Symposium Article

Forecasting the FN presidential vote in 2012

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Abstract   Forecasting the Extreme Right vote in French elections is one of the few 'third-party' forecasts that has attracted attention in a forecasting literature focusing generally on incumbent performance and winners. Despite being a 'hard case' because of third-party status, unstable polling estimates and relatively few data points, previous models have provided relatively strong forecasts of the performance of the *Front National* (FN) and its erstwhile leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen. The recent succession of Le Pen by his daughter, Marine, and her apparent popularity pose a significant challenge to these models, however. In this article, we consider our previous model's prediction of her likely score in the first round of the presidentials, comparing this to standard forecasting benchmarks, and look at possible adjustments to account for the speculated 'Marine effect'. We then compare this with other vote indicators including the results of an experimental expert judgment survey, finding that there is currently little evidence for a likely runaway success for the new FN leader in April 2012.
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Introduction

French forecasting remains one of the few country-cases outside the United States that attracts a significant amount of attention. While the focus is generally on predicting winning candidates in presidential races, and to a lesser extent, the majority winner in the legislative elections, France also offers an excellent opportunity to forecast third-party outcomes, and in particular that of the Extreme Right *Front National* (FN) and its presidential candidate. The

2012 elections are of particular interest in this respect. First, the previously immutable combination of 'Jean-Marie Le Pen in the presidentials, FN in the legislatives' has finally seen a change, with his daughter Marine Le Pen taking over the *présidentiable* mantle. As we discuss later, this does pose a challenge to forecasting the Extreme Right vote in the presidential race, not least because the personality effect is held to be important both for Extreme Right party success and, self-evidently, for presidential candidates.

Second, there is a clear context emerging of possible success for Marine Le Pen in the presidential race, certainly not in terms of attaining the presidency, but undoubtedly in exploiting the *pouvoir de nuisance* on the right, to win back a number of disenchanted hard-right voters who moved to Nicolas Sarkozy and the UMP in 2007, as well as using the more 'approachable' profile of Le Pen *fille* to make inroads into previously unreachable groups, including women and younger voters. A marked bonus in popularity rating over her father indicates a potential for Marine Le Pen in terms of prospective vote that a forecast model might do well to anticipate. However, as we discuss, at some five months from the election, her popularity rating is the only key indicator that points towards any major increase in performance above Jean-Marie Le Pen's own success in 2002.[1] To what extent should we factor this in to any indicative – as opposed to robustly modelled – prediction? Third, this provides the first opportunity for the authors precisely to retest their forecast model for the Extreme Right in the French case in a true *ex ante* setting.

In this article, we suggest a 'two-step' approach, which takes inspiration from previous attempts to move away from some of the constraints imposed on traditional single-equation forecasting models (for example, Nadeau *et al*, 2010). We look to provide a baseline *ex ante* forecast of Marine Le Pen's first-round vote from our model, and then to consider an adjustment procedure that will allow us to account for the change of candidate since the model was last tested. We begin by setting out the logic of forecasting 'hard cases', which informs the first-order model underpinning our forecast. We then look at deriving a second-order election forecast model, to allow us to estimate an observed Marine Le Pen effect in the 2011 cantonal elections, and amend the baseline first-order forecast accordingly. We subsequently consider three other indicators of likely electoral performance – voting intention, popularity polls and an experimental expert estimate benchmark – to compare with the adjusted baseline model forecast. Lastly, we consider possible shocks between now and the actual election that might raise its error. We conclude that, while the decline of the FN in the late 2000s has evidently abated, Marine Le Pen's performance in April 2012 is unlikely to see her soar above the bar set by her father a decade ago.

Forecasting Hard Cases: The 'Shock' of New Leadership

Forecasting models have become widespread in the voting literature, both in *ex post* and quasi *ex ante* format. True *ex ante* models are less widespread because of publishing deadlines and reticence among political scientists about 'putting their money where their mouth is'. Also less common are forecast models that aim to forecast outcomes other than the winner of an election, and their margin of victory. As we review in one such endeavour elsewhere (Evans and Ivaldi, forthcoming), focus is inevitably drawn to the principal outcome of interest in most if not all elections. However, this does not mean that forecasting other outputs from an election, including smaller 'third-party' vote shares, has no academic value (see, for instance, Bélanger *et al*, 2010). On the contrary, forecasting who else does how well puts explanatory models of behaviour in the spotlight, and identifies what really matters in these models.

Such a logic could, in principle, be brought to bear on any political party. Empirically, a lack of datapoints across time generally means that the majority of non-mainstream parties are subject to model instability, which rules out a standard forecasting approach, assuming that this is of conceptual interest. However, of all third parties in European democracies that raise interest in predicting how they will do in elections, parties of the far right stand out.[2] Despite their 40-year history in the post-war period, they still retain a (morbid) fascination for many commentators. This long history is useful for the forecaster, in that it provides more than a small handful of datapoints to support the modelling process. In this regard, the French FN is most amenable to modelling, given its (almost) uninterrupted electoral presence since 1974.

No doubt taking the lead from US literature on the two-party system, much of the forecasting work on France has traditionally adopted a two-bloc approach, with the FN being included as part of the Right bloc (for example, Jérôme *et al*, 1999; Auberger and Dubois, 2005).[3] Other approaches include more advanced multiparty forecasts of all major party groupings within the French party system (Arzheimer and Evans, 2010). Attempts at forecasting the FN score are few, but increasing in number (Jérôme and Jérôme-Speziari, 2003, 2004; Auberger, 2007; Evans and Ivaldi, 2008; for a comparative forecast of Extreme Right parties, also see Evans and Ivaldi, 2010). These various approaches to modelling the FN and its presidential candidate's score have revealed a remarkable accuracy in forecast, despite many analyses of Extreme Right parties pointing out their problematic nature in terms of definition, ideological profile and varying pools of support. In fact, whether at national or regional level, a small number of predictors perform well and bypass the complexities set out by many rich explanatory theories of Extreme Right support (for example, Lubbers *et al*, 2002; Ivarsflaten, 2005).

The 2012 race throws a new obstacle in our way. After nearly 40 years of leading the FN, Jean-Marie Le Pen has retired to make way for his daughter Marine. Leadership successions inevitably focus attention on the likely value-added or -subtracted that the new *chef* attracts; however, specifically for forecast models, the change of leader introduces a shock, which one must assume may affect the stability of the previous model. This is all the more true of an Extreme Right party for whom the personality effect of a charismatic candidate is held to be fundamental to the party's chances (Pedahzur and Brichta, 2002).[4] The Le Pen effect has been well documented in previous analyses of FN support (Perrineau, 1998; Mayer, 2002), but had largely been perceived to have diminished subsequent to the presidential second-round of 2002. The accession of Marine Le Pen to the FN presidency has incontestably inaugurated a new political era for the French extreme right. All available indicators point to the political dynamics initiated by the new party leadership, leading to brighter prospects for what is anticipated by many observers to be a 'Marine blue wave' in the 2012 presidential election.

