



Corso di laurea in Policies and Governance in Europe

Master's thesis

Discursive Nativism and  
ideological continuity of  
far-right parties: the case  
of the French National  
Rally

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## **Discursive Nativism and Ideological Continuity in European Far-Right Parties: The Case of the French National Rally**

### **Abstract:**

The rise of far-right parties in Europe has been extensively studied by scholars in the past years. While the literature has tried to come up with explanations for this relatively recent electoral success, advancing socio-economic or political factors, it has progressively turned its back to the very content of far-right parties' content: the ideology. This thesis aims to contribute to this precious field of study by examining the case of France and the *Rassemblement National*. It seeks to assess whether there has been an ideological change in the nativist ideology of the party since Marine Le Pen took over from her father in 2011. To answer this question, this thesis analyses the party's manifestos from the 2012, 2017 and 2022 presidential elections using discursive nativism, that views nativism not merely as a set of fixed ideas but as a dynamic discourse shaped by context and rhetoric, as a theoretical lens and Critical Discourse Analysis as a methodological tool. Through this analysis, this thesis aims at providing new insights to the understanding of far-right parties in European politics.

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## 1. Introduction

“*You are a social scam. The reality is that you are always protecting the same people*” (Faure, 2024) – Olivier Faure, First secretary of the French Socialist Party speaking about the political program of the French National Rally for the 2024 French legislative elections.

In the past years, Europe saw the surge of far-right political parties. Their popularity and influence have progressively increased, and they are now playing a central role in the political landscape of many if not European countries. The 2024 European elections did not fall short of this trend, witnessing historically high scores of far-right parties in many European countries. Comparing these parties across Europe is a very complicated task that requires caution and close attention to cross-national differences. In France, the results of the European elections led President Emmanuel Macron, to dissolve the *Assemblée Nationale* (the French Parliament) for only the sixth time in the history of the French Fifth Republic, and the first time since President Jacques Chirac did it in 1997. The repercussions of the 2024 European elections were significant, as French citizens were called back to the polls to elect their national representatives. At the night of the first round, the *Rassemblement National* (National Rally, RN) formerly called *Front National* (National Front, FN) came out at the first position of the election with more than 33% of voters' shares (Le Monde, 2024). Never in the history of the country, a far-right party had gathered such a support outside of a presidential election. It is the result of a constant political ascension since Marine Le Pen took the party over from her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen, founder and former president of the party, in 2011. Since then, the party has only increased his score election after election and accessed the second round of the presidential election twice in a row -in 2017 and in 2022- against current President Emmanuel Macron and has never looked in a better position for the upcoming presidential election of 2027. The rise of the RN and other European far-right parties has been extensively studied, particularly as some have recently gained power. A lot of similarities exist between these parties across Europe. Among them, and central to their discourses, national identity, immigration and populism are some of the topics that can be found into almost every European far-right party studies. While some explanations relative to their success were convincing, scholars still cannot agree on the nature of the success of far-right parties in Europe and different school of thoughts exist. We will discuss this point further on in the literature review.

For this reason, the rise of far-right parties is a critical area of study in contemporary European politics studies. Firstly, it can have political implications, as it sheds light on the trajectory of far-right parties in the last years and contribute to the potential anticipation of their evolution in the coming years. Second, it helps understand a critical phenomenon in the transformation of the political landscape in Europe, with these parties challenging mainstream parties and overcoming the traditional left-right divide. Moreover, it also speaks to the analysis of different phenomenon occurring on the demand-side.

Indeed, studying far-right parties is also indirectly studying their electorate. This thesis seeks to be part of the continuity of the study of far-right political parties in Europe but aims at providing a different angle than the pre-existing ones. It focuses mostly on the French National Rally, due to its relevant role in the European far-right parties' landscape. Indeed, a lot has been done in recent studies to explain the rise of the RN under different perspective. Whether it is about the political landscape in France and the collapse of the traditional parties, the social and economic pressures faced by the population, or the change in discourse since Marine Le Pen took over, different explanations exist, coexist, concord, and differ. The current French political context almost in itself brings credit to this thesis, as the RN is still gaining electoral support, despite considerable efforts from traditional parties to retain their electorate. Illustrated by the aforementioned quote by Olivier Faure, First Secretary of the French Socialist Party, a lot of people, whether they are from the political class or from the civil society, seem to believe that the rise of the RN is largely due to their capacity of reframing their discourse, from the traditional nativist discourse, centred around immigration and national identity, to a more nuanced one, with more focus about social and economic policies, hereby the "social scam" (Faure, 2024). Indeed, since she took over, Marine Le Pen seems to have successfully put in place her strategy of "de-diabolisation", one of the main starting postulates of this study (Alduy, 2015). Remain the question of whether this change is an ideological change, or if it is a strategic change, aimed at opening their electorate to new horizons. The aim of this thesis is to assess whether since Marine Le Pen took over from her father and changed the discourse of the party, the nativist ideology of the party remained or not. It will try to answer the following research question: *"To what extent do shifts in Marine Le Pen and the Rassemblement National discourses since 2012 have changed the nativist ideological underpinnings of the party?"*. Overall, this thesis aims to contribute to the understanding of the mechanisms through which far-right parties gain and maintain support, and the social and societal consequences of their political strategies. It is important to precise that the goal of this thesis is not to demonstrate a causal relationship nor a correlation between the electoral success of the RN and its change in discourse, but rather to demonstrate and analyse the nature of this change of discourse.

To answer this question, the thesis will analyse the RN party manifestos for the 2012, 2017 and 2022 presidential elections, three elections under which the party was represented by Marine Le Pen and saw the respective elections of socialist François Hollande, and centrist Emmanuel Macron, twice. In terms of time scale, these manifestos were all published after Marine Le Pen took over the party and are defining the timeframe of our research. To analyse these manifestos, this thesis will use discursive nativism as a theoretical framework and will make use of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as an analytical tool to attempt to draw a conclusion in the party manifestos' analysis.

This thesis is divided into five main sections. Following the current introduction, the second section will provide an extensive review of the pertinent literature about the RN and key concepts

surrounding it such as populism and nativism. Part three will expose the methodology and the theoretical underpinnings of the research, before diving into part four where the analysis will be performed, and the results will be discussed. Finally, the conclusion will recap everything said during the thesis and will explore potential limits and future research implications about the RN or far-right political parties in Europe.

