LSE European Politics and Policy (EUROPP) Blog: How the Rassemblement National is using local government to 'mainstream'
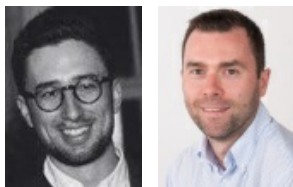
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How the Rassemblement National is using local government to 'mainstream'

Despite making significant electoral gains over the past decade, the French Rassemblement National remains excluded from power due to its extremist reputation. Examining its showcase town of Hénin-Beaumont, **Fred Paxton** *and* **Timothy Peace** *show how the party is using the local level of government to 'mainstream' and project a more competent, government-ready image.*

Populist radical right parties are increasingly in positions of power, inspiring much scholarly interest into the mainstreaming consequences of government responsibility. The *Rassemblement National* (RN) in France tends to be excluded from this debate due to its lack of governing experience at either the national or regional level. Yet, if we turn to the local level of government, the party has been responsible for running a number of towns. In this year's municipal elections, it even gained control of Perpignan, a major city of more than 100,000 inhabitants. Does this mean that the RN has been successful in mainstreaming its image? And are RN politicians being 'tamed' by the experience of holding power locally?

In a recent study, we explore the mainstreaming of the RN while in power at the local level of government. Rather than considering the RN simply as a policy-seeking radical party, constrained and potentially moderated by the transition to government, we focused upon their strategic use of local government to project a mainstream image. Since taking the reins of the party in 2011, a key strategy of Marine Le Pen has been *dédiabolisation* or 'de-demonisation'. This is the process through which she has sought to construct a more moderate political image with broadened appeal.

We focused on the town of Hénin-Beaumont, a former mining community in the far north of France, and a symbol of Marine Le Pen's leadership. In 2014, the RN gained control of the local government of Hénin-Beaumont for the first time. According to Le Pen and the incoming Mayor, Steeve Briois, the town was to be used as a showcase to demonstrate a 'cleaned-up' image of the party as 'normal'. This could be seen as a success, given the very favourable subsequent electoral results for the RN in the town. Just days before the Covid-19 lockdown began in France, Steeve Briois was re-elected as Mayor in the first round of the municipal election with an impressive 74% of the vote.

Marine Le Pen and Steeve Briois at an event in July 2020, Credit: Rassemblement National

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In our study of the first mandate of the RN in Hénin-Beaumont, we found mainstreaming to be evident in two main respects. First, the policy priorities of the local government were distinct from those expected from a populist radical right party. Government action was instead focused upon concrete changes to the local environment, in terms of both cultural events and infrastructure improvements, as well as budgetary stability and tax reductions. The framing of these policies was utilitarian, without evidence of a distinctively ideological or nativist framing.

Second, there was a notable lack of reference to migrants or other ethnic minority 'others' in both the interviews we conducted with local RN politicians and the mayoral statements we analysed. Local opposition politicians we interviewed even admitted that relations between the local mosque and the RN administration are positive. Social groups that would be excluded according to their nativist ideology are largely avoided in the discourse of the RN administration in Hénin-Beaumont. Muslims are mentioned just once in the data we analysed, simply to justify their Christmas public celebrations – 'whether one is Catholic, Jewish, Muslim or atheist, one can admire the beauty and innocence of a nativity scene without seeing it as an attack on someone's beliefs'. The populist idea of the 'pure' people was evident in the framing of local citizens in terms of dignity, honour and homogeneity.

We found that the discourse of the RN in Hénin-Beaumont focused upon their own competence in government, in an apolitical sense. The most common framing was in terms of its responsiveness to the demands of the citizens and their dedication to their activity and efficacy in outcomes. The executive body running the town certainly has a lot of experience. These include senior figures who are currently serving (or have recently served) as an MEP, deputy of the National Assembly, regional councillor and departmental councillor. Yet, rather than a technocratic emphasis on expertise, the mayoral statements stress their commitment to being close and responsive to local interests.

Their negative discourse towards opposition politicians and the local newspaper has created a highly conflictual political environment. The opposition are portrayed by the Mayor as ineffective, unproductive in their constant criticism of the RN, and opposed to local interests. The local newspaper, *La Voix du Nord*, has been vociferously targeted; portrayed as disconnected from the town and obstructive to the productive efforts of the RN. As the Mayor put it in a statement to the town: "They attack me because I defend you."

The strategy of mainstreaming by radical right parties is a risky one. To moderate 'too far', in pursuit of shedding the image of racism and attaining one of mainstream credibility, risks losing the parties' core support. This risk is particularly high when these parties enter government positions, due to the need for compromises on top of the strain of responsibility. Populist ideology and communication strategies facilitate a strategic moderation, including when in power; also seen, for example, in the 'one foot in, one foot out' strategy of the Lega in Italy.

The responsibilities of government have certainly not damaged the electoral performance of the RN in Hénin-Beaumont. It was one of several towns (along with Beaucaire, Fréjus, Hayange, Le Pontet and Villers-Cotterêts) that the party held on to in the first round of the local elections held back in March. This contrasts with the local government experiences of the then *Front National* in the 1990s where incompetence and extremism led to subsequent electoral failure.

Yet the second round of the 2020 local elections (held three months late because of the Covid-19 pandemic) showed the limitations of the RN's local strategy. Hénin-Beaumont was supposed to act as a showcase, yet the party only gained one additional town (Bruay-la-Buissière) in the Pas-de-Calais area, their supposed stronghold. In fact, the party gained just two new towns nationally and lost two that it already held (Le Luc and Mantes-la-Ville).

The very particular circumstances of these local elections make it difficult to read too much into the results. Nevertheless, the party would have certainly been hoping for a better showing as it looks to establish foundations for important departmental and regional elections in 2021. Their performance in these elections will be a truer test of how far its local mainstreaming strategy has been a success.

For more information, see the authors' accompanying study in Government and Opposition

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