Certainly, the second-order elections held since her assumption of the FN's presidency indicate an electoral revival. After navigating shallower electoral waters between 2007 and 2009, the party regained strength in the 2010 regional and 2011 cantonal elections by polling 11.4 and 15.1 per cent of the national vote, respectively. In March 2011, the success of the FN in the cantonal ballot was largely attributed to the rejuvenating 'Marine' effect. This new political 'franchise' dominated the party's campaign strategy and eventually allowed patently inexperienced local candidates to achieve record scores across the country, up to an average of 19.2 per cent in the cantons where the FN was standing.[5] A quick glance at popularity data curves shows that Marine Le Pen has been consistently enjoying higher levels of popular support compared with her father, with difference ratios of 1.6 (SOFRES), 1.4 (IFOP) and 1.2 (IPSOS) (see Figure 1 below). Her personal popularity has reached historic highs since her taking over the party in January 2011, and is also consistently above that of her party (with an average difference of 5.8 points in the TNS-SOFRES political barometer over the 2010/2011 period of time).

This surge in popularity is corroborated by the exceptionally high level of support that the new FN leader has gained in earlier voting intentions polls. In March 2011, a number of polls brought back memories of 21 April 2002, finding that the FN candidate could lead in the first round of the 2012 presidential election with up to 24 per cent of the vote. In sharp contrast, let us recall that the highest polling score ever recorded for Jean-Marie Le Pen ahead of the 2002 'earthquake' was only 14 per cent. We return to current polling scores later.

Such an effect is clearly the product of the strategic move towards the modernization of the FN. The search for credibility and 'normalization' – in
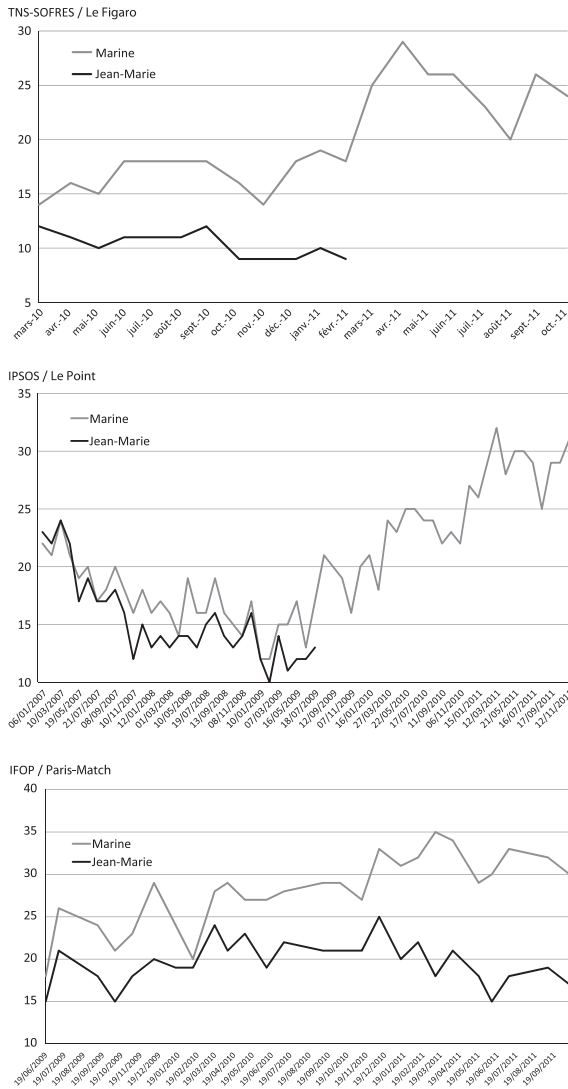
Figure 1: Compared popularity data: Jean-Marie and Marine Le Pen (2007–2011)
TNS-SOFRES/*Le Figaro*
Question: 'Pour chacune des personnalités suivantes, voulez-vous me dire si vous souhaitez lui voir jouer un rôle important au cours des mois et des années à venir ?' (% réponses 'oui')
IPSOS/*Le Point*
Question: 'Quel jugement portez-vous sur l'action des personnalités politiques suivantes ?' (% réponses 'très' et 'plutôt favorable')
IFOP/*Paris-Match*
Question: ' Pour chacune des personnalités suivantes, dites-moi si vous en avez une excellente opinion, une bonne opinion, une mauvaise opinion, une très mauvaise opinion ou si vous ne la connaissez pas suffisamment ?' (% réponses 'excellente' et 'bonne opinion').

the party's own words *dédiabolisation* – was initiated in the 2007 presidential election after Marine Le Pen was appointed campaign director, and was further accentuated after she took over the party in 2011. The new FN leadership has since striven to present a more respectable face for the party by breaking away from some of the more controversial positions taken by Jean-Marie Le Pen in the past, as well as his often inflammatory, demagogic style. This evolution in the public image of the party has been complemented by some important changes in its policy positions under the leadership of Marine Le Pen. The new economic manifesto of the FN is marked by a distinct shift to the left, towards a more statist – quasi *Colbertist* – approach to social protectionism embedded in the more general anti-globalization doctrine that had already emerged in the 2002 presidential platform. Together with slightly more nuanced positions on some cultural issues – most notably abortion – these changes seem likely to alter the sociological basis of the FN by broadening its appeal to a wider constituency beyond the traditional boundaries of its petty-bourgeois and working-class electorate, and building on the public perception of the new party leader as more 'moderate' and politically acceptable. Already polling data reveal that Marine Le Pen could be in a position to attract social groups that have been traditionally more averse to supporting the French extreme right, particularly young voters, women or the lower strata within the middle-class electorate.

Lastly, some of the alterations that will take place in the pattern of party competition in the 2012 presidential election might further account for a boost in popular support for the FN. In particular, the changing status of Nicolas Sarkozy from candidate of *rupture* and uncontested leader of the 'self-confident' right to that of highly unpopular incumbent could fuel voters' resentment and bolster the FN vote. That a number of former UMP supporters might defect to the extreme right in the forthcoming presidential ballot is evidenced by opinion polls showing possible shifts of about 15–20 per cent of those who voted for Sarkozy in 2007. The magnitude of the electoral transfers to take place in 2012 will depend on the incumbent president's ability to salvage credibility as a national leader and the UMP's capacity to sustain its hard line on immigration and crime, while both need to disparage FN credibility in dealing effectively with the debt crisis and all related economic issues.

