

# Far right backed by one in five French voters

Stubbornly opposing the tides of modernity and globalisation, record numbers of French people have supported a far-right candidate in the presidential election. Liberals are reeling.



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**M**arine Le Pen greeted her flag-toting crowd with a triumphant smile. 'The battle of France has just begun,' ran her war cry. 'Dear friends, fellow citizens – nothing will ever be the same again.'

The rhetoric was a little overblown. Far from leading a revolution, Le Pen had simply secured third place in the first round of the French presidential elections. In terms of votes cast, the day's real winner was Françoise Hollande, the moderate socialist who forced President Sarkozy into second place. These two must now prepare for a final showdown in two weeks' time.

But it was Le Pen who grabbed the headlines. By winning 18% of the vote for her extreme right-wing Front National (FN) party, she has outstripped all expectations. It is the greatest show of support for the far right in France's history.

Liberals are shaken. The FN is an anti-immigration party with a history of

intolerance, even racism. This result is a major boost for opponents of multiculturalism. And it is not only symbolic: Sarkozy is now likely to adopt more hard-line stances in a desperate effort to win over Le Pen's supporters and rescue his floundering campaign.

The right is on the rise across Europe; but this is the greatest victory for an extreme nationalist party yet. And it is not France's first flirtation with the FN: ten years ago, Le Pen's even more extremist father received an almost as impressive 16% of the vote.

Why is France so drawn to nationalism? Part of the answer, say analysts, lies in French pride in their particular culture. Other countries – including in Britain – have accepted the passing of traditional ways; but France staunchly defends its cultural heritage.

The Academie Francaise, for instance, fiercely guards the French language against anglicised words like 'email' or

'walkman'. The government also protects traditional products like cheese and wine. In a way, nationalism is behind France's renowned rustic cuisine.

Not all French patriots support Le Pen, of course. But does a vigorous defence of national culture feed dangerous anxieties about foreign influence?

## THE FRENCH DEFENCE

For lovers of traditional culture, this vigorous defence against globalisation is heroic. Other countries, they say, have become blandly similar; but a French market or cafe is like no other place on Earth.

But multiculturalists are wary of this romantic patriotism. It is a short step from defending your own culture to attacking others – with Marine Le Pen and her ugly xenophobia as the result. It's useless to resist modernity and globalisation, they say; we should stop worrying and celebrate them instead.

## Q & A

**Q I've never even been to France – what do their elections matter to me?**

**A** Even though its power has declined recently, France is still a big player in world events. It is the world's fifth largest economy – two places above the UK. Its policies have enormous ripples across

Europe and beyond. Its influence in the EU is second only to Germany's. The French stance towards the free market, the Euro crisis and austerity could determine the fate of an entire continent.

**Q Okay, but this is just the first round...**

**A** True. But whoever is elected will now have to find a way of dealing with the strength of anti-immigrant feeling in France.

What's more, it confirms fears that the far right are on the rise across Europe. If one of these parties gained power then the impact could be very serious indeed.

## SOME PEOPLE SAY...

**'Multiculturalism has failed.'**

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

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### WORD WATCH

**Final showdown** – In French presidential elections, the winning candidate needs to take over half the votes cast. Since French voters tend to support a wide range of candidates, that usually doesn't happen straight away. So instead, the top two candidates from the first round go head-to-

head in a runoff two weeks later – in this case, it is Sarkozy vs Hollande.

**Multiculturalism** – Multiculturalists believe that diversity should be promoted, and that representatives of every culture should have their place in national institutions. Opponents say that this leads to confusion and conflict, and that a nation needs to agree

on shared values to survive.

**Anglicised** – That is, words that come from English – these days usually via America. France's sensitivity to this is partly historical. There was a period when all of Europe spoke French. It looked set to become the main international language; but because the British Empire was so huge, the rival language English won out.

### YOU DECIDE

1. Does traditional culture need to be defended against outside influences?
2. Should governments welcome immigration or try to restrict it?

### ACTIVITIES

1. List five things you associate with French culture and say which ones you admire, and which you don't.
2. Research the candidates who stood in the French election and have a class debate about whose ideas are best. At the end of the debate, take a vote.

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 **NOTES**