## **2. Literature review**

The electoral campaigns of the RN since 2012 have highlighted several key themes among which we find nativism, populism and a strong focus on immigration. This literature review intends on focusing on these themes, and on the evolution of the discourse of the party. The debates among scholars existing in the literature will also be discussed, before concluding with research hypothesis relative to the research question.

### **2.1 Nativism**

Existing literature on nativism is rich and is the subject of a lot of debates among academics. The most famous ideational definition of nativism is the one of Mudde (2007) that defines nativism as a combination of “nationalism and xenophobia” (Mudde, 2007, 27) and as “an ideology, which holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group (“the nation”) and that non-native element (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous nation-state” (Mudde, 2007, 19). The criteria to belong to the native group are obviously not static and settled. Indeed, as Benedict Anderson (1983) demonstrates in his most prominent work, unlike common beliefs of nationalists or nativists, nations are not ancient communities united by history, language, culture and territory, but are rather “imagined communities”, as a nation is too large for all its citizens to know each other across time and space (Anderson, 1983). In other words, they are the result of a modern collective imagination. In Mudde’s definition, two key terms stand out: “nationalism” and “xenophobia”. On the one hand, nationalism is defined by Mudde himself, as a “political doctrine that strives for the congruence of the cultural and political unit” (Mudde, 2007, 14). On the other hand, xenophobia can be etymologically defined as the “fear of foreigners or what is from foreign provenance” (Larousse, 2023). The main difference between nationalism and xenophobia is the fact that nationalism tends to focus more on the in-group, whether xenophobia tends to pay more attention to the “other” (Els, 2013). Another ideational definition of nativism is the one provided by Betz (2017): “the logic of nativism rests on the demarcation [...] between those on the inside and those on the outside, between foreigners and the native-born” (Betz, 2017). Overall, different definitions of nativism have at least one thing in common: the distinction between the natives and the non-natives, the in-group against the out-group, or the “we” versus the “they”. Accordingly, we can say that a form of othering exists and is inherent to nativism.

Another approach of nativism, is the discursive approach, as supported by Newth (2021). The discursive approach of nativism understands the concept as a discourse, or a way of talking about and constructing social reality. In that sense, nativism is understood through the language and rhetoric used to create distinctions between natives and non-natives, or as mentioned before, between the in-group and the out-group (Newth, 2021). It focuses on the way these distinctions are constructed, perpetuated,

and communicated through discourse. As a summary, the ideational approach envisions nativism as a set of ideas and the discursive approach envisions nativism as a discourse. One of the advantages of the discursive approach is that, unlike the ideational approach, the discursive approach renders the approach to nativism more careful about the context and the specificities.

However, one of the main debates related to nativism when talking about the far-right parties in Europe, is knowing the nature of nativism itself (Newth, 2021). Mudde sees it as a non-racist concept (Mudde, 2007), Bosniak as a “race-neutral” process (Bosniak, 1997), while others even see it as a mix between “nationalism and populism” (Yarish, 2019) or as a “natural reaction” (Hervik, 2015). Bosniak (1997) argues that because nativism makes no point towards to the “merits or demerits of particular national groups or to the colour of anyone’s skins”, nativism cannot be considered as racist (Bosniak, 1997, 287). This argument is not very convincing as it is clearly overlooking some of the prominent studies of nationalism and identity, praising that racialisation can play a role in the sense of belonging to a nation. Therefore, it is hard to argue here that nativism is not racist. In other words, even if nativism doesn’t explicitly make the use of race, it can still reinforce racist ideologies. Some more recent studies have explored the relationship between racism and nativism, and the blurred lines between the two concepts have still not been resolved. However, in the context of far-right parties in Europe, it appears complicated and uncaringful to remove the racist component in the nativist discourse, given the failed attempt by the literature to address nativism as not linked to racism.

This part of the literature review has clearly defined the main approaches -ideational and discursive- to nativism and has explored its relationship with racism. As previously mentioned, another recurring theme related to far-right parties in Europe and more specifically to the RN, is populism.

## **2.2 Populism:**

When we mentioned the richness of the literature on nativism, it cannot compare to the hype the concept of populism received in the 2010s and onwards. Over the past decade, multiple phenomenon such as the election of Donald Trump in 2016, the outcome of the Brexit referendum in 2016 or the electoral success of Marine Le Pen in 2017 have been described as the results of populism (Norris and Inglehart, 2019). “What is populism?” is the question the academic field has been trying to answer since it became so famous after the election of Donald Trump. Is it an ideology? Is it a strategy? Is it a discourse? Is it everything at the same time? This thesis itself could be dedicated to the attempt of a conception of a definition of populism, and it would still fail significantly. Populism is a fragmented concept with varying definitions among scholars. The most-used definition of populism comes from Mudde (2017), defining it as a “thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic camps, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’” (Mudde, 2017, 6). By “thin-centred”, he refers to the fact that’s the concept of populism is adaptable and can be attached to other concepts (Mudde, 2017). Consequently, it also explains the fact that this definition is