Unfortunately, the 'Marine effect' cannot easily be introduced into a structural model with no previous cases. We first need to run our baseline model to look at what it predicts the presidential candidate's performance to be. Then, we need to model the one election where Marine Le Pen was in charge – the cantonal elections of 2011 – to estimate what change occurred in outcome from previous second-order elections that can be attributed to the leader, and adjust our baseline model accordingly. To this end, this article

adopts a 'two-step' approach which combines two different sets of forecasts, with one baseline equation for all first-order elections since 1974 and another adjustment model derived from all second-order ballots since 1984. In the following section, we focus on the structural baseline first-order model itself.

A Baseline Structural Model of the Le Pen Vote in First-Order Elections

On the basis of our previous comparative work on predicting the radical right vote in Europe, the 2012 FN presidential forecast in this article is derived from a macro-structural model that was successfully tested in comparative context with Austria, Denmark, Norway and France, and specifically for all first-order elections in France over the 1974–2007 period (Evans and Ivaldi, 2010). This baseline model combines three relevant dimensions – economic, cultural and political – which are central to the understanding of the electoral dynamics of the FN. This application of our comparative model to the French case represented a significant improvement on our previous attempt to forecast the FN vote in all nationwide elections – including regional and European ballots – using short-term popularity data (Evans and Ivaldi, 2008).

An important premise of the model stems from the original proposition by Kitschelt and McGann (1995) that the electoral success of the new radical right should be understood in a two-dimensional space for political competition. In their view, a new libertarian-authoritarian 'cultural' cleavage crosscut the traditional economic (left–right) axis, with radical right parties standing in the right-authoritarian quadrant. These two dimensions are operationalized by looking at the key issues of immigration and unemployment. Together with crime, these have been identified as the bedrock of electoral support for the FN in France since the mid-1980s (Perrineau, 1998; Mayer, 2002), and still form the core of the programmatic appeal by the party in the 2012 presidential ballot.

Second, the model controls for the type of electoral race to account for the differentiation that exists in the FN between the party and its leader. Since the mid-1980s, this personality effect has translated into a significant increase in the vote for Le Pen in presidential elections compared with the performances of his party elsewhere. This can be linked with the general argument on the role of charismatic leaders in the political success of radical right parties in Europe. It also relates to the populist dimension underpinning their electoral appeal (Betz, 1994; Mudde, 2007). Radical right parties fuel public resentment towards the political elite and in return mobilize voters dissatisfied with politics. In the French context, Le Pen's strong leadership has attracted protest voters from outside the core ideological support for the party, most dramatically in presidential elections where candidate-centred considerations are paramount.

The baseline model is a simple linear regression predicting *ex post* the national percentage of valid vote for the FN in all first-order elections (presidential and legislative) between 1974 and 2007 ($n = 13$). Our dependent variable is the individual FN score. We ignore a number of small splinter and/ or competing parties on the extreme right such as the PFN in the later 1970s or, more recently, Mégret's *Mouvement national républicain* (MNR), Lang's *Parti de la France* (PDF) or the Bloc Identitaire (BI)/Ligue du Sud, which have never achieved electoral relevance at national level.

We employ three variables that are relevant to the examination of the economic, cultural and political factors discussed above. First, economic conditions are tapped by looking at the unemployment rate 6 months in advance of the election.[6] Second, for the cultural dimension, we look at immigration and measure the change in the total numbers of immigrants legally admitted into France in the year immediately preceding the election.[7] This not only provides information about immigration flows, but can also be regarded as an appropriate proxy for the 'restrictiveness' of governments' immigration policies over time. Finally, to operationalize the political dimension, an 'election type' dummy variable is used, with presidential ballots coded 1.

Parameter estimates for the OLS regression are presented in Table 1, together with robust standard errors.[8] As can be seen, the model works very well with a mean absolute error (MAE) of only 1.34 over the 1974–2007 period.[9] The direction of effect for the individual parameters corresponds to the theoretical expectation, with electoral support for the FN growing with unemployment and immigration.[10] The model confirms Kitschelt and McGann's (1995) view of the FN as the ideal-type of the new radical right in Europe, drawing upon both unemployment and immigration issues for electoral support. Equally, an apparent 'presidential boost' can be established from the data, with stronger performances for Le Pen in presidential ballots – roughly a 4.5 per cent bonus above his party's support in legislative elections.

As a linear forecast model based on socio-economic indicators, there is one important implication of the model. The party's vote increases in line with a degradation of employment and increase in immigration. To date, unemployment change remains relatively bounded in its annual changes. Moreover, it is unlikely that any government of whatever political flavour will open France's borders to mass immigration. Consequently, the model implies some kind of 'ceiling' effect to the FN's support. Conversely, were FN support to increase substantially, this implies that the model is badly specified, either in terms of function – the relationship is not linear, for instance – or in terms of being wrongly or under-specified – other factors matter, or may come to matter more.

Table 1: Baseline regression model of FN voting in first-order elections (1974–2007)[a]

	B	SE	VIF
Constant	−11.74	1.61	
Presidential[b]	4.56	0.59	1.01
Δ Immigration	0.12	0.01	1.08
Unemployment	2.15	0.14	1.09
Adjusted R^2		0.95	
SE		1.35	
MAE		1.34	
N		13	

[a]as per cent of valid vote cast.
[b]Dummy variable: presidential = 1, legislative = 0.

We return to under-specification, and the possibility of a Marine Le Pen 'effect' above and beyond that manifested in the baseline model, shortly. First, how to assess the strength of the forecast model so far? In single-country forecasts, model quality can be assessed across four main components: reproducibility, lead time, parsimony and, ultimately, accuracy (Lewis-Beck, 1985). Empirically, the data used in the model allow for its replication over time, although there might be some minor concern with changes that occur in the collection of immigration statistics by official bodies in the future, thereby lowering reproducibility. Second, the lags used for the independent variables in the model make it possible to issue a forecast a few months ahead of the election. In this, our model enjoys a substantial advantage in lead time over predictions based on short-term polling data – for example, incumbent and/or opposition popularity. With only three predictors and a healthy error term, our model equally seems to fit the bill for parsimony. A more systematic evaluation can be conducted with goodness-of-fit diagnostic measures such as the Akaike Information Criterion and its variants. With just three variables included, however, these measures vary in line with forecast error, improving with the inclusion of each predictor.[11]

Finally, Table 2 addresses accuracy. Overall, the model provides excellent *ex post* forecasts of FN performance in first-order elections. Since 1981, out-of-sample error has never risen above 2 per cent, and only above 1.5 per cent on two occasions – the 2002 presidentials, where Jean-Marie Le Pen out-performed almost every poll and forecast; and the 2007 legislatives, where his relatively poor showing in the presidentials hamstrung his party 1 month later. As a stable forecast model, then, the model performs well.

