The Racist Motivations Behind the National Rally Vote in France

by Nicolas Duvoux

This fascinating political sociology study looks at the lifestyles and subjective perceptions of average National Rally voters in the South of France. It sheds light on the racist motivations behind people's support for the party.

In a book that has been widely acclaimed—and rightly so, given its relevance to the electoral context and its intrinsic quality—Félicien Faury gives a masterly account of a survey conducted over several years in the South of France. The study looked at people's reasons for voting for the National Rally (Rassemblement National—RN), focusing on the social, residential and relational logics involved. To do so, he opted for qualitative research and interviews that were either predominantly or entirely unstructured, giving free rein to the associative thinking and principles underlying the perception and division of the social world inhabited by his respondents, whom he met in a variety of social settings. Without seeking to describe the social world in terms of its objective characteristics, the author is concerned with mental maps and subjective perceptions that have their own social efficacy: a shopkeeper's perception of his neighborhood; a mother's perception of her children's school environment; perceptions of the changing patronage of a downtown café, and so on.

The driving forces behind the RN vote are thus explained on the basis of the social environment in which it is embedded. This method anchors political analysis in the most ordinary situations and avoids reproducing or duplicating, in the survey mechanism, the distancing from politics that characterizes a large part of the population. Two closely related main findings emerge: first, the pre-eminence of racism in the determinants of the RN vote and its everyday grounding in a rejection of redistribution through taxation and welfare benefits; and second, the highlighting of forms of spatial and cultural dispossession. One of the book's major findings is that, although economic inequalities are much greater in scale, cultural distances, which are objectively less great, are more harmful and more determinant of support for the National Rally.

Race and power

Félicien Faury's book develops a simple thesis that runs counter to the prevailing view: racist motives are a primary factor in people's support for the National Rally. Although disputed by recent studies (including those by Julia Cagé and Thomas Piketty[1]), this thesis is strongly supported by quantitative analyses, such as those of Nonna Mayer[2].

This method reveals the centrality of racist factors in the RN vote. The term 'racist motives' does not refer to individual behaviors or representations, but rather to a *process of ascription* that leads members of the majority group—particularly members of the working classes or the weakened middle classes who perceive that their integration into this group is under threat—to establish an asymmetrical social relationship that allows them to minoritize 'others' (primarily 'Muslims', 'Arabs' and 'Turks'). Four processes of fixation, essentialization, alteration and hierarchization (p. 20) are at the root of the fantasized power that racialization gives to those who deploy it and who wish to see it implemented in positive law through access to the power of the RN vote.

The rejection of Islam is thus strikingly central, whether it is being asserted through signs such as the veil, which is then seen as aggressive, or, on the contrary,

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[1] Julia Cagé, Thomas Piketty, *Une histoire du conflit politique. Élections et inégalités en France, 1789-2022*, Paris, Seuil, 2023.

[2] See, among others, https://booksandideas.net/The-Front-National-Still-Racist-and-Xenophobic.

practiced with a discretion that is deemed hypocritical. In their eyes, Muslims are always wrong. The respondents are driven by a feeling towards what they perceive as radical and invasive otherness in various scenes of ordinary life: cafés, social services, schools. The latter appears to be a point of fixation insofar as it allows them to rediscover a white 'in-group' that is usually out of reach for these working-class or middle-class groups.

The book's argument is organized around the reflections of Colette Guillaumin, Frantz Fanon and the American sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois, and seeks to identify the various manifestations of a structural and systemic social relationship in the racialization (and exacerbation) of social and moral boundaries around social benefits, as well as in the rejection of Islam and its symbols or, on the contrary, the desire to identify with the ('white') color of the majority group. Félicien Faury gives a particularly convincing analysis of this issue, insofar as he identifies voting dynamics that cannot be reduced to social fragility alone, and grasps the processes of ascription that are at play.

The territories of dispossession

Faury's study focuses on stable working-class households or relatively vulnerable middle-class households (self-employed, small shopkeepers, firefighters), similar to those characterized as "lower-middle class"[3].

The book thus highlights a situation of social dispossession on at least three levels: time, space, and culture. The most defining and perhaps most generalizable[4] aspect is the uncertainty about the future that plagues the ordinary voters surveyed. This widespread social insecurity, which is felt by most respondents, helps explain their rejection of taxation, which is the focus of their resentment:

> "While everyone feels that they are 'managing', and that they are not, as I often heard, 'to be pitied' or 'in need', they also believe that their financial situation does not allow them to look to the future with confidence ('having a solid foundation',

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[3] Marie Cartier, Isabelle Coutant, Olivier Masclet, Yasmine Siblot, *La France des 'petits-moyens'. Enquête sur la banlieue pavillonnaire*, Paris, La Découverte, « Textes à l'appui / enquêtes de terrain », 2008.