widely used, as it is broad enough to link populism with almost any concept. One advantage of this definition is that it successfully avoids the mistake according to which populism is only observed at the far-right of the political spectrum. Example of left-wing populism exist, especially in South America. Multiple similarities in different definitions of populism can be outlined, the main one being the juxtaposition between the “people” and the “elite”. While recognising the importance of the concept, some authors raised some complaints about the use of the concept, and the danger of such a broad use of populism as an ideology. Indeed, Glynos and Mondon (2016) argue that, while populism is useful to explain part of some phenomenon, the framing of the xenophobic and nativist aspects of far-right parties leaders as populist is very dangerous and could downplay the actual nativist -therefore racist- message behind their discourses and qualify it as “populist hype” (Glynos and Mondon, 2016, 3-4). In other words, Newth (2021) explains this phenomenon as “a tendency to (mis)interpret the populist phenomenon as a simple and sizeable rise of right-wing party popularity across Europe’ as well as exaggerating its significance and describing right-wing populism as a threat to democracy” (Newth, 2021). From this perspective, the term populism and its uncaredful use becomes problematic. Indeed, building on the previous research mentioned, Brown, Winter and Mondon demonstrated how the uncaredful use of the concept of populism could lead to the euphemising of a nativist idea (Brown, Winter and Mondon, 2019). In that case, populism appears to clash with the concept of nativism. This thesis will build on the work of Newth (2021), who argues that the ideational understanding of populism is too often used inappropriately, and will use the following definition instead: populism is a “dichotomic discourse in which “the people” are juxtaposed to “the elite” along the lines of a down/up antagonism in which “the people” is discursively constructed as a large powerless group through opposition to “the elite” conceived as a small and illegitimately powerful group” (Newth, 2021) (De Cleen and Stavrakakis, 2017). Cas Mudde (2017), despite being the author of the most cited definition of populism in the literature, admits that “within European and US politics, populism functions “as a fuzzy blanket to camouflage the nastier nativism” (Mudde, 2017). This confusion in the literature between the concepts of nativism and populism is present in a lot of studies. While populism construct the ‘people’ against the ‘elite’, some scholars argue that it also constructs “a homogeneous group based on ethno-cultural or racial traits ... [which] ... contest a liberal democratic vision of society” (Newth, 2021). However, as stated by De Cleen, Mondon and Glynos (2018), “the ‘contestation of a liberal-democratic vision of society flows from the particular articulation of nativism with the logic of populism, not from populism itself”. (De Cleen, Mondon, and Glynos, 2018). This thesis will build on the work of Newth, arguing that nativist logic is racist, rather than populist (Newth, 2021). However, it does not prevent populism from being a very useful term in the analysis of far-right parties in Europe.

This first part of the thesis briefly explored the concepts of nativism and populism, while also exploring their relation. The concept of nativism, and especially discursive nativism, have been extensively studied in atheoretical way, but has been rarely used and applied to an empirical case. Using

this approach to analyse the case of the RN could be a pertinent starting point for the future use of discursive nativism as a theoretical framework. I would also fill a significant gap in the literature. The remaining part of the literature review is dedicated to the study of the RN's discourse in the literature and the debates surrounding it.

### **2.3 Discourse of the Rassemblement National**

The *Rassemblement National*, formerly *Front National*, was founded in 1972 by Jean-Marie Le Pen and by some other political personalities, including some former Waffen-SS. He became the first president of the party until 2011. The party only emerged in the 1980s. Five times candidate to the presidential election, Jean-Marie Le Pen, accessed the second round of the presidential election in 2002, where he was severely defeated by Jacques Chirac. It's only after the takeover by her daughter Marine Le Pen in 2011, that the party really began to gain electoral success across a long period of time. At the 2012 legislative elections, the party obtained 17,9% of the votes, its highest score at the time in history. Marine Le Pen will then go on to get to the second round twice in a row, in 2017, where she was severely defeated by current President Emmanuel Macron, and in 2022, where she was less than seven percentage point from becoming the first woman to access to the presidential role. Since 2021, Jordan Bardella took over the presidency of the party, and among others, led the campaign for the 2024 European elections. Nonetheless, at this date, Marine Le Pen remains the main figure of the party and will probably be the party's candidate for the presidential election of 2027, this time against a different candidate, Macron being stopped by the constitution from governing again. This very brief history and current trends of the party electoral success sets the ground for the literature debates existing among scholars regarding the party.

Since she took over from her father, the literature is obsessed with one thing about the RN: the way Marine Le Pen is trying to 'de-diabolise' her party from his past demons. This strategy consists in shifting her voters' perspective of the party and to make it appear as more mainstream. The literature on the mainstreaming of the far-right in Europe is extensive, and different approaches exist to describe this phenomenon. However, due to the restrictive nature of the research we will only go over the most appropriate definition of mainstream in the context of the RN, the one provided by Rear (2019), that explains that "when discourses successfully become hegemonic, the social practices they structure can appear so natural that members of a society fail to see that they are the result of political hegemonic practices. Discourses then reach the level of 'common sense', in that their origins and intrinsic contingency are forgotten." (Rear, 2019). In other words, it consists of the naturalisation of an option into the best or legitimate one, essential to govern or regulate society, politics and the economy (Brown, Mondon and Winter, 2021). This thesis assumes that since Marine Le Pen took over, she is constantly trying to render her party more mainstream, to increase her chances of being elected as French president.

The RN's shift in discourse from her father's is often credited for the RN's electoral success. Her father was infamous for his tendency to always go towards polemics with antisemitic and xenophobic press releases. In the 2010, she tried to completely change the voters' perception of the party, by, among other things, firing all party members that were openly advocating for antisemitic or neo-Nazis reforms. Indeed, antisemitism was one of the main ideological resources of the party under Jean-Marie Le Pen, and Marine Le Pen managed to get rid of it (Bouron, 2015). The literature confirms significant differences in their leadership and communication styles (Krepak, 2021). One of the most obvious differences is the use of new platforms such as social medias, that considerably changed the way in which the political message is communicated and the way it is received by a certain portion of the population, with platforms such as Instagram and TikTok being widely used (Albertanzzi and Bonansinga, 2024). More importantly, as soon as she took over the party, Marine Le Pen tried to "emancipate from her father ideological positions" (Xia, 2022, 379). According to Aubry (2015), she was succesuful in distancing herself from her father "because ignored some paternal obsessions (anti-semitism, and biological racism)" (Aubry, 2015).

This thesis examines whether this shift in discourse reflects an ideological change or not. The literature has different interpretations about the change in discourse, but only a few articles analysed the ideological change. Xia, argues for example, that the shift in discourse from the RN constitutes a true ideological change (Xia, 2022, 380). She associates the changed perspective of voters and the moderation of the discourse as a change in the ideology. However, despite a descriptive listing of Marine Le Pen's adaptations she does not provide any supporting evidence nor any demonstration that proves that this corresponds to a change in ideology. However, she successfully links this phenomenon to the RN electoral success (Xia, 2022, 380). Muis (2017) also argues that the ideological (re)positioning of far-right parties can be a reasonable explanation relative to their electoral succes (Muis, 2017). Another interpretation is the one made by Crépon, Dézé and Mayer (2015). They study the mutation of the party through the prism of their electoral success. They argue that there is a link between the moderation of the image of the party -de-diabolisation-, and its electoral success (Crépon, Dézé and Mayer, 2015). Alduy argues that the RN is constantly making a binary distinction between the 'us' and the 'them' (Alduy, 2015). However, she does not draw a link between this factor and the ideology of the party. A last popular interpretation in the literature, is the one arguing that the RN's ideology has become populist. This narrative suggests that the RN's ideology has significantly changed in recent years, particularly through its adoption of populism and strategic moderation. Scholars like Mudde (2017) and Betz (2017) argue that the RN has evolved from its traditional nativist and xenophobic roots to embrace a broader populist agenda that juxtapose "the pure people" against "the corrupt elite." This shift is seen as part of a deliberate effort to reframe the party's image, distancing itself from the overtly racist and antisemitic rhetoric of Jean-Marie Le Pen's era. Such perspectives highlight the party's attempt to widen its appeal by focusing more on socio-economic issues and presenting itself as a defender of the common

people against the political establishment, thereby indicating a transformation in its ideological positioning.