Nevertheless, we can use other means of evaluating the accuracy of our forecasting model relative to other benchmarks. The low absolute error is indicative of a strong model. However, with even a parsimonious model, it

Table 2: Individual FN vote prediction errors ($\hat{\varepsilon}$) and out-of-sample errors

Year	Type[a]	$\hat{\varepsilon}$	Out-of-sample error
1974	P	0.17	0.43
1978	L	2.04	3.23
1981	L	−2.08	−2.64
1986	L	1.05	1.30
1988	P	−1.09	−1.44
1988	L	−1.04	−1.22
1993	L	0.98	1.17
1995	P	0.34	0.72
1997	L	0.80	1.05
2002	P	0.87	1.67
2002	L	−0.30	−0.53
2007	P	−0.29	−0.38
2007	L	−1.44	−1.71

[a]P = Presidential, L = Legislative.

is worthwhile comparing this with standard benchmarks to check that the inclusion of exogenous predictors provide sufficient value-added to be worthwhile. Overall, the latter outperforms random models constructed using past performances either at $t-1$ (walk) or averaging all preceding electoral ballots (mean). Such naïve endogenous models would fail to accurately predict the variation in the support for the FN across the whole period (MAEs of 4.56 and 4.47, respectively). Similarly, our model can be contrasted with trial-heat polls that are conducted before the election (Campbell, 1996; Pickup and Johnston, 2008). Comparing the model's ex-post adjusted predicted values (out-of-sample) with the average of voting intention polls released for the 2002 and 2007 presidential elections showed that the model estimates were closer to the actual election outcome on both occasions (Evans and Ivaldi, 2010, pp. 91–92).

On the basis of the model's parameters and the unemployment and immigration data available, we can derive *ex ante* forecasts for the 2012 presidential and subsequent legislative elections. It is worth noting that the structural building of the model should in theory make it possible to issue forecasts 4 months in advance of the electoral races, taking into account delays that occur before government statistics are made available to the public and independent of the final shape of political competition. There is still of course a risk of overlooking possible late campaign effects. At the time of writing, an additional limitation is imposed by the fact that neither the 2011 nor 2010 immigration data have yet been released by the Ministry,[12] which forces us to use as sole reliable data the 2010 figures presented in the latest Annual Activity report by Office Français de l'Immigration et de

l'Intégration (OFII). This absence of official immigration statistics for the year preceding the election limits our ability to produce a true unconditional forecast for 2012. It will also inevitably affect the accuracy of the forecasts, recalling that a 10 per cent change in immigration yields a 1.2 per cent increase in the anticipated FN/Le Pen vote according to the model. This said, a glance at influxes of foreigners since 2003 shows no discernible trend and, more importantly, little variation in numbers of immigrants admitted into France from one year to the next, within a $-9.8/+8.8$ per cent range. Moreover, the recent passing of the Bill on 'Immigration, Integration and Nationality' (Law 2011-672) was testimony to the government's commitment to the continuation of hard-line restrictive immigration policies. While the final 2011 figure will inevitably differ somewhat from that employed here, we can therefore be reasonably optimistic in assuming that the observed discrepancy will remain of limited amplitude.

With an unemployment rate of 10 per cent and a percentage change of 6.8 per cent in recorded entries of legal immigrants in France during 2010, under a 'same leader' hypothesis, our baseline first-order model predicts that the FN candidate will poll 15.2 per cent of the valid vote in the first round of the presidential.

Whatever the internal validity of the model, there is no escaping the fact that our model provides a very conservative estimate of Marine Le Pen's likely performance, given many of the qualitative and although speculative commentaries on her performance as party leader, and the suggestive polling data. A good forecast model should stand on its own terms and, if robust, be more convincing than intuitive accounts of likely performance. Equally, however, the model is badly specified inasmuch as it does not control for a change of leader. We therefore feel it is entirely appropriate to look to adjust the model estimate on the basis of additional information, as well as comparing any adjustment with other potential forecasts.

An Adjustment Model for Second-Order Elections: Finding the 'Marine Effect'

To estimate the possible effect of Marine Le Pen as national party leader or presidential candidate, we cannot conjure up cases for our model that have not yet occurred. The only election at which she has actually led the party is the cantonal election of March 2011. Inasmuch as this provides our only empirical case, one approach is to try to model *second*-order elections, to see how out of line a prediction of these 2011 elections is compared with an otherwise well-specified model, which predicts party performance under Jean-Marie Le Pen's leadership.

Such a second-order model is relatively easily derived. Unlike the first-order model, we base this model on the core popularity model (Lewis-Beck and Tien, 2010). Given our concern is to find an *ex post* indicator of the effect of Marine Le Pen's own vote premium, we are not concerned by issues of lead-time or explanatory independence. Instead, we exploit the relative stability of sub-national election performance by building in an endogenous predictor, that is, FN vote at the previous election of the same type, as well as what would in a 'pure' forecast model be regarded as a trivial popularity estimator, namely the last poll before the sub-national elections (normally 2–3 weeks before). Given the importance of timing of sub-national elections in the electoral cycle (Schmitt, 2005) and their consequent shifting role as protest elections – clearly important in the FN case – we include a third predictor, namely the percentage of time elapsed within the first-order election cycle.[13] Lastly, we include simple dummy controls for regional and European elections to control for election type effects. Overall, rather than looking at causally relevant socio-economic variables as predictors, we are simply looking to pick up as much aggregate variance across a variety of contexts in sub-national units as possible.

As Table 3 shows, the second-order model is accurate and not entirely unparsimonious ($k = 5$, $n = 19$). Moreover, even though we are interested in the model simply in terms of predictive fit, all parameters make sense in explanatory terms, being in the right direction and fitting a general 'protest vote' model.

