

What Are the Implications of Increasing Euroscepticism in Politically Confused France?

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POL S 448

Politics of the European Union

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December 14, 2016

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Outline	1
France's historical connection to the European Union	1
Earliest signs of Euroscepticism in France	2
Dwindling French exceptionalism in the wider European context	4
Current status of politics in France	5
Prospects for France's 2017 presidential elections	6
Does Marine Le Pen really have a chance at winning the presidency?	6
Conclusion	8
References	9

Introduction

The prevalence of Euroscepticism in France is on the rise and has been for the past couple decades. The term, Euroscepticism, can most simply be described as “a broad, generic label which covers varying degrees and kinds of resistance to EU integration from within any Member State or candidate country” (Flood, 2002). It is generally accepted amongst academics that France’s rejection of the European Constitutional Treaty in its 2005 referendum was indicative of the start of a new phase of Euroscepticism, though there is evidence which suggests that distrust and even complete indifference in regards to the European Union (EU) existed in France prior to when voters were faced with the decision of potentially implementing a European Constitution. Nonetheless, it is insurmountable to ignore the fact that Euroscepticism has gradually played a much more vital role in France’s domestic politics in the years following the referendum in 2005. The case can be made that Euroscepticism in France has inflated to such an extent that it has become a legitimate threat to France’s future as it relates to the EU. This paper will strive to figure out what led to the heightened level of Euroscepticism in the first place and then predict what kinds of implications we can expect to see as the increasing level of Euroscepticism in France not only has ramifications on France itself, but also on the EU and France’s role in it.

Outline

This paper will first take a look at France’s historical relationship with the EU and understand the reasons why France decided to join the Union back in its beginning. Then we will focus our attention on examining two of the earliest cases of French Euroscepticism – the 1992 referendum on the Maastricht Treaty and the 2005 referendum on the European Constitutional Treaty. We will then delve into the dwindling of French exceptionalism over the past several years and the current political situation in France, and explore how those two aspects have contributed to the rise of the National Front, which we will then investigate by assuming the validity of the real threat that the National Front poses to France and the EU alike.

France’s historical connection to the European Union

The relationship between France and the EU goes as far back as the Union's earliest days. France was one of the two key Member States, the other being Germany, at the founding of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1951, which later would come to be known as the European Union. The ECSC was formed in an attempt to put a permanent end to conflict that had thrown the continent into two World Wars by interlinking the economies of Europe's two main competitors: France and Germany. The thinking was that by creating a common market for the coal and steel industries, the two countries would find it impossible to go to war with each other, and, as a result, would be forced to work together to resolve disputes diplomatically as opposed to resorting to fighting each other. This solution worked, and has kept EU Member States free of war ever since.

Earliest signs of Euroscepticism in France

Despite it being one of the founding Member States of the EU, France has been rather skeptical of European integration ever since it officially became the European Union in 1992 with the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty. France was one of three Member States to hold a referendum on the Treaty, and it passed with only fifty-one percent of votes in favor. The low success rate may have to do with the fact that the Maastricht Treaty moved to not only further integrate Europe economically, but also politically, which was an aspect over which the European Community (EC) did not previously have any jurisdiction. It was at this point that Euroscepticism in France was officially born.

France has been a Member State that has held a liberal intergovernmental view in regards to the EU. Liberal intergovernmentalism is defined as an "integration theory which holds that Member States are fully in charge of cooperative steps they take and only collaborate with a view to their direct self-interest" (Lelieveldt/Princen, 2011). In addition, liberal intergovernmentalism says that "issues of sovereignty and security are dominant in explaining the behavior of countries" and that "intergovernmentalists do not accept the idea that non-governmental groups are able to exert a strong influence on the preferences and activities of governments" (Lelieveldt/Princen, 2011). Keeping this definition in mind, it is easier to understand why French voters were so divided on the

Maastricht Treaty. While there were benefits of being part of an ever-closer union, its ratification meant that the EU's competences would strengthen and expand, and France would likely have to abide by some supranational policies set forth, which many saw as overstepping boundaries into areas where national governments should be making decisions for themselves.

The French rejection of the European Constitutional Treaty in 2005 marked a turning point in the relevance of Euroscepticism. It was the first time that the French people had openly rejected and prevented a step towards further European integration. There were two main reasons why the French opposed the European Constitutional Treaty. They were against the potential of Turkish accession to the EU and disapproved of the liberal direction of the EU under an Anglo-Saxon economic model, and opposition to those two matters was heightened as a result of the overall poor state of the French economy and negative trends in the rate of unemployment (Taggart, 2006). These were areas that the French felt the EU was making decisions without France's consent, and the fact that they both would have implications on France itself is likely why fifty-five percent of voters voted against the Constitutional Treaty.