Even if it is not the objective of this study, it is interesting to question the reasons explain the good reception of the RN's message by the electorate. Scholars such as Stockemer and Barisione argue that this change in discourse had a big impact on their electoral results (Stockemer and Barisione, 2017). More specifically, Wahnich (2015) argues that five major explanations are at stake to explain the rise of the party: "the geographical logic (i.e. by the opposition of city centers to urban peripheries and by the regional logic which shows a preventive reaction of voters with regard to what the media report to them, the powerlessness of the policies of other parties (impossibility of formulating an explanatory speech, numerous slip-ups), the societal change brought about by globalisation, the reception of the media (the National Front offers a guarantee of a good audience, and finally the strength of the ideology of Marine Le Pen's speech which offers an explanatory diagram of the world". (Wahnich, 2015). One could argue that other explanations can be given to explain the electorate success of the RN and would probably be right. We chose to put forward this attempt by Wahnich to explain this phenomenon, not because we believe that he is exclusively correct, but to try to put in perspective the complexity of the issue, and the number of things to consider when trying to demonstrate a causal relationship between the electoral success of the RN and another variable. Another insight of this contribution is also that it avoids the easy explanations of the socio-economic situation of the country and the rise of the RN, even if the latter plays a significant role.

Furthermore, there is a substantial gap in the research in which the question of whether these discursive shifts have resulted in an ideological shift is either overlooked or tacitly assumed. This thesis attempts to close this gap by critically analysing the RN's manifestos through the lens of discursive nativism, resulting in a more nuanced understanding of whether these shifts represent a substantive ideological transformation or a strategic rearticulation of the party's enduring nativist beliefs. This study intends to add a new viewpoint to ongoing debates concerning the evolution of far-right ideology in Europe.

Drawing on this brief literature review, this thesis will hypothesise that (H1) despite the strategic adaptation and moderation of its discourse, the *Rassemblement National* under Marine Le Pen, continues to maintain and propagate its core nativist discourse, and that (H2) this propagation is mainly in its framing of immigration and national identity. To test these hypotheses and answer the research question, we will analyse the party manifestos from the 2012, 2017 and 2022 presidential elections. The next chapter is dedicated to the detailing of the theoretical framework used in this research, and the methodology used to perform the analysis.

### **3. Research Design**

#### **3.1 Theoretical considerations**

Drawing on the previous literature review, this thesis will consider the discursive understanding of nativism as its principal theoretical framework. Discursive nativism, opposed to ideational nativism that considers nativism as a set of idea -combination of nationalism and xenophobia (Mudde, 2017)-, considers nativism as a discourse. In other words, it understands nativism as a way of speaking that constructs social identities and distinctions between natives and non-natives, often emphasising the role of language and context in shaping these ideas. The work of Newth (2021) was particularly useful to conceptualise discursive nativism. The main purpose of this thesis being to demonstrate that there has been no ideological change in the RN discourse but only strategic adaptation to open to a broader electorate -without assessing its success-, discursive nativism appears as a legitimate choice to put forward implicit or subtle underlying ideologies. It appears fit to test our hypotheses and to answer our research question. Indeed, the approach of discursive nativism to the understanding of the RN's discourse helps fill a gap identified in the literature review, being the fact that discursive nativism has not been tested a lot on a practical case, and never on the one studied here. If this analysis proves successful, this framework could be useful for future studies about far-right parties and how they adapted to overcome some challenges they might have faced. By using this approach, this thesis also seeks to add a new dimension in the study of the RN, by using an original theoretical framework. Indeed, the application of discursive nativism to the case of the RN will not only allow to understand what the RN believes, but also how its strategically frames these beliefs in its discourse, which is also something the literature has not explored into depth that much.

One of the main challenges of this thesis when using the theoretical concept of discursive nativism is being able to operationalise it. To do so, we will analyse the manifesto looking for common dimensions, themes, indicators and ways in which the RN is constructing and communicating their nativist ideas. These dimensions are present systematically through the texts. Among the different dimensions of discursive nativism, we chose three dimensions that we will allow us to analyse the manifestos. The first dimension is the framing of immigrant and national identity. For this dimension, we will look for vocabularies and logic that will contribute to reinforce the distinctions between the in-group (native French) and the out-group (immigrants or foreigners). The second dimension is cultural superiority. Indeed, this dimension is key to understand nativism as envisioned by the RN. In other words, we can speak about nativism 'à la française'. This concept was put forward mainly with the idea of "l'exception française" (the French exception) which will be developed later (Vitanza and Hudson, 2007). This translates into the rhetoric that protects French culture and values from perceived foreign threats. The last dimension is the security and threat narratives that they associate with non-natives. Indicators could include vocabulary like 'invasion', 'flooding' or even 'colonisation' for example. By analysing the manifestos through these key three dimensions, the study aims at demonstrating that there

is an ideological continuity within the RN discourse, that would challenge the narratives found in the literature review, saying that the moderation of the discourse over time is a true ideological change, or a softening of the ideas. In other words, we aim at demonstrating that a softening of the discourse is not a softening of the ideas.

To sum up, while nativism serves as the ideological underpinning of the RN, discursive nativism enables us to investigate how this ideology is disseminated and adapted over time. This thesis examines the RN's manifestos to see how the party intentionally rearticulates its nativist principles to appeal to a broader population while keeping its basic ideological position.