Table 3: Regression model of FN voting in second-order elections (1984–2011)

	B	SE	VIF
Constant	−8.95	1.57	
per cent vote FN in previous election[a]	0.36	0.08	1.33
FN popularity[b]	1.38	0.13	1.04
per cent time elapsed in first-order cycle	0.02	0.01	1.04
Regional election[c]	1.05	0.68	1.50
European election[c]	−1.22	0.58	1.18
Adjusted R^2		0.87	
SE		1.24	
MAE		1.31	
N		19	

[a]Election of the same 'type', excluding all first regional (1986), European (1979) and cantonal (1982) ballots; all election scores as per cent of valid vote cast.
[b]TNS-SOFRES series, last survey conducted before election day. FN popularity was not measured before the 1984 European election.
[c]Dummy variable.

Table 4: Individual FN vote prediction errors ($\hat{\varepsilon}$) and out-of-sample errors

Year	Type[a]	$\hat{\varepsilon}$	Out-of-sample error
1984	E	1.83	2.90
1985	C	−1.48	−2.30
1988	C	−1.11	−1.92
1989	E	−1.75	−2.71
1992	R	−0.16	−0.27
1992	C	−0.09	−0.13
1994	C	1.42	1.73
1994	E	−0.54	−0.71
1998	R	1.17	1.81
1998	C	1.27	1.78
1999	E	0.19	0.31
2001	C	−0.32	−0.51
2004	R	−0.07	−0.10
2004	C	−1.09	−1.49
2004	E	0.56	0.69
2008	C	−0.06	−0.10
2009	E	−.28	−0.38
2010	R	−0.94	−1.34
2011	C	1.47	2.16

[a]R = Regional, E = European and C = Cantonal.

Looking at the predicted scores (Table 4), the model performs quite well from 1998 onwards.[14] The model would have accurately forecast the low-tide FN score in the cantonal ballot of 2001 following the MNR split of 1999, as well as that of 2008 ballot subsequent to the disastrous showing of the party in the 2007 national elections. Interestingly, the model would have still overestimated the 2004 cantonals at a time when the 'Sarkozy effect' was apparently beginning to progressively attract voters away from the extreme right. In contrast, the extreme right performance in the recent 2011 cantonal ballot would have been underestimated, precisely the model's worst forecast since the late 1990s. Assuming the model tells us what should have happened had Jean-Marie Le Pen still been in charge in 2011, other things being equal, it is likely then that the FN received a small electoral boost from its new leader. From the out-of-sample error, the size of this 'leadership premium' can be estimated at about 2.2 per cent, corresponding to the error that would have occurred in predicting the 2011 score on the basis of all previous second-order elections since the mid-1980s under the 'same leader' hypothesis.

In passing, we would also note the important *explanatory* (rather than predictive) finding that the observed variance in the FN electoral performances shows the dissimilar political opportunity structures that exist

between first- and second-order elections in France. This is true, for instance, of changes that take place in the European election party system, with single-issue parties temporarily entering the European electoral arena. The negative sign of the 'European election' dummy variable in the model points to a deterioration of the FN score in European ballots, which in part can be regarded as a result of the competition with other Eurosceptic actors on the right of the political spectrum (for example, Pasqua's *Rassemblement pour la France* (RPF) or De Villiers' *Mouvement pour la France* (MPF). Similarly, the analysis of model performances should take into account changes in the organizational structure of the party, more specifically the splits between rival factions that have been historically endemic within the French Extreme Right. As can be seen from Table 4, the model would have indeed accurately anticipated the drop in electoral support for the FN, which occurred in the 1999 European and 2001 cantonal elections as a consequence of the forming of rival MNR by Bruno Mégret. Since the latter's 'retirement' from politics in 2008, the Extreme Right vote has returned to the quasi-exclusivity of the FN, with only minor challengers such as the BI or the PDF. Beside the personality effect, some of Marine Le Pen's bonus could well be because of her capacity to bring in MNR voters from the cold.[15]

Of course, in adjusting our first-order model on the basis of this second-order test, there is one large assumption: that cantonal and presidential performance will be similar, even given the focus of the latter on the individual. In a period when Marine Le Pen's leadership 'honeymoon' seems to be over, and where her polling scores are some 6–7 per cent lower than at the time of the cantonals, we feel that a conservative estimate towards parity between the two admittedly very different elections is reasonable. If we were to adjust our first-order forecast of Marine Le Pen's performance in April 2012 on the basis of these data, we would therefore estimate her score at 17.4 per cent.

Complementary Forecasts of Le Pen Vote in 2012

An additional way of assessing likely forecast accuracy is to compare the model prediction with that of other forecast modes. Here we use three: voting intention; popularity ratings; and expert judgement. The first two are standard indicators used by a range of commentators in advance of elections to provide not just final predictions, but also indicators of the dynamics of the campaign. The expert judgement indicator, while common in work looking in particular at policy positions of political parties (for example, Huber and Inglehart, 1995; Benoit and Laver, 2006; McElroy and Benoit, 2010), is much less frequent in the recent forecasting literature, although it was famously tested relatively recently (Hofstee and Schaapman, 1990). We consider the three complementary measures in turn.[16]

a) Voting intention

In the year that preceded her taking control of the party, Marine Le Pen received a relatively low average of 12.5 per cent in the polls ($n = 18$). The change in FN leadership has witnessed a dual revival, both in Marine Le Pen's own popularity scores and in the vote intentions in the presidential race, peaking at some 24 per cent around the time of the cantonal elections of March 2011 (Harris poll, 6 March 2011). Figure 2 gives the spread of voting intentions by the main polling houses from January 2011 until the most recent polls. At first glance, there seems to be little pattern in the polls, other than 'house effects' for each polling institute. A moving average fit to the data indicates a downward trend after the cantonal elections of March 2011, followed by an upswing in early November 2011, averaging 16.9 per cent across the most recent polls at the time of writing.[17]

