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## **A seat-level nowcast of the Front National in the 2017 legislatives**

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### *Introduction*

This research note looks to forecast the number of seats the Front National (FN) will win in the 2017 legislative election, using support in the 2015 regional election, the most recent nation-wide election. These regional elections showed another surge in electoral support for the Front National (FN). The party received 27.7 per cent of the first-round vote, and reached the runoff ballot in every metropolitan region except Corsica. In the second round, the FN won 27.1 per cent nationally, amassing a record 6.8 million votes and 358 regional councillors. Given the information this provides us about the geographical spread of its vote share across constituencies, we look to build a forecast model for the vote and seat share for the FN in 2017. In this paper, we build such a model to provide a 'nowcast' estimating how many National Assembly seats the FN could win if this support remains stable.

### *Previous legislative forecasts*

After the US and UK, electoral forecasting is most prevalent in France, particularly for Presidential elections (Dubois and Fauvelle-Aymar, 2004; Lewis-Beck et al, 2008; Foucault and Nadeau, 2012). VP-function models using macro- and meso-level predictors tend to outperform poll-based estimations – unsurprising, given significant polling bias in some elections (Jérôme et al, 1999; Durand et al, 2004), although these have improved more recently (Evans and Ivaldi, 2013; Arzheimer and Evans, 2014). Work on third-party / minor candidate performance has focused on Jean-Marie and Marine Le Pen's vote share in Presidential races (Jérôme and Jérôme-Speziari 2003; Auberger 2008; Evans and Ivaldi 2008, 2013). Legislative election forecasts are less common, no doubt because of the primacy of Presidential elections, as well as the greater complexity of party choice, cooperation and run-off requirements, which forecasters solve variously using incumbent or ruling-party vote share models (Auberger and Dubois, 2005), or more complex choice models (Arzheimer and Evans, 2010). Multi-stage regressions used for presidential elections (Nadeau et al, 2010, 2012) have yet to be tested, but use of subnational data by department or region has resolved the standard problem of small number of cases at national level (Jérôme et al, 1999; Foucault, 2012). Across all such models, standard VP-function assumptions regarding economic and political context obtain.

Use of second-order election results to forecast legislative results is less common, in France and elsewhere (Rallings, Borisjuk and Thrasher, 2016; Prosser, 2016). Second-order elections risk exaggerating first-order support for a radical right party such as the FN. First, voters are more ready to vote expressively for a fringe party rather than instrumentally for a party of government. Second, lower turnout tends to punish the ruling party or bloc, with greater abstention among non-mobilised incumbent support. Paradoxically, outside the European elections, the FN has in the past tended to perform poorly in local elections due in particular to a lack of grassroots infrastructure. However, performance in these since Marine Le Pen's assumption of the presidency in early 2011 and strategic initiatives by Florian Phillipot have seen a stabilisation of FN vote across all levels of elections and growing geographical homogeneity (Perrineau, 2014). We would consequently expect using the pattern observed from the 2011 cantonal to 2012 legislative election to be a relatively conservative means of estimating the 2017 legislative outcome on the basis of the 2015 regionals. Moreover, the absence of the personalised 'Le Pen' effect makes the legislatives a more stable forecast outcome when using second-order elections as a predictor.

We characterise this approach as a form of nowcast, whereby we use the most recent second-order election result to estimate the first-order election, modelled using the previous pattern of cross-election support, and assuming levels of party support unchanged from that last election.

Nowcasting, which uses current data to update forecasts for an election held a specified length of time from the estimate, is a relatively new approach in electoral forecasting (Lewis-Beck et al, 2010). Any previous second-order election in the electoral cycle could be used, but we choose the most recent election as the latest data on party support, which still enjoys a substantial lead-time. We move now to consider how to operationalise the expected change from regional to legislative election.