### **3.2 Methodology**

Based on the previous literature review, and to answer the research question, this thesis will make the use of primary sources that are the RN party manifestos from the 2012, 2017, and 2022 presidential election. The 2012 RN party manifesto was entitled “Mon projet pour la France et les Français” (“My project for France and the French”) and was accessed through the European Manifesto Database and is constituted of 16 pages with some images. The 2017 RN party manifesto was entitled “144 engagements pour la France” (144 commitments for France) and was accessed through the same website. It is constituted of 44 pages with no image. Finally, the 2022 RN party manifesto was entitled “M la France” (M France, word game meaning ‘Love France’) and was accessed through the official website of the party, and not on the same website as the others as it was not available. It is constituted of eight pages including multiple pictures. All primary source materials were accessed and analysed in French, original language of the texts. The use of party manifesto is relevant in the sense that they represent easily accessible sources of information and provide precious information regarding the propositions of a party. They are also useful to analyse how a party frame a certain issue. I will also supplement the use of primary sources by secondary sources, both in French and English.

To analyse the manifestos, this thesis will use Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as an analytical tool. According to Ruth Wodak, CDA can be defined as “demystifying ideologies and power through the systematic investigation of semiotic data (written, spoken, or visual)” (Wodak, 2014, 303). CDA can reveal a relationship between material production and social institutions, making it a valuable content analysis tool (Wodak, 2014).

This section has justified the choice of theoretical framework and research material of this study. It now turns to the core of the research, by diving into the empirical chapter of it. Again, the aim is to answer the research question: “*To what extent do shifts in Marine Le Pen and the Rassemblement National discourses since 2012 have changed the nativist ideological underpinnings of the party?*”. By analysing the party’s manifestos across multiple election cycles, this study seeks to provide evidence of ideological continuity in the RN’s discourse, challenging the notion that the party has undergone significant ideological moderation. The methodology outlined here offers a rigorous and systematic

approach to understanding how far-right parties like the RN adapt their rhetoric while preserving their core ideological principles.

#### **4. Empirical Section: Critical examination of RN manifestos: A critical discourse analysis using discursive nativism**

This last chapter before the conclusion will represent the body of the research and the core of the analysis and discussion. It will analyse the RN party manifestos for the 2012, 2017 and 2022 presidential campaigns, using discursive nativism as a theoretical framework and CDA as an analytical tool. This study is not divided in chronological order, as it would have produced linear and descriptive results. It is rather divided into the three thematic mentioned in the methodological section, namely: the framing on immigration and national identity, the cultural superiority and rhetoric of protectionism, and finally the security and threats narratives. The objective is to analyse any thematic shift or continuities between the three manifestos to prove the ideological continuity of the RN despite the strategic adaptation of its rhetoric to the political and social context.

##### **4.1 Framing of immigration and national identity: a consistent narrative**

As mentioned in the literature review, immigration and national identity have always been at the forefront of the RN's political discourse, serving as the primary lens through which the party constitutes its nativist ideology. Despite changes in rhetorical styles and strategic framing, the RN emphasis on these issues reveals a deep commitment to the exclusion of non-natives, and the preservation of a pure national identity.

##### *2022: A sophisticated nativism in action*

This thesis being written in 2024, the 2022 manifesto is the culmination of the RN' efforts to refine and polish its discourses regarding immigration and national identity. In this manifesto, immigration is framed not only as a policy issue, but also as an existential threat to the French Nation-State.

One of the central points of this manifesto is the concept of "immigration massive et incontrôlée" (massive and uncontrolled immigration) which is framed as a direct challenge to "notre identité nationale" (our national identity) (RN, 2022). In that context, not only does the party depict the influx of non-natives as being a risk for the national identity of the country, but they also depict themselves as the only political actor in the country capable of controlling this flux thanks to their unique policies. Going into rhetoric, the manifesto presents a strategic use of language that aims at legitimising exclusionary ideas and policies through appeals to national identity and the notion of common sense and common good. An illustration of this is the demand of the party to "protéger notre mode de vie" (protect our way of living) (RN, 2022). This is a very subtle way to link immigration and national identity. Indeed, with that use of language, the RN is framing immigration as a potential threat to the French



social and cultural fabric. It is hard to say that this language is scandalous or confrontational, yet it is still conveying a nativist message: the protection and preservation of the national identity requires the exclusion and the regulation of non-natives on the national territory.

### *2017: victimisation and self-defence*

In the 2017 manifesto, immigration is once again one of the major messages the party wants to convey. The French state is depicted as having failed to protect its population against the danger and the risks presented by uncontrolled migratory policies. The victimisation of the party is key to its strategy that presents the French citizens as being the unfair victims of the inaction by the State, at that time a socialist government led by François Hollande. In other words, the party is implying that the government is implementing policies that do not favour French citizens anymore but are rather favouring immigrants. Formulas such as “*préfère les étrangers*” (prefer the foreigners) or “*démantèle les droits des français*” (dismantle the rights of the French) are used to refer at the State action (RN, 2017).

Using this strategic framing of immigration, national identity and the action of the state, the RN pictures itself and its measures as necessary to prevent the French culture from being damaged. In other words, they want to appear as the only reasonable corrective force to overcome the problem of national identity being diluted by uncontrolled immigration. There is also here a particularly aggressive stance against the mainstream political parties, being depicted as incapable of acting truly for the French citizens. The discourse of defence is central to the RN’s nativist ideology, as they portray the native in-group as being vulnerable and in need of protection, and the non-natives out-group as not welcomed.

Another component of this manifesto is the notion of “*cohésion sociale*” (social cohesion) (RN, 2017). In the literature, social cohesion is defined “as the belief held by citizens of a given nation-state that they share a moral community, which enables them to trust each other” (Larsen, 2014, 4). The RN’s rhetoric is building a link between immigration and social cohesion. They argue that massive immigration creates parallel communities that undermine the French social unity. Opposed to the concept of social cohesion is the concept of social erosion, which can be used here to describe the consequences of the inflow of immigrants according to the RN. As a precision, social erosion can be defined as the decline of social cohesion, being that less citizen believe that they share a moral community with each other (Larson, 2013, 5). Once again, to legitimise its policies, the RN makes use of a nativist discourse. The 2017 manifesto is very useful to understand how the party frame immigration to convey nativist messages. It is also alert of the political climate of the country at the time and is using this to create an environment even more subject to expand their political support.