One important question to ask is the validity of vote intentions some five months before the election – and we would answer 'not very'. With regard, in particular, to the FN presidential performances of the past, other causes of instability in forecasting Jean-Marie Le Pen's vote were under-sampling, the 'spiral of silence', and polling institutes' own attempts to correct their poll scores for this. We do not know the extent to which these multiple sources of error still apply. The discrepancies in the current range of scores found across major sources of vote intentions seem to indicate that pollsters are still
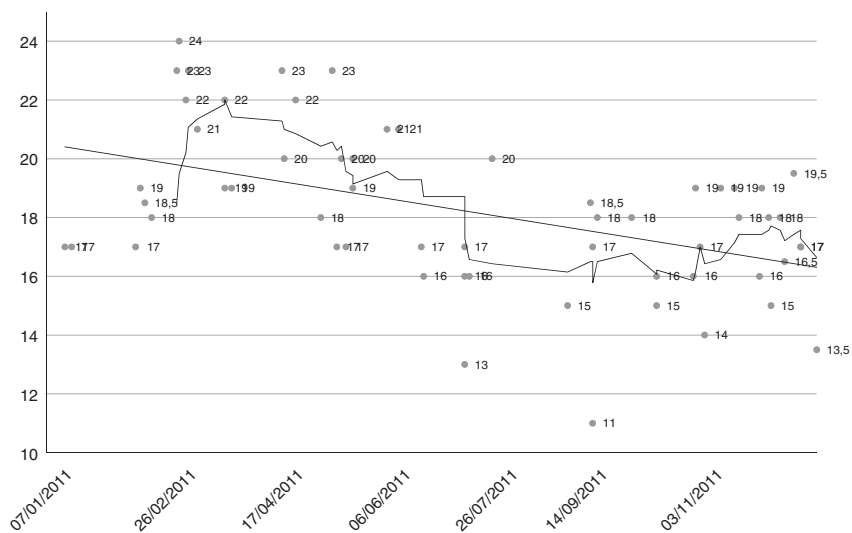

Figure 2: Voting Intention Polls for Marine Le Pen 2012 (All pollsters): January–December 2011
Note: last updated on 12 December 2011.

confronted with the necessity to derive their own *ad hoc* correcting factors. Yet there is a consensus among institutes to acknowledge the fact that FN supporters are now keener to express their 'true preferences' in surveys.[18] If established, this normalization of the extreme right vote could lead to a substantial improvement in the predictive accuracy of trial-heat polls in 2012 and beyond.

b) Popularity rating

As part of the VP-function literature and the so-called 'referendum model' using government popularity as an indicator (Lewis-Beck and Tien, 2010), popularity measures in opinion polls provide a useful indicator of a candidate or party's standing with the general public before the election. In the case of Jean-Marie Le Pen and the FN, historically, popularity scores have, however, proved poor indicators of eventual vote in the first-order elections (Evans and Ivaldi, 2008, p. 142).

Looking first at the IPSOS time-series popularity for the FN leader in 2002, 2007 and 2012, there is no evidence of a clear trend in Jean-Marie Le Pen's scores before the first two elections (Figure 3). In 2007, his popularity was in fact *higher* during most of the 2007 campaign compared with what it was in 2002. Moreover, in the last week before the election, he had the exact same
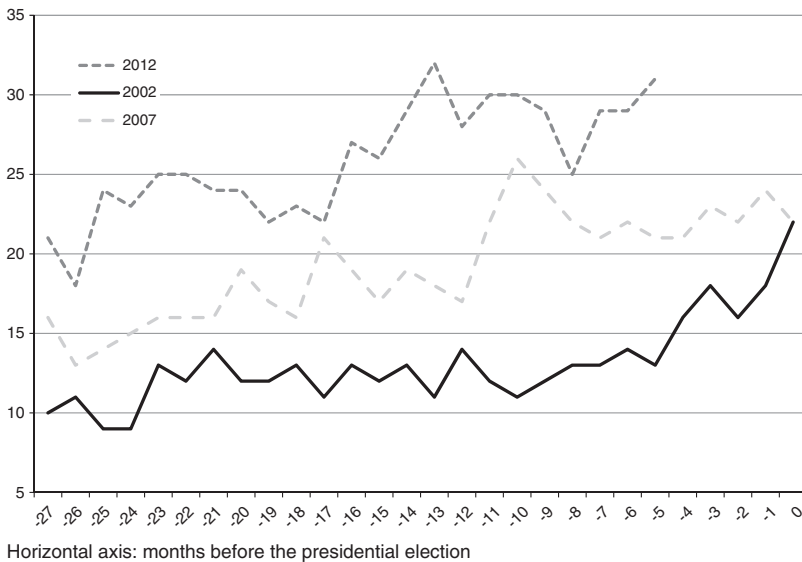

Horizontal axis: months before the presidential election

Figure 3: Compared FN leader popularity ratings in the 2002, 2007 and 2012 presidential elections
Source: IPSOS-Le Point Barometer.

score (22 per cent), yet he polled only 10.4 per cent in 2007 as opposed to 16.9 per cent five years earlier. Today, six months before the election, Marine's popularity is twice that of her father back in 2002 and about 10 per cent higher than 2007. With no comparable election to assess the popularity/vote ratio – even if one exists – it is of no help in trying to derive a reasonable forecast.

A similar conclusion would apply to the IFOP-Paris Match barometer: in March 2007, a few weeks before the first-round of the presidential election, Jean-Marie Le Pen had a surge in popularity ($+6$) with 31 per cent of positive ratings (which was to persist into April 2007), one of his best scores since the survey started in 2003. In November 2011, the comparable figure for Marine Le Pen is 30. Again, we have no way of knowing how popularity will translate into vote.

Finally, we can look more systematically at the *longue durée* using the TNS-SOFRES series back to the mid-1980s. Figure 4 uses all first-order elections since 1986 ($n = 13$) to look at party and leader popularity against actual vote. Again, the results are similar, with no evidence of any relationship between the two, either for party or leader.

Overall, then, as with the voting intention figures, there is a wide disparity in popularity by polling house. Unlike voting intention, or indeed our adjusted model and particularly second-order elections, where precisely popularity data have shown a link with electoral performance, we lack an empirically proven 'equation' to link current popularity scores to final vote. The most we can say from this is that Marine Le Pen's popularity is markedly higher than current expressed voting intentions.

