence it gave rise to. Furthermore, in Wave 4 of the French European Electorel Survey 2024, carried out from 19-24 April, the dynamic of the RN list continued to exist (+1 point) reaching 32% of voting intentions with a very strong degree of determination among the electorate (85% of potential voters being certain of their choice). On the evening of June 9, we shall see what remains of this strong dynamic that the list headed by Jordan Bardella has experienced over the past few months. We shall also see what remains of the hesitations which at times have emerged about raising this list to a pinnacle so that that the doors to power might be open to the *Rassemblement national* in the perspective of the 2027 presidential election.

Table 2: Political profile among the various sections of the *Rassemblement National* electorate

| <i>Left-right Scale</i> | Permanent (n=1134) | Won-over (n=534) | Disappointed Wave 2 (n=159) | Disappointed Wave 3 (n=231) | <i>Population as a whole</i> (n=7148) |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|
| 0 (very left-wing) | 0,3% | 0,1% | 0 | 0,9% | 1,9% |
| 1 | 0,8% | 2,2% | 1,3% | 0 | 3% |
| 2 | 1,4% | 5,1% | 2,5% | 1,7% | 6,8% |
| 3 | 3,1% | 5,6% | 3,1% | 3,9% | 10,2% |
| 4 | 2,5% | 4,9% | 5% | 5,2% | 7,9% |
| 5 | 14% | 15,9% | 15,7% | 16,9% | 17,3% |
| 6 | 3,7% | 5,8% | 4,4% | 8,2% | 8,7% |
| 7 | 10,5% | 15,4% | 15,7% | 16% | 11,5% |
| 8 | 19% | 17,8% | 17,6% | 18,2% | 11,5% |
| 9 | 14% | 7,5% | 8,2% | 9,5% | 5,2% |
| 10 | 20,6% | 5,4% | 10,7% | 7,4% | 5,7% |
| Don't know | 10% | 13,7% | 15,7% | 12,1% | 10,5% |
| <i>Vote P.2022 1st round</i> | | | | | |
| Poutou | 0,3% | 0,7% | 0 | 0 | 0,8% |
| Arthaud | 0,1% | 0 | 0 | 0,4% | 0,4% |
| Mélenchon | 2,8% | 12,4% | 9,4% | 10,4% | 16,2% |
| Roussel | 1% | 2,1% | 1,3% | 1,7% | 3,2% |
| Jadot | 1,2% | 0,7% | 0,6% | 0,4% | 5,1% |
| Hidalgo | 0 | 0,2% | 0 | 0 | 1,8% |
| Macron | 2,4% | 9,9% | 8,8% | 14,3% | 24,8% |
| Pécresse | 1,7% | 9,4% | 6,3% | 12,1% | 7,4% |
| Lassalle | 2% | 4,5% | 4,4% | 5,6% | 2,9% |
| Dupont-Aignan | 1,1% | 3,7% | 4,4% | 4,8% | 2,2% |
| Le Pen | 76,3% | 30,9% | 41,5% | 31,6% | 18,6% |
| Zemmour | 7,9% | 15% | 12% | 9,1% | 6,1% |
| Abst. | 3,6% | 7,9% | 8,8% | 6,9% | 7,1% |
| Bl. Nuls | 0,7% | 2,6% | 2,5% | 2,6% | 0,1% |
| <i>Vote P.2022 2nd round</i> | | | | | |
| Macron | 4,7% | 19,5% | 12,6% | 25,1% | 45,5% |
| Le Pen | 88,5% | 58% | 69,8% | 54,5% | 30,1% |
| Abst. | 4,5% | 9,4% | 11,3% | 6,9% | 10,2% |
| Blank/Spoilt votes | 2,3% | 13,1% | 6,3% | 13,4% | 14,2% |

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