There also was a general feeling that the EU was not entirely democratic, and that an elite few were making decisions that did not truly represent what the people wanted. The French felt particularly uneasy about this because they were very uncomfortable with the idea of a supranational institution deciding what would go on in France, and even more so if they felt they had no say in that decision. This, however, was not entirely based on fact. As Taggart notes in his keynote article, "it appears that, in important domains, there is a move towards a model of direct democracy and away from representative democracy," and that referendums "are being used at key moments of European integration" such as deciding on EU membership and treaty ratification (Taggart, 2006). As it relates to France, the French have had a say in key moments of further European integration. Referendums were held to decide on the enlargement of the EC in 1972, the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, and the Constitutional Treaty in 2005, so there must be something more contributing to the overall French skepticism in regards to the EU (Taggart, 2006).

Dwindling French exceptionalism in the wider European context

The argument can be made that France's influence on the EU has diminished over the years. While France has maintained its liberal intergovernmental standpoint, other Member States who could be grouped more as having a neo-functionalist standpoint, such as Germany, have been leading the way on European integration. Neo-functionalism is an "integration theory which states that Member States will work together to reap economic benefits, setting in motion a process in which ever more tasks are delegated to the supranational level" (Lelieveldt/Princen, 2011). As a result of it being more hands-off when it comes to supranational decision-making, France has watched its ability to influence the EU diminish over time, and as such, Germany has gradually filled in and assumed the sole role of leadership primarily because of its strong support for the EU and further European integration. This, combined with the fact that the EU is leaning more towards Anglo-Saxon free market capitalism, which scores a point for the Brits, France's longtime rivals, has led to the general feeling that France's role in the EU and its ability to affect decision-making are becoming weaker over time as its leverage decreases.

During French President François Hollande's current term, France's ability to influence the EU has shrunk even more. At the beginning of his presidency, Hollande strongly resisted Germany's lead on the Fiscal Compact and European Stability Mechanism (ESM) in response to the Eurozone crisis, but was unable to make France's voice heard at the supranational level as a result of choosing to opt for "qualified dissent rather than unity on EU issues such as how Greece should go about reimbursing its creditors," which made other Member States less willing to want to work with France and more inclined to move along with decision-making no matter if France was on board (Vinocur/Ariès, 2015). Vinocur and Ariès also note "by failing to at least simulate unity with Germany on strictly EU issues, France has allowed itself to be cast in the role of unequal partner" (Vinocur/Ariès, 2015).

This may begin to explain why "the share of top staff posts held by French officials has dropped from 17 to 8 percent since 2009," which is odd considering that France is "Europe's second-biggest economy, [yet ranks] fifth in terms of European influence" behind Spain, Italy, the United Kingdom, and Germany (Mandra, 2015). French resentment towards Germany and the EU has grown primarily as a result of

France's dwindling influence in the EU as it is forced to take a backseat to Germany, and this has given strength to Euroscepticism and the role it plays in politics domestically.

Current status of politics in France

Besides President Hollande's inability to affect decision-making at the supranational level in the EU's response to the Eurozone crisis, Hollande has faced harsh criticism for his overall handling of the French state during his term. *France 24*, a prominent French news television channel, reported Hollande as having an approval rating of as low as four percent in October 2016 (Creedon, 2016). The biggest problem is that Hollande's presidency has led to a dismantling of the left – in particular, of the Socialist Party. The vast majority of those who voted for Hollande in France's 2012 presidential election “now view their leader as a traitor who has increasingly inched to the right” (McAuley, 2016). As a result, Hollande's Socialist Party is losing what historically has been its base of support: the working class.

Two policy decisions have played the biggest role in the demise of President Hollande and his Socialist Party: the forced passage of extremely unpopular labor reforms and the never-ending state of emergency. In an attempt to give life to an otherwise stagnant economy with an unemployment rate consistently hanging around ten percent, Manuel Valls, Hollande's Prime Minister, took it upon himself to push strongly for labor reforms that would do away with some labor protection regulations which would largely benefit employers at the expense of their employees. These reforms made it easier for employers to hire staff by eliminating the need for French workers to be on a written contract and also easier to fire staff by no longer needing to specify a reason, recognized by French law as being legitimate, for firing an employee (Henley/Inman, 2016).

The other issue is Hollande's handling of the country ever since the terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015. Since then, France has been in a prolonged state of emergency, most recently being renewed for another six months in July 2016. Muslim communities have been targeted as security tightens and police infringe by conducting unauthorized house searches and sometimes going as far as banning social gatherings of Muslims. Not only this, but Hollande himself has gone to the extent of attempting “to

pass a constitutional amendment that would have permitted stripping French citizenship from dual citizens convicted of terrorism” (McAuley, 2016).

Both of these actions by Hollande and Valls “were seen as affronts to the fundamental values of the French left as the party of social equality,” and have left Socialist Party supporters no choice but to abandon the party altogether. This is particularly alarming considering France’s next presidential elections will be held just a few months from now in April and May 2017.

Prospects for France’s 2017 presidential elections

The rise in popularity of France’s extreme-right populist party, the National Front (FN), is beginning to raise some eyebrows, and rightly so. The combination of the left having failed so miserably during Hollande’s first term in office and growing levels of resentment towards the EU has fueled the FN’s momentum under the lead of Marine Le Pen. The party’s main characteristics are that it is extremely nationalistic, Eurosceptic, and opposed to immigration. The FN has gained so much momentum that it has been able to attract support from the fractured left by speaking mainly to the working class.

