Marine Le Pen's Woman Card: The re-alignment of female voters in a traditionally masculine game

by Sjifra de Leeuw

The nation and by extent nationalist politics is traditionally rendered a male game. In the most recent French presidential race this status quo has been challenged by a female contender, namely Marine Le Pen. In this post I ask what role Marine Le Pen’s gender played in the mobilisation of voters and argue that Le Pen’s electoral success can be explained because of her gender, rather than in spite of it.

Nationalist populist parties across Europe have increasingly been positioning themselves as the defenders of Western values and traditions against foreign, predominantly Muslim, influences. The French party Front National (FN) and its president Marine Le Pen are in this respect no exception. With defending the nation as a prime objective of such parties, it comes as no surprise that the nation is traditionally pictured through a masculine gaze, in which characteristics associated with masculinity, both virtues (e.g. discipline, persistence) and strengths (aggressiveness and reason), are deployed in the protection of external boundaries. Consequently, nationalist populist discourses are predominantly embedded in ‘nativist ideology’, which has been translated in fierce standpoints on topics like Immigration and, in the case of Marine Le Pen’s most recent campaign, a rather ambiguous stance on abortion. In the nativist project, women are responsible for the biological reproduction of the nation and serve symbolically as the protectors of the cultural boundaries, representing the metaphorical antipodes of the ‘barbaric other’. The reliance on these ideas has made that the FN has been particularly popular among a predominantly male electorate. Such a particular positioning of women, however, seems at odds with and presents challenges for a female leader. Marine Le Pen’s female leadership of the FN, then, raises interesting questions with respect to the relationship between gender and nationalism: How come that Marine Le Pen, in spite of these challenges, was so successful at mobilising voters during the most recent presidential race? Moreover, what role did her gender play in this electoral success?
Female leadership, female ideas?

With respect to substantive changes in terms of policy preferences, the replacement of father Le Pen by daughter Le Pen has made little to no difference. The ‘masculine’ concerns discussed above play an equally central role in the campaigns of both Marine’s and her father’s. In this regard, Marine Le Pen is extremely successful at embodying a typically masculine ideology; to the extent that “we tend to forget that she is a woman”. In the past, FN has been successful at uniting voters on the basis of their distinct ideological identity, but lacked electoral momentum due to its rather restrictive understanding of the nation. With the political exclusion of homosexuals, women and Jews under Jean-Marie Le Pen, the number of ‘eligible’ members of the French nation (i.e. natives) and members willing to identify with FN remained very small. The unwillingness of these nationalist voters to identify with this party, left the party with a large electoral potential and therefore presented an important opportunity for FN to mobilise new groups of nationalist voters that were formerly excluded.

In this respect, Marine Le Pen’s election as party leader represents major changes in how the party imagines the nation. Indeed, through her appointment, the party alluded to the inclusion of groups that were formerly excluded by her father, creating the potential to tap into the more subjective dimension of nationalism, namely identification. This attempt was positively received. Recent polls reveal that the female leadership of Le Pen has been particularly successful at invoking women’s “nationalist passion” by repositioning the party in a way that female nationalist voters were enabled to identify with the party’s programme, without losing the support of their predominantly male electorate. Similarly, this more inclusive vision on the nation, also resulted in a substantial increase in electoral support among another very unlikely stratum of the population, namely the gay community.
Acting ‘Au nom du peuple’!

Thus, contrary to the expectations drawn from the literature, Le Pen’s female leadership has not clashed with the masculine character of her party. Quite the opposite: Marine Le Pen also strategically used her gender to achieve the electoral mobilisation of this broader and more inclusive electorate. For instance, her female gender was presented as consistent with the masculine objective of protection of the cultural boundaries of the nation. This was achieved e.g. by highlighting the cultural schism between the ideals of the French nation and the Islamic culture, which maintains a more conservative view on women’s societal role. This newly found interest in women’s rights and gender equality is reflected in for instance the publication of Le Pen’s Woman’s Magazine and her refusal to wear a head-scarf in her state visit to Lebanon. Similar attempts to widen this schism resulted in the inclusion of gays and lesbians, a strategy that is also known as homonationalism. By doing so, FN lost part of its rather dangerous reputation, resulting in a partial de-demonisation of the party, therefore repositioning the FN as a decent alternative to main-stream political parties.

Secondly, Le Pen also used cultural identity markers to further bolster the compatibility of her female leadership with the masculine project of the nation. Her repeated attempts to draw parallels between her and female symbols of the French nation, e.g. Marianne, Simone de Beauvoir and Jeanne d’Arc, also added to the reputation of FN, and Le Pen in particular, as legitimate defenders of the La Patrie and its ideals of liberté and égalité. These attempts were consistent with the symbolic function of women in nationhood, while at the same time extending this solely symbolic function to an active function. These tactical shifts have lead Le Pen “to be both woman [to women voters] and genderless [to male voters] at the same time”. In effect, Marine Le Pen used her gender to highlight her legitimate claim to act in the name of the people (not so coincidentally also her 2017 electoral slogan au nom du peuple).

Conclusion

So, how come Front National was able to ‘pull off’ female leadership? The answer appears to be twofold. First, although the gender of the leader might have changed, it has done little to alter the traditional masculine character of the party. Indeed, with a primary focus on the immigration issue and pro-life policies, Marine Le Pen embodies the same antagonistic views and protects the same traditional institutions as her predecessor and father, albeit with a broader and more inclusive envisioned community. This does not necessarily suggest that Marine’s success was achieved in spite of her gender and this brings me to my second point, namely that Marine gained support because of her gender. Her female leadership, has contributed to a softening of the party’s image, through feminisation and newly found tolerance toward homosexuals and Jews. This in turn made it possible for female nationalist voters to identify with the party and has caused FN to diversify its constituency, leading to the electoral momentum witnessed during the campaign. This was further bolstered by highlighting her symbolic claim as legitimate defender of the French nation, by widening the schism between cultures maintaining a more conservative view on the previously mentioned groups. In sum, the campaign of Marine Le Pen tells us that traditionally female characteristics can be employed and combined to realise an essentially masculine national project: just with a female touch.

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