### *2012: Overt nativism and cultural exclusion*

The 2012 manifesto is nothing compared to the two previous ones. The strategic rhetoric in the document is much less sophisticated than in the previous ones, and the gap between this one and the one published in 2022 is massive, which confirms the findings of the literature that there has been a major shift in their political communication. In other words, the image of the RN, or FN back in 2012, was much less moderated at the time. In that case, non-natives, immigrants, are directly linked to delinquency, crimes, and unemployment.

In this manifesto, the RN is not trying to hide anything. Immigrants are explicitly called “danger pour la nation” (danger for the Nation) and “coûteux et déstabilisant” (expensive and destabilising) that are exploiting the welfare system (RN, 2012). Indeed, she refers multiple times to some state economic allocations that are very attractive to migrants to try and come to France. She refers to these measures as the “pompes aspirantes de l’immigration massive” (suction pumps of massive immigration) (RN, 2012). This rhetoric reflects an unfiltered nativism, where the FN is directly calling into the fears and anxieties of citizens about the presence of non-natives in France.

The concept of “préférence nationale” (national preference) is also heavily present in this manifesto and is directly mentioned (RN, 2012). In the manifesto, it is defined as the privilege according to all French citizens regarding the accession of public services offered by the state (RN, 2012). They also announce wanting to encourage, if not force, companies to hire French people before hiring people that do not hold the French nationality. Not only do immigrants are pictured as criminals and associated with crimes, but they are also seen as a burden for the nation and are progressively excluded from the access to public services. The nativist ideology underpinning this discourse is extremely present.

#### **4.2 Cultural Superiority and the rhetoric of protectionism**

Cultural superiority and the narratives of needing to protect the French culture against the non-natives invasion and interference are recurrent themes in the RN manifestos. In the three manifestos examined, the RN depicts the French culture as being superior, unique, and as being under constant external threats by non-natives.

##### *2022: Strategic cultural superiority*

In the 2022 manifesto, the RN continues to emphasise the idea of cultural protectionism, but the rhetoric is more developed which makes the discourse more moderated.

The manifesto is invoking multiple times the notions of “valeurs françaises” (French values) and “notre identité culturelle” (our cultural identity) (RN, 2022). However, while the notion of cultural protectionism is subtly present in this manifesto, the notion of cultural superiority is not. At no point during the presentation of its political program, the party is implying that French culture is unique nor superior, but only that it must be protected to prosper. It frames the protection of French culture as a

necessary response to the challenges imposed by globalisation and immigration. Even if it more subtle, it is clear here, that while the rhetoric becomes more sophisticated and the message more subtle, the nativist logic within the discourse does not change, and the underpinning nativist ideology either. Indeed, the need of a culture protectionism is rooted in the nativist belief that the French nation is tied with the maintaining of a uniform national culture.

The RN's embrace of cultural protectionism in 2022 follows a larger trend in European far-right politics, where parties are increasingly using a vocabulary of "cultural defence" to justify discriminatory policies (Petrov, 2021). The RN aims to legitimise its nativist goal by presenting it as safeguarding national culture, rather than retrograde or radical. This strategic shift displays the party's capacity to negotiate the complex dynamics of contemporary politics while remaining committed to nativist beliefs.

### *2017: Defending French cultural heritage*

In the 2017 manifesto, cultural superiority is one of the main themes. Indeed, the RN sees it as one of its central missions. The party frames French culture as damaged and eroded by globalisation and uncontrolled immigration. The manifesto is built on the concept of "l'exception française" (the French exception). "L'exception française" can be defined by the idea that French culture and identity are unique and that they must be protected at all costs (Vitanza and Hudson, 2007).

The RN's discourse on cultural superiority in 2017 is tied to its nativist ideology, which builds a binary opposition between "pure" French culture and "foreign" influences that threaten to damage it. The manifesto regularly used phrases such as "pureté culturelle" (cultural purity) and "préservation de notre héritage" (protection of our legacy) to emphasise the necessity of preserving a uniform national culture (RN, 2017). This rhetoric implies that the presence of non-native cultures in France is intrinsically destabilising, and that France's survival is inherent to the exclusion or marginalisation of these foreign influences.

The 2017 manifesto also views the preservation of French culture as an issue of national pride and identity. The RN contends that permitting immigrants to preserve their own cultural practices within France will result in the destruction of French values and customs. This rhetoric reflects a nativist worldview in which cultural homogeneity is regarded as necessary for national unity and power. The party's emphasis on cultural superiority is not just about preserving the past, but also about assuring the French nation's future, which it believes can only be done by protecting the purity of its cultural character.

### *2012; Raw cultural exclusion*

The 2012 manifesto is a more overt and unreserved statement of cultural supremacy, mirroring the RN's less moderate public image at the time. In 2012, the party's discourse on cultural protectionism emphasises the need to "rétablir la primauté de la culture française" (establish the primacy of French culture) in the face of what it regards as an "invasion" of foreign influences (RN, 2012).

The rhetoric employed in the 2012 manifesto is more hostile and exclusionary than in previous years, with immigrants openly associated with the decline of French culture and values. The RN contends that the existence of non-native cultures in France is intrinsically destabilising, and that the only way to maintain the country's cultural purity is through rigorous immigration controls and the promotion of "l'identité française" (French identity) above all else (RN, 2012). This language of cultural exclusion is inextricably tied to the RN's nativist ideology, which regards cultural homogeneity as critical to the existence of the nation state. The 2012 manifesto creates a binary opposition between "pure" French culture and "foreign" influences that threaten to undermine it, using explicitly exclusionary terms. This rhetoric reflects a more raw and more unmediated version of nativism, attempting to rally support by appealing to voters' concerns and anxieties over the loss of cultural identity.

While the RN's rhetoric on cultural supremacy has evolved over time, the essential message remains unchanged: the existence of the French country is dependent on the exclusion of non-natives and the maintenance of a uniform national culture. Although the party made some calculated adjustments in succeeding manifestos to appeal to a wider audience, its nativist philosophy remained largely unchanged, once again proving our hypothesis.