Le Pen and her party stand firmly against globalization and neoliberalism, which they claim have been forced on France by the EU and have made working conditions and earnings within France suffer as a result (Invernizzi Accetti/Bickerton, 2016). This has given a voice to workers who for a long time have felt excluded and forgotten about by their own party. One working class man interviewed by *Le Monde* who claimed to support Le Pen for president in 2017 stated that voting for the FN “is like a desperate attempt to be noticed in the eyes of others” (Vincent, 2016). As we witness the repercussions on the working class of the unpopular labor reforms forced through the National Assembly by Hollande and Valls, it is likely that this kind of support for the FN will only grow in the months preceding the next presidential elections.

Does Marine Le Pen really have a chance at winning the presidency?

Overall, the potential of a Le Pen presidency is regarded as unlikely. If we take a look back to France’s 2002 presidential elections, we notice that Jean-Marie Le Pen, the leader of the FN at the time, was defeated horribly in the run-off vote against Jacques

Chirac. Chirac managed to win eighty-two percent of the vote, which sent him into his second term as president of France. However, this huge percentage was not necessarily reflective of support for Chirac as much as it was opposition to Le Pen. In the first round of voting, the unpopular Chirac won only 5.5 million votes of the roughly 41 million votes to be had (Bell/Criddle, 2002). Despite this low amount, he still managed to come out as one of the two candidates with the most votes after the first round of voting, and since no single candidate won an absolute majority, the election went to a run-off vote. It was then that Chirac gained an additional 20 million votes simply because he was the ‘faute de mieux’ or lesser of two evils (Bell/Criddle, 2002).

It is assumed that if Le Pen were to make it to the run-off vote in the 2017 presidential election, which Hollande was actually preparing for before he announced his decision to not run for re-election, that she would face similar opposition and defeat that her father faced back in 2002 (Chapuis, 2016). But is it really that likely? Times are changing in France that could point to the very real possibility of a Le Pen presidency. France’s current president is highly disliked, the French economy has not improved in years, and Euroscepticism is stronger than it has ever been. After all, the FN did perform much better than it was expected to in France’s regional elections in December 2015 by making it to the run-off vote in six of the thirteen regions.

Not only this, but populist right parties and candidates are on the rise all across Europe and even in the United States, likely in response to the overall poorer quality of life in the years following the 2008 global financial crisis. The most important lesson that can be learned from the current situation in the United States with Donald Trump sitting as President-elect is to not discount the real threat that the extreme-right poses. Hollande already took the first step necessary in keeping Le Pen away from the presidency by choosing to not run for re-election and instead give the Socialist Party a better chance at winning support, but France’s political parties are going to have to evolve if they want to compete with Le Pen.

There is currently a political spectrum shift in France which draws a populist/establishment line as opposed to the traditional left/right divide. Even “Le Pen insists that her party is ‘neither right- nor left-wing,’” which is something very different that has not been seen before in France, so other political parties will need to get creative

with their nominees for president (Invernizzi Accetti/Bickerton, 2016). There are a number of ways to go about doing this, but perhaps the best way would be to nominate a candidate who is not seen as being part of the establishment, and even better, someone who does not openly proclaim strong support for the EU. It is only by taking these precautions that will lessen the legitimate threat that the FN poses to France and the EU alike.

Conclusion

A Le Pen presidency would not only have potentially devastating effects on France itself, but also on the EU and France's role in it. Le Pen has already promised that she will hold a referendum on a French exit from the EU if she were to become president. According to a poll conducted by *The Independent*, a British online newspaper, sixty-one percent of the French population has an unfavorable view of the EU (Wright, 2016). Although this does not directly imply that the French would vote to leave the EU if given the opportunity, it is somewhat concerning considering that this same poll found forty-eight percent of the British population to have an unfavorable view of the EU, and those same voters voted in June 2016 to leave the EU. Additionally, the same Eurosceptic viewpoints that lingered during the 2005 Constitutional Treaty referendum are also prevalent today, so a potential French exit from the EU should be taken seriously.

A French exit from the EU would surely diminish the Union's influence not only in Europe, but on the international scene as well, if not lead to the inevitable dissolution of the EU altogether. Seeing as France is one of the EU's key founding Member States, it would reflect a huge change in the status of the EU if France were to leave, and possibly also convince other Member States to leave the EU. Without the EU acting as a forced way to find consensus between Member States, what would come of Europe if the EU were to completely disappear? Would the continent find itself back in war all over again? Would other political unions similar to the EU be formed in an attempt to preserve what the EU stood for? It is likely that we may never have to face such a scenario, but to ensure that the EU has long term potential, action needs to be taken at the supranational level to find ways to deal with the ever-increasing level of Euroscepticism not only in France, but across the entire continent as well.

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