### *Learning from 2011-2012*

Contextually, the previous national electoral cycle (2007-2012) resembles the current one. The incumbent president and party have extremely low popularity ratings. Unemployment and other economic indicators are poor, and the executive's inability to provide programmatic coherence in addressing these has been punished by these disastrous approval ratings. The ruling majority, on this and other issues, is heavily divided, not just with election coalition partners, such as Europe-Ecologie Les Verts (EELV), heavily critical of the major party, but the major party itself experiencing significant dissent. Electorally, four dynamics have similar trends. Turnout continues to drop across elections.

The incumbent parties have lost heavily in all second-order elections. The FN, conversely, has experienced strengthening support at successive elections, as had already been the case in the 2010 regional and 2011 cantonal elections. Finally, we also expect that the incumbent president will seek re-election (unsuccessfully so). To the extent that such conditions persist until 2017, we consequently expect similar contextual effects on vote choice as in 2011-12.

In 2011, the final set of cantonal elections (prior to their being replaced by a single set of departmental elections) covered around half of the cantons, that is 1,940 cantons across all departments of metropolitan France. We exclude overseas territories and the French living abroad, who are much less prone to support the FN than voters in metropolitan France, and where there is virtually no chance that the FN could win a seat in 2017. In 2011, the FN ran candidates in 1,441 cantons. Legislative vote in 2012 can be broken down to the cantonal level. Initially, then, we look simply at the change in vote-shares of the left bloc, the right bloc and the FN in those cantons between the 2011 (cantons) and the 2012 (legislatives). We need to be aware that using this share may over-estimate the FN vote, as the party ran candidates strategically in cantons with likely higher electoral returns in 2011. This selection bias is visible in the outcome of the 2012 legislative elections: on average, the FN performed significantly better in the 1,441 cantons where the party had run candidates in 2011, compared with those where the party was absent. In the latter, for example, the FN candidates polled an average 9.5% of the vote in the 2012 legislatives, as opposed to 15.4% in the former.

Between 2011 and 2012, the number of registered voters in the 1,441 cantons increased from 16.9 to 17.2 million. Turnout also increased, from 43.6 to 58.1%. Together, this resulted in an aggregate surplus of 2.7 million votes in the 2012 legislatives over 2011. In net terms, from this surplus, the left bloc won an additional 1.17 million votes, representing 44% of the above surplus; the right took 48.6% and the FN only 6% (winning a mere 159 681 additional votes between 2011 and 2012). Other candidates won 180 179 votes more in the legislative (that is 1.4% of the additional vote) (see table 1 below).

Looking simply at aggregate national figures, most (92.6%) of the 'additional' votes went to mainstream parties, slightly favouring the incumbent (at the time the UMP/UDI right), whilst the FN only took a small proportion. This ignores of course individual swings and only concerns the national level of vote. This explains why, in spite of the increase in its total number of votes between 2011 and 2012, the FN's vote share decreased from 19.2% in the cantonals (recall we are looking at the subset of 1,441 cantons with FN presence) to 15.6% in the legislatives (in those same 1,441 cantons).

That the incumbent won a slightly larger proportion of the additional vote is also consistent with the second-order hypothesis, which assumes that the ruling party suffers bigger losses in mid-term local or European elections, winning some of this support back in the first order arena – a rebalancing effect.

**Table 1 National vote shares in the 2011 cantonal elections and 2012 legislative elections**

	Canton 2011	Legis 2012	LEGISLATIVE MODEL				
Registered	16 933 082	17 242 211					
Votes	7 379 469	10 022 059					
Turnout	43.6	58.1					
Valid	7 193 776	9 870 745					
			diff. 2012-2011	% Surplus		% vote 2011	% vote 2012
Left	3 392 322	4 570 404	1 178 082	44.0	Opposition	47.2	46.3
Right	2 279 431	3 580 510	1 301 079	48.6	Incumbent	31.7	36.3
FN	1 379 971	1 539 652	159 681	6.0		19.2	15.6
Others	142 052	180 179	38 127	1.4		2.0	1.8
N cantons (1,441)	7 193 776	9 870 745	2 676 969	100.0		100.0	100.0

*Estimating support in the 2017 legislatives*

By assuming vote swings of similar magnitude, we apply the 2011-2012 pattern to the forthcoming 2017 legislatives, changes in voter support being estimated from the 2015 regional election. First, we assume the growth in the number of registered voters to be of similar magnitude to the average 5-year growth between legislative elections since 1997, and therefore we apply the 1.06 average multiplier to the 2012 number, yielding an expected 48.6 million registered voters in 2017 (see table 2).