### **4.3 Security and Threat narratives**

All three of the RN's manifestos revolve around its use of security and threat narratives, which is a crucial tactic for advancing its nativist agenda. The basic theme of these stories has not changed over time, despite changes in language and framing: non-natives are seen as dangers to social cohesiveness, national security, and the welfare of the native population.

#### *2022: Subtle but persistent threat narratives*

In the 2022 manifesto, the RN's security and threat narratives are presented in a nuanced and strategic manner. The party emphasises the importance of "sécurité renforcée" (improved security) and "ordre public" (public order) in protecting the French people from the threats posed by immigration (RN, 2022). The language employed in 2022 is restrained, indicating the RN's continuous efforts to reach a wider public while avoiding blatantly xenophobic statements. Despite the more nuanced phrasing, the core message remains unchanged: the RN continues to define immigration as a security

concern, tying it to terrorism, crime, and instability in society. The manifesto regularly used phrases such as "menace terroriste" (terrorist threat) and "insécurité" (insecurity) to imply that the existence of non-natives in France is inherently unstable (RN, 2022). This discourse justifies the RN's exclusionary policies by portraying them as necessary measures to ensure the safety and well-being of the native population.

The 2022 manifesto also makes a more subtle relationship between immigration and social cohesion, claiming that the failure to integrate non-natives into French society has resulted in the formation of "zones de non-droit" (lawless zones) over which the state has lost authority (RN, 2022). The RN aims to legitimise its nativist agenda by portraying its exclusionary policies as required to restore social order and cohesion, making it more appealing to a larger audience. The RN's embrace of security and danger narratives in 2022 shows a strategic shift in its language, but it does not signal a break from its underlying nativist ideas. The party's emphasis on security and social cohesiveness is used to forward its nativist agenda, portraying non-natives as threats that must be managed and controlled in order to defend the nation's integrity.

#### *2017: Fear as a rhetorical weapon*

The 2017 manifesto expands on the topics introduced in 2012, but in a more refined and intentionally regulated format. The RN's security and threat narratives in 2017 are distinguished by a greater emphasis on the dangers posed by immigration, notably in terms of terrorism and criminality. The party utilises fear as a rhetorical technique, implying that the French state cannot protect its inhabitants unless it accepts the RN's severe immigration policies.

The 2017 manifesto regularly uses phrases such as "laxisme migratoire" (migratory laxity) and "danger pour la sécurité nationale" (risk to national security) to portray immigration as an existential threat to the country (RN, 2017). This fear-based language serves to explain the RN's exclusionary policies by framing them as necessary measures to protect the local population from non-native threats. The party positions itself as the sole political force capable of restoring order and security in France, contrasting its stance with the perceived failures of the mainstream political system.

The 2017 manifesto was also written in a very specific national context. At that time, the country was recovering from a series of terrorist attacks that were particularly violent and that were all revendicated by the Daesh. The two main attacks took place respectively in January 2015, and November 2015. Scholars recognized that these tragic events had a great impact on the collective consciousness in France (Riou, 2016). By using the rhetoric of fear, the RN is strategically exploiting the anxieties of French citizens to promote exclusionary views.

The RN's use of fear in its 2017 speech is inextricably related to its nativist ideology, which portrays non-natives as inherently dangerous and unstable, and responsible for damages to the French population, as illustrated with the terrorist attacks. The party's emphasis on security and threat narratives

legitimises its exclusionary policies by presenting them as essential responses to immigration-related dangers. This discourse shows a more nuanced knowledge of the political context, as the RN attempts to appeal to voters who are worried about security but sceptical of overtly xenophobic statements.

#### *2012: Overt exclusionary rhetoric*

The 2012 manifesto is at the opposite of the 2022 one. The subtlety is absent and the effort to restrain or hide the exclusionary characteristics of their policies and ideas is minimal if not non-existent. The 2012 manifesto is the most explicit in terms of exclusionary terminology, reflecting once again the RN's less moderate public image at the time. In 2012, the party's security and threat narratives linked immigration directly to crime, unemployment, and social unrest. The wording employed in the 2012 manifesto is less subtle, indicating a more combative attitude to nativist speech.

The RN's use of overt exclusionary rhetoric in 2012 demonstrates the party's dependence on fear as a central component of its nativist discourse. The party's emphasis on security and threat narratives legitimises its exclusionary policies by presenting them as necessary measures to safeguard native populations from non-native threats. While the RN's rhetoric has evolved over time, the central idea remains unchanged: the existence of the French country is dependent on the exclusion of non-natives and the maintenance of a homogenous national identity.

#### **4.4 Main findings and discussion**

The analysis of the RN manifestos from 2012, 2017, and 2022 demonstrates a distinct pattern of discursive continuity in the party's nativist ideology. Despite shifts in vocabulary and policy, the RN has constantly portrayed immigration as a threat to national identity and security, emphasised the superiority and unicity of French culture through the concept of “l'exception française”, and called for exclusionary policies to safeguard the native people. These themes are consistent with the concept of discursive nativism, which emphasises the significance of language and rhetoric in developing and reinforcing exclusionary ideologies. This analysis shows that the RN's ideological core has remained mostly intact under Marine Le Pen, despite the party strategically adapting its rhetoric to appeal to a larger public. The party's vocabulary has evolved from the explicitly exclusionary language of the 2012 manifesto to the more nuanced and subtle wording of the 2022 manifesto, indicating a tactical rebranding rather than a fundamental ideological shift. The RN continues to employ discursive nativism to rally support, retaining its nativist mindset while attempting to grow its political influence.

In conclusion, the RN's manifestos show convincing proof of ideological continuity in the party's nativist language, calling into question the claim that the party has undergone major ideological moderation under Marine Le Pen. This research emphasises the need of closely examining political

language in order to understand the enduring beliefs that sustain far-right movements, even as they alter in response to shifting political settings. The RN's strategic rhetorical and stylistic adaptations demonstrate its ability to navigate the complexities of modern politics while remaining committed to nativist principles, demonstrating discursive nativism's continued relevance as a theoretical framework for analysing far-right political discourse.