[4] Nicolas Duvoux, *L'avenir confisqué. Inégalités de temps vécu, classes sociales et patrimoine*, Paris, Presses Universitaire de France, 2023, english translation, Nicolas Duvoux, *Class and Time-Based Subjective Inequality : Wealth Forecas*t, Routledge, Routledge Advances in Sociology, 2025.

as Christophe put it)—whether that means being to cope with potential financial difficulties or life events, or fulfilling aspirations they consider reasonable (owning a home, paying for their children's education, etc.)." (p. 20)

This bleak outlook on the future highlights the tension between aspirations and circumstances, between the desire for stability and upward mobility and the threat of decline or downward mobility.

Another particularly salient and well-documented aspect of the analysis concerns the spatial and territorial dispossession of these groups. The region surveyed is marked by an economy of enrichment[5] in which Parisian and international elites monopolize the most sought-after spaces, privatizing them and turning them into heritage sites for their own gain. Added to this dispossession from above is dispossession from below: the middle and working classes who identify with or wish to identify with the majority group find themselves overtaken and invaded by "visible" minorities in public spaces. This dual spatial dispossession, which is particularly acute due to regional processes of land value appreciation, provides another particularly interesting insight:

> "These facilities fuel RN voters' sense of dispossession 'from above', both economically (through prices) and culturally (through lifestyles)." (p. 87)

Finally, Faury draws attention to the particular resentment felt towards cultural elites, who derive their status and prestige from their qualifications rather than from their economic success—which is both coveted and criticized when deemed excessive or disproportionate. This collective experience, which is based on a knowledge of the social world, contrasts with the lessons taught by academics. The inertia of school grades and assessments, the power of school rankings, and the lingering humiliation linked to the symbolic violence of the school system appear to be the most prominent drivers of hatred toward cultural elites:

> "Their representations of the social world highlight, like a distorted map, a gap between subjective perceptions of social disparities and actual class differences. While minor cultural differences become particularly striking and divisive, criticism of the economic elite is much less prominent, or at least much more

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[5] Luc Boltanski, Arnaud Esquerre, *Enrichissement. Une critique de la marchandise*, Paris, Gallimard, 2017.

limited, even though the gap in living standards between them and the rest of society is much wider." (p. 191)

This type of discrepancy between aspirations to belong to the majority group and the material impossibility of securing a place in the white in-group is central to the argument: it is because their sense of belonging is threatened that the groups studied politicize the racial boundary in order to reap symbolic and material dividends (p. 222).

Subjectivity and the study of social relations: some points for discussion

Félicien Faury's book is a remarkable achievement: not only for its clear, high-quality writing, the scope of the material covered, and the precise way in which it is presented, but also for its ability to analyze and interpret these findings using a framework that views racialization processes through the lens of broader social dynamics.

The book's rich content invites us to explore several avenues for further reflection. The first is to link national results with transnational analyses of populism and the issues of integration inherent in the associated votes. What links, identities and differences exist between the rise of the RN and the referendum that led to Brexit, for example? It is clear, for example, that the UK's "Leave" voters were expressing their dissatisfaction with the deteriorating economic situation. However, ethnographic studies have also identified a "nostalgic deprivation[6]" of a sense of civic belonging, which echoes Faury's analysis. The feeling of not being respected socially is likely to fuel a form of resentment towards the elites, which is exploited by radical alternative electoral options. One of the hypotheses explaining populism is that individuals at the bottom of the social ladder have a fear of falling, which causes them to distance themselves from the poorest members of society and immigrants[7]. These overlaps could serve to broaden the debate beyond France and encompass society as a whole.

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[6] Justin Gest, Tyler Reny and Jeremy Mayer, "Roots of the Radical Right: Nostalgic Deprivation in the United States and Britain", *Comparative Political Studies*, 2017, 51, 13, pp. 1694-1719.
[7] Noam Gidron, Peter A. Hall, "Populism as a Problem of Social Integration", *Comparative Political Studies*, p. 5.

Looking solely at the French national context, it is not so much the opposition between the RN in the south and the RN in the north of the country—whose vote is more rooted in social issues (Faury points out the limitations of what might emerge as an objection to his thesis)—but rather the different ways in which social and xenophobic motives are intertwined in the RN vote, depending on location and social group, that warrant further investigation.

The analysis offered here is based on specific, relatively protected social groups; it contrasts with ethnographic studies that point to a direct and genuinely ideological adherence to the values of segregation expressed by elite segments of society. One example that comes to mind is Bruno Cousin's study of high society clubs[8].