**Table 2 growth of the French electorate across election years**

Registered voters in legislative elections (national)		
		<i>Multiplier</i>
1997	39 203 716	-
2002	40 969 239	1.05
2007	43 895 833	1.07
2012	46 082 104	1.05
	<i>Mean</i>	<b>1.06</b>
2012	46 082 104	
<b>exp. 2017</b>	<b>48 636 196</b>	

Next, we need to estimate turnout in the election, to identify the expected number of valid votes from the registered electorate. Turnout is also key for French legislative elections, where a candidate must poll 12.5% of registered voters to progress to the runoff (in contrast to the regional elections where only 10% of the valid vote is required). Given the trend to date in declining turnout across all levels of elections, turnout for the 2017 legislative elections is likely to be lower than in 2012 (at

57.2%). In this paper, however, we make no assumption about turnout and we simply provide a range of estimates of FN vote and seats by different levels of turnout.

For each level of turnout, out of an expected 48.6 million registered voters, we calculate the number of votes. From this, we calculate the expected valid vote cast (to exclude blank and spoiled ballots), using the voters/valid votes ratio of the 2012 legislative elections (0.98). This gives an estimated total of valid votes in the 2017 legislatives, which allows us to calculate the surplus from the regional elections.

We assume that changes in vote shares should be similar to those of the previous 2011-2012 electoral cycle, resulting in the incumbent (this time the left) winning 48.6% of those additional votes, the right-wing opposition taking 44%, with the remaining 6% going to the FN, representing only a small proportion of the additional votes in the 2017 legislative ballot. Other candidates would take 1.4% of the extra vote. Finally, from these, we estimate the total number of votes for each party/bloc in the 2017 legislative as the simple sum of the 2015 regional votes and their respective shares of the legislative surplus. Table 3 below illustrates how estimated figures are calculated based on an expected turnout of 55% in the 2017 legislatives.

**Table 3 vote shares, observed in the 2015 regional elections and expected in the 2017 legislative elections**

	Region 2015	Legis 2017					
Registered	45 299 289	48 636 196	Exp. Turnout=	55			
Votes	22 609 335	26 749 908	Ratio Vote/exp=	0.98	Ratio in 2012		
Turnout	49.9	55.0					
Valid	21 708 280	26 327 630					
			Exp. diff. 2017-2015	% Surplus		% vote 2015	% <b>vote 2017</b>
Left	8 140 702	10 385 830	2 245 128	48.6	Incumbent	37.5	<b>39.4</b>
Right	6 844 785	8 877 671	2 032 886	44.0	Opposition	31.5	<b>33.7</b>
FN	6 018 672	6 294 216	275 544	6.0		27.7	<b>23.9</b>
Others	704 121	769 913	65 792	1.4		3.2	<b>2.9</b>
All constituencies	21 708 280	26 327 630	4 619 350	100.0		100.0	100.0

In that case, the left would then win 39.4% of the national vote in the first round of the 2017 legislatives, the right would poll 33.7% and the FN 23.9% (the remaining 2.9% going to other minor candidates). Recall that these figures concern electoral blocs *in toto*, which in the case of the left includes the extreme left and the FG/PCF, as well as EELV and other minor left wing independent candidates (*divers gauche*). Unfortunately, the great amount of variability in party presence locally in

the 2011 cantonal elections does not allow us to look at vote shares for individual parties, nor does it allow the disaggregation of national vote down to the constituency level. Let us also note here that the expected 2017 vote share reflects the balance of forces which emerged from the 2015 regionals. The latter showed the left bloc at 37.5% of the national vote ahead of the right bloc at 31.7% and the FN at 27.7%, indicating primarily a substantial drop in support for the Republicans and their centrist allies. The decrease in mainstream right support was most evident in the 2015 regionals where the right lost nearly 5 percentage points from the departmental elections of March – whilst support for the left was steady at about 37%.