## 5. Conclusion

This thesis aimed at investigating the extent to which shifts in Marine Le Pen and the RN's discourses, since 2012 have changed the nativist ideological underpinnings of the party. By examining the RN's presidential elections manifestos from 2012, 2017, and 2022 through the theoretical lens of discursive nativism and Critical Discourse Analysis as a methodological tool, the thesis sought to assess whether the party's ideological core changed significantly, or if its nativist beliefs have remained consistent despite changes in its rhetorical style. The analysis has shown that, while the RN's discourse has indeed adapted strategically in response to evolving political and social contexts, its ideology has remained almost intact.

The introduction laid the framework by emphasising the emergence of far-right parties throughout Europe and positioning the RN as a vital case study for understanding the dynamics of far-right politics. The introduction also framed the research issue, emphasising the need of determining if the RN's evolving language under Marine Le Pen is a real ideological transformation or a political adaptation to extend its electoral base. The thesis proposed that, despite apparent rhetorical improvements, the RN under Marine Le Pen continues to promote a nativist ideology centred on the exclusion of non-natives and the preservation of French national identity.

The literature review examined existing academic discussions on nativism and populism, revealing gaps and variations in our understanding of far-right ideologies in Europe. The review defined ideational nativism as a fixed set of ideas combining nationalism and xenophobia, as opposed to discursive nativism, which sees nativism as a flexible discourse used to construct social realities and distinctions between natives and non-natives. This discursive approach served as the thesis' theoretical framework, providing a lens through which to examine how nativist ideas are communicated, altered, and legitimised in RN manifestos across time.

The methodology section described the primary sources used, being the RN's manifestos from 2012, 2017, and 2022, and defended the use of CDA as an analytical tool to identify subtle alterations and continuities in the party's rhetoric. The manifestos, published in various political situations and under Marine Le Pen's leadership, provided a solid foundation for studying the strategic use of language in perpetuating nativist beliefs. The research was intended to go beyond a descriptive analysis, focusing on thematic continuity and shifts in the framing of immigration, cultural superiority, and security and threat narratives.

The empirical study was organised around three major themes that emerged as important to the RN's nativist discourse: (1) framing of immigration and national identity, (2) cultural superiority and protectionism rhetoric, and (3) security and threat narratives. By emphasising on these themes rather than chronological sequence, the research produced a more nuanced picture of how the RN preserved ideological continuity while consciously modifying its rhetoric to appeal to a wider range of voters. The study identified a coherent narrative in all three manifestos, portraying immigration as a threat to French



national identity. The 2022 manifesto, while more sophisticated and subtle in phrasing, nonetheless portrays immigration as an existential threat to "our national identity," implying the necessity for strict immigration limits to safeguard the native people. This narrative is not fundamentally different from the 2012 manifesto's overtly discriminatory vocabulary, which explicitly equates immigration with crime, unemployment, and social unrest. The 2017 manifesto uses a similar narrative of victimhood and defence, portraying native French as unfairly disadvantaged by governmental policies that favour immigration. In all three manifestos, the party maintains a binary opposition between the native in-group and the non-native out-group, maintaining its nativist ideology. Moreover, the RN's discourse on cultural supremacy has also remained a key component of its ideology. The 2017 manifesto is especially explicit in portraying the RN as the protector of French cultural heritage, which it argues is under constant attack from globalisation and massive immigration. The 2022 manifesto, while more strategically phrased, emphasises the importance of protecting French cultural identity from external influences, but in a more subtle language. The 2012 manifesto is clearer in its desire to restore the primacy of French culture, indicating a more outspoken version of nativism. Despite the differences in rhetorical technique, the fundamental theme in all three manifestos is clear: the existence of the French nation depends on the preservation of a homogeneous national culture free of non-native influences. Finally, the RN's use of security and threat narratives is another recurring feature throughout the manifestos. The 2022 manifesto, through a very subtle rhetoric, connects immigration to terrorism, crime, and social instability. This more balanced approach contrasts with the 2012 manifesto's overt exclusionary tone, which directly associates immigration with social instability. The 2017 manifesto, while emphasising security concerns, uses fear as a rhetorical tactic to argue that the French state is incapable of defending its population unless it adopts the RN's severe immigration policies. In all three manifestos, the party portrays non-natives as threats to national stability, social cohesiveness, and the well-being of the indigenous community.

The empirical evidence given supports the conclusion that under Marine Le Pen, the RN's ideological roots have not changed significantly. While the party has intentionally altered its speech to appeal to a broader population by using more moderate language and avoiding overtly racist words, the underlying nativist philosophy remains unchanged. The RN continues to portray immigration as a threat to national identity, promoting the supremacy of French culture and advocating for exclusionary policies to safeguard native populations. These findings call into question the myth that the party has undergone major ideological moderation under Marine Le Pen, implying that strategic adjustments are more about rebranding than a true movement in beliefs.

The conclusions of this thesis have significant meaning for the larger study of far-right political parties and groups in Europe. First, they contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how far-right groups modify their language in reaction to changing political and social settings while keeping their essential ideology. The case of the RN shows that rhetorical moderation does not always imply ideological transformation. Instead, far-right parties can carefully rearticulate their key values in ways

that appeal to a larger audience while maintaining their fundamental convictions. Second, this thesis emphasises the importance of discursive methodologies in studying far-right politics. By focusing on how nativist views are communicated and altered through language, scholars can acquire a better understanding of the techniques that far-right parties employ to gain and keep support. This discursive viewpoint might be applied to other far-right parties in Europe, providing a comparative lens for understanding their parallels, differences, and adaptation methods. Finally, the findings of this thesis imply that politicians, journalists, and academics should be cautious when interpreting shifts in far-right rhetoric. As the RN's narrative shows, strategic language moderation does not always imply ideological softening. Understanding the persistence of nativist ideology beneath more appealing language is critical for establishing effective counter-far-right initiatives and limiting their influence on mainstream politics.

In a few last words, this thesis proved that despite some strategic adjustment in its rhetoric, ideological continuity can be observed in the RN's discourse. The main findings of the analysis indicate that far-right parties such as the RN continue to spread exclusionary, xenophobic, and racist views using more sophisticated and complex modes of communication. Future studies could build on this work by applying the discursive nativism theoretical framework to other far-right parties in Europe, and by examining how they deal with national specificities while remaining ideologically consistent. Finally, additional research is needed to determine how voters perceive these strategic changes and if they see them as actual moderation or merely rebranded, and if they are receptive to these messages or not.

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