c) Expert judgement

Our final approach to estimating Marine Le Pen's likely score in 2012 is to operationalise expert academic knowledge into a predictive indicator. The value of expert surveys for election forecasts has been examined in the context of American presidential elections (Jones *et al*, 2007; Graefe *et al*, 2011), but to date, to the best of our knowledge, no comparable experiment has been conducted in France. Colloquially, experts should 'know' what the likely outcome of an election will be. It is unlikely that any one expert can give an accurate forecast with any degree of certainty, but averaging across a number of expert opinions should, other things being equal, give a useful forecast of the likely outcome. In early November 2011, we contacted 100 experts on French electoral politics or comparative radical right parties, and asked them to provide (anonymously) their own estimate for Le Pen.[19] We closed the poll on 16 November 2011 and achieved a final response rate of over 50 per cent with a total of 56 participating experts. The results are given below (Table 5).
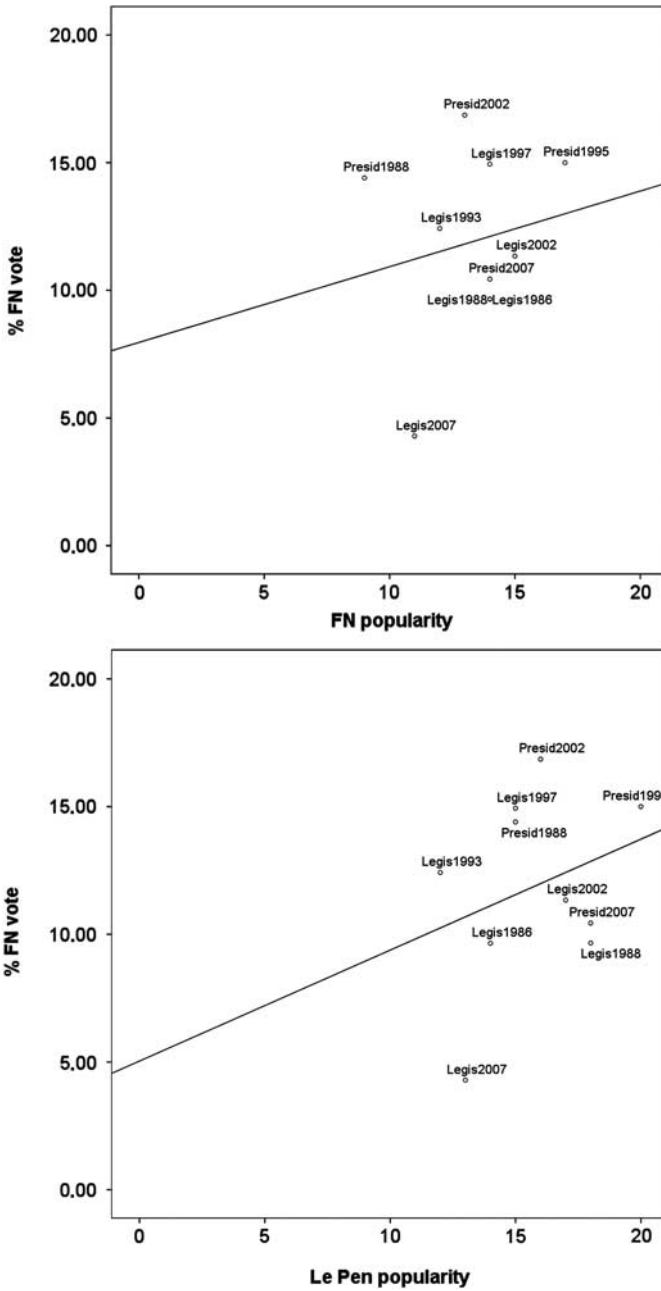
Figure 4: TNS-SOFRES party and leader popularity scores.

Table 5: Results from the expert judgement survey (November 2011)

Estimated per cent score of Marine Le Pen in the first round of the 2012 presidential election	
Mean	17.06
Standard deviation	3.59
Quartiles	
Q1	15
Q2	17
Q3	18
Minimum	10
Maximum	30
N	56

First, the range of predictions is very large. Our expectation that experts would provide a clustered set of forecasts was wide of the mark. Inevitably, there may be an element of wishful thinking/pessimism introducing bias into the forecasts, resulting in a range of 20 per cent. However, by taking the mean position across a relatively healthy number of responses, we would produce an estimated 17.06 per cent for Marine Le Pen in the first round of the 2012 presidential election, with an interquartile range of 3 per cent. In terms of expert judgement, this suggests that some of the highest voting intention polls are overly optimistic, but agrees almost exactly with that of our adjusted structural model. Moreover, the significant minority of predictions above 20 per cent – which would constitute an outstanding performance for the FN candidate – seem to suggest that the popularity polls promise an as-yet untapped pool of electoral support which will 'convert' to vote intention between now and April. However, the majority of responses fall within the 15–18 per cent band, suggesting once again that the 'Marine blue wave' is perhaps a breaker, but not tidal.

Discussion and Conclusion

Forecasting Presidential elections is principally about 'who wins'. Other articles in this special issue deal with this issue admirably. However, a close second to this topic is how well the new Extreme Right presidential candidate will do. Given the narrative of Marine Le Pen's 'softer', more acceptable image and a political context of economic crisis, unpopular mainstream leaders and generalised disenchantment, the received wisdom that she will outperform her father's score of 2002 is in many ways compelling. However, as we have seen above, three of our four indicators currently place her result well under the 19 per cent of the combined Extreme Right score in 2002, and only just

over Jean-Marie Le Pen's score of the same year. Our adjusted structural model predicts a performance of around 17 per cent, as does the expert judgement and the average voting intention. Popularity polling places her much higher, and there is of course the possibility that this represents a tappable pool of additional voters. However, liking a candidate, or finding them to have a positive image, does not equate to voting for them. With a forecast literature which has identified the 6-month margin as the optimal lag for models (Lewis-Beck and Rice, 1992), we would expect to see such popularity also manifest itself in a more overt vote indicator if this conversion were likely to happen. To date, it has not consistently done so.

Conversely, we are of course *only* at five months' distance from the election, whatever the forecast literature states, and with a highly unstable economic situation that could make or break candidates who need to offer policy solutions, as well as an incumbent who needs to provide convincing executive action until the election itself. President Sarkozy's management of the Cannes G20 summit received relatively positive assessments, and certainly his own poll ratings and vote intentions improved from what was a parlous situation only one month previously. Conversely, the unveiling of changes to European treaties in order to settle the Eurozone crisis might revive the Eurosceptic forces that had prevailed in the 2005 ECT referendum in France, which could well benefit the strong anti-Euro campaign led by the FN.

Another source of variation in the predictive accuracy of all current forecasts of Marine Le Pen's performance will of course be turnout. The accumulated experience of the two presidential ballots of 2002 and 2007 has shown that changes in the FN electoral support are likely to be amplified by levels of popular abstention. In 2012, the FN candidate would probably benefit from the decision by large numbers of dissatisfied former Sarkozy's supporters of 2007 to express their discontent through abstention. She would also benefit further from the immigration issue, should the eventual release of the official figures, and the consequent amendment of the model to an unconditional, but *ex post*, forecast version, prove to be higher than our included estimate. Our model has relied throughout on official figures, however, and thus it would be inappropriate to start factoring in any public perceptions of immigration potentially influenced by Marine Le Pen's statements about immigration levels. We acknowledge that risk, nonetheless.