It also contrasts sharply with the findings of surveys conducted among populations that are more spatially and socially marginalized. We could highlight the attachment to egalitarian working-class values revealed by Florence Weber[9], or the central role of friendly social networks as a defense mechanism against the scarcity of job opportunities in small towns in eastern France, as emphasized by Benoît Coquard[10].

These studies, which all demonstrate the hegemony of the National Rally, show that some forms of social cleavage are being reestablished and that racism is grafting itself onto these divisions and finding expression, progressively liberated by the normalization of political offering of the far-right party, which is well analyzed in one of the final chapters of Faury's book.

Building on Alexis Spire's analysis[11], Faury also points out that his respondent's criticisms are focused on taxation and redistribution, particularly through welfare benefits. This aspect places racialization back in the context of structural social insecurity and dispossession fueled by social protection itself. This point also gives cause for optimism, as it shows that the most acute forms of distancing are rooted in certain (residual) methods of constructing social protection. Specific social (and

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[8] Bruno Cousin, "Capital social et sociologie des grands cercles mondains", original thesis for qualification to supervise research in France, Université Paris-Saclay, 2022.

[9] Florence Weber, "L'exigence ouvrière d'égalité : mutations et résistances", in Nicolas Duvoux, Cédric Lomba, *Où va la France populaire ?*, La Vie des Idées / Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 2019.

[10] Benoît Coquard, *Ceux qui restent. Faire sa vie dans les campagnes en déclin*, Paris, La Découverte, "L'envers des faits", 2019.

[11] Alexis Spire, *Résistances à l'impôt, attachement à l'État. Enquête sur les contribuables français*, Paris, Seuil, 2018.

therefore political) action can thus be envisaged to mitigate the force of the prejudices that are expressed[12].

Linked to this tension surrounding taxation and the privileged elite, it is worth noting that the purely economic forms of inequality, despite being glaringly obvious, are relatively unchallenged by respondents, except in extreme cases involving the super-rich who flaunt their wealth in the region but, by contrast, legitimize more ordinary forms of economic success. For those surveyed, cultural differences (particularly in terms of education) are the most salient factors shaping their worldview and voting behavior. However, economic resources do matter, and matter greatly, when values are analyzed not in terms of rejection but in terms of positively constructed aspirations. And these aspirations are clearly oriented toward the values of the private sphere of the social elites and the forms of success associated with them. From this perspective, resentment toward (all) small local elites also reflects the strength of a value system in which the economic dimensions of the social hierarchy are both valued and largely inaccessible.

We will conclude this review by highlighting two other possible avenues for further research. The first relates to the advisable cross-referencing of available quantitative and qualitative data. Faury rightly points out that the clinical sociology approach he adopts is not the same as the analysis of variables and their relative weight through the secondary use of surveys or panels. Yet the work of Vincent Tiberj, as well as other barometers and surveys, highlights a steady rise in tolerance towards immigration, with the shift to the right being driven by the political (and media) agenda rather than by structural shifts in public opinion[13]. As with other issues, the interplay between quantitative and qualitative, objective and subjective factors appears to be a major challenge in contributing to an overall analysis that encompasses the various observable and measurable aspects of social reality.

Finally, forms of racialization deriving from the majority group could be linked to minority experiences of racialization, yielding analyses that could be usefully combined with Faury's findings to develop a fully relational approach to the processes involved, examined not only from their source but also in terms of their effects and the ways in which this racialization is appropriated, whether from a sociological[14] or

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[12] Nicolas Duvoux, "Comment l'assistance chasse l'État social", *Idées économiques et sociales*, 2013/1, n°171, pp. 10-17.

[13] Vincent Tiberj, *La droitisation française : mythe et réalités*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2024.

[14] Solène Brun, *Derrière le mythe métis. Enquête sur les couples mixtes et leurs descendants en France*, Paris, La Découverte, 2024.

philosophical[15] perspective. This crossover would particularly welcome given that a set of analytical categories, such as that of dispossession[16], applies to both majority and minority configurations, and could help to explain the intersecting forms of domination that lead to the disintegration of a social order in which public services are in disuse or in retreat[17]. This disintegration is not, however, a disorder or a form of anomie, but rather the reestablishment of an order, albeit an order based on the majority group's unabashed claim to social and racial power.

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[15] Marie Garrau and Mickaëlle Provost, *Expériences vécues du genre et de la race. Pour une phénoménologie critique*, Paris, éditions de la Sorbonne, "Philosophies pratiques", 2022.
[16] Benoît Trépied, "Les jeunes kanaks vivent une forme de dépossession sociale et coloniale", *Médiapart*, May 18, 2024.
[17] Nadège Vezinat, *Le service public empêché*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2024.