Given the primacy of presidential elections, particularly since the alignments of the presidential and legislative electoral calendars and the imposition of the *quinquennat*, the actual outcome of the FN candidate's presidential first round is a *sine qua non* for predicting the legislative elections. Experience shows that even strong first-round performances were not matched by the party itself in subsequent legislatives – and poor first-round performances ravaged the FN's scores. While the personality 'bonus' can be legitimately factored in for

a presidential forecast, its strict applicability to legislative elections is more debatable. As suggested earlier, the outcome of the cantonal elections of March 2011 has helped establish the positive impact of the new 'Marine franchise' inside the party, with local candidates clearly benefiting from the popularity of their newly elected leader. This personalization process could therefore be expected to replicate in the June 2012 legislative race. However, our working hypothesis here is that a likely disappointing showing by Marine Le Pen in the first round of the presidential race – mostly her inability to disrupt the announced Hollande/Sarkozy left–right swordfight – will result in the relative waning, if not disappearing of her personality effect. On the basis of the first-order model parameters, our unadjusted estimate of the FN score in the legislative ballot of June 2012 is therefore 10.7 per cent.

Lastly, polls of *second* round intentions – where Marine Le Pen's voters will go, assuming she does not progress to the *ballotage* herself – indicated in December 2011 a close-to-equal split between François Hollande and Nicolas Sarkozy of those who indicated they would vote at all.[20] Le Pen evidently enjoys support from both camps, in a manner reminiscent of the 'winning formula'. At the point of writing, however, there is a good deal of congruence between three key indicators. Our model concurs with the empirical information – as opposed to informed speculation – which we can currently access. Marine Le Pen will likely score 17.4 per cent of the valid vote in April 2012.

Notes

1 Voting intention indicators averaged 16.9 per cent in mid-December 2011, very similar to her father's performance in 2002, but short of the combined 19.2 per cent scored by Le Pen and Bruno Mégret.

2 We are, of course, aware that in a number of cases, these third parties have in fact joined coalition governments, or polled among the highest vote shares – for example, the Austrian FPÖ and the Norwegian FrP.

3 Auberger and Dubois control for separate FN effect on Right-wing seats won using a control variable for *triangulaires* in their model.

4 See, however, van der Brug and Mughan (2007) who find a diminished role for the 'charismatic leader' argument.

5 Some caution should be exercised in comparing the 2011 performance with the electoral showings of the FN in previous cantonal ballots. First, it must be noted that the FN only ran candidates in about 74 per cent of all renewable cantons, as opposed to over 90 per cent in the past. In 2011, these were not randomly selected, but rather 'safe bet' cantons where the party had polled its best scores in 2007. Second, the high level of abstention in the 2011 cantonals (55 per cent compared with about 30–35 per cent previously) might have artificially inflated the FN score.

6 Standardised seasonally adjusted figures for unemployment rates are expressed as a percentage of the civilian labour force according to the common criteria in the International Labour Organization (ILO) definition. Since November 2007, these are compiled quarterly

from the results of the Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques (INSEE) Employment Survey. Their definition differs from that used in the monthly unemployment statistics published by DARES (Ministry of Labour). At the time of writing, official figures show unemployment levels rising in the third quarter of 2011 at 9.8 per cent. However, the latest national statistics published in early December show signs of further deterioration in the labour market in October. Therefore, assuming the psychological impact from media coverage of unemployment, we use the European commission forecast of a 10 per cent rate in 2012, which, in our opinion, better reflects the current aggravation (ec.europa.eu/economy_finance/eu/forecasts/2011_autumn/fr_en.pdf).

7 Immigration figures were compiled from a number of national and international sources including the OECD, *Organisation internationale pour les migrations* (OIM), the French *Office français de protection des réfugiés et apatrides* (OFPRA), *Direction de la population et des migrations* (DPM) and Ministry of Interior for the post-2002. These exclude all short-term temporary stays by foreigners, students, as well of course as undocumented migrants. Since 2007, some changes have been introduced in the methods employed to collect immigration data from various sources. There are discrepancies between the official statistics published, for instance, by the Ministry of Interior's (formerly Ministry of Immigration and National Identity) SGII-DSED division, and those published by the OFII.

8 We use Huber–White sandwich estimators to correct for heteroscedasticity.

9 The MAE gives the mean error from the out-of-sample forecasts, that is, how well each election case is predicted by the other cases in the set.

10 No evidence of strong cross-correlation between predictors was found, with variance inflation factors (VIF) close to 1 in all three predictors.

11 A full set of goodness-of-fit measures is available from the authors.

12 Clearly, immigration statistics increasingly become extremely sensitive politicized issues. In March 2011, Marine Le Pen has, for instance, presented 'leaked' figures identifying, she claimed, an increase of more than 42 per cent in the immigration rate in 2011 (www.lepoint.fr/fil-info-reuters/marine-le-pen-brandit-ses-chiffres-de-l-immigration-12-03-2011-1305666_240.php). Were this indeed the case, the immigration parameter in the model would give her some 4 per cent more than the official 2010 figure of 6.8 per cent that we used here.

13 On average, the 19 second-order elections considered for the analysis took place near mid-term (41.5 per cent of the national election cycle elapsed) when government popularity usually reaches a nadir. As would be anticipated, a negative correlation was also found between the temporal location of the second-order election and Prime Ministerial popularity as measured in the TNS-SOFRES series since the late 1970s ($r = -0.56$, $p = 0.006$, $n = 19$).

14 It should be noted that testing this model on the first-order elections provided woefully inaccurate forecasts – worse than running the first-order model on the second-order elections. Both of these trials are available from the authors on request.

15 Notably, the new top-level leadership that has emerged from the XIVth party congress in January 2011 has accommodated a number of former *mégrétistes* such as Steeve Briois, Bruno Bilde and Nicolas Bay.

16 Our test is far less robust than Hofstee and Schaapman's, lacking as it does, for instance, any control group. However, we still feel it provides a useful expert benchmark.

17 Specifically: OpinionWay, 18 per cent (24 November 2011); SOFRES, 16.5 per cent (26 November 2011); IFOP, 19.5 per cent (30 November 2011); BVA, 17 per cent (03 December 2011); IPSOS, 17 per cent (03 December 2011) and LH2, 13.5 per cent (10 December 2011).

18 See 'Les électeurs FN sont plus nombreux à assumer leur vote' (*Le Monde*, 19 November 2011).

19 Participating experts were asked the following question: *What is your own estimate, today, of Marine Le Pen's score in the first round of the 2012 Presidential election?*

20 LH2 poll for Yahoo!, 20 November 2011, www.lh2.fr/_upload/ressources/sondages/politique_nationale/lh2yahoointentionsvotepresidentielle201220nov_2011.pdf.

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