### *Estimating FN seats in the 2017 legislatives*

Based on these expected national vote shares in 2017, we can then recalculate the scores of the main three blocs in each constituency and run our forecast of FN seats based on adjusted voter shares, for different levels of turnout and taking into account the impact of the 12.5% legal threshold for runoff participation. Because turnout varies considerably between constituencies, producing different opportunities for parties by location, for each constituency we calculate the expected 2017 turnout based on the observed deviation from the national rate in the 2015 regional election. As indicated above, because party supply varied greatly across cantons in 2011, changes in vote shares can only be estimated in total volume at the national level, with the left replacing the mainstream right as the incumbent in 2017. We must assume therefore that the proportions of ‘additional’ votes taken by each of the main three blocs in the 2017 legislative ballot will be similar across all constituencies, using the aforementioned 2011-2012 ratios. This suggests a uniform first-order rebalancing towards both the incumbent and main opposition blocs, with the FN taking only a small proportion of the extra vote.

The likely FN seat tally will be conditional upon the competitive decisions taken by the left and right blocs, in particular the possible alliances on the left. In some cases, we assume previous patterns of cooperation between parties of the left and of the right. On the left, we assume independent candidates for the extreme left and the Front de Gauche (FG) / Parti Communiste. As regards the previous alliance between the Greens and the Communists, EELV leader Emmanuelle Cosse has pledged against another joint venture with the FG in 2017.<sup>1</sup> In regions where the FG and EELV ran together in 2015, we disaggregate their vote and estimate their respective shares using the 2014

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2016/01/09/les-ecologistes-ont-du-mal-a-digerer-leurs-regionales\\_4844393\\_823448.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2016/01/09/les-ecologistes-ont-du-mal-a-digerer-leurs-regionales_4844393_823448.html)



European elections, where the two parties competed individually. It is still not known, however, to what extent the Greens will seek to form another electoral pact with the PS in 2017. Consequently we test four different scenarios and estimate relative vote shares accordingly:

Scenario 1 (H1)	PS and EELV alliance across all constituencies
Scenario 2 (H2)	63 constituencies 'reserved' for EELV, all other constituencies PS (as in 2012)
Scenario 3 (H3)	17 constituencies with current EELV deputies reserved for EELV (assuming the PS will not run against outgoing EELV MPs)
Scenario 4 (H4)	Independent EELV candidates across all constituencies (the most likely scenario at the time of writing)

On the right, we anticipate that Les Républicains (LR) will continue cooperation with their centrist UDI and MODEM allies, as was the case in all but one region in the 2015 elections, while other right-wing parties such as Nicolas Dupont-Aignan's DLF and the UPR should run independently. Finally, we exclude minor regionalist parties and the Alliance Ecologiste Indépendante (AEI).

In each constituency, the second-round run-off threshold is calculated and used with the expected vote share of each individual party/alliance of parties to estimate who goes forward in 2017. Taking again a 55% turnout rate as an example, and assuming independent EELV candidates in all constituencies, the FN could progress to 278 run-offs. Contrast this with 59 in 2012, only one in 2007, 37 in 2002 and 132 in 1997, its halcyon legislative race to date, where its 'nuisance potential' was first coined. Just over half of the constituencies with an FN presence in the second round in 2017 would be three-way contests.

Finally, to estimate second-round performances, we calculate net changes by party for previous elections, and use these as a first indication of likely shifts in 2017. We use a combination of coefficients for vote transfers between the two rounds of the 2015 departmental and regional elections, which allows us to take into account the variation in electoral support for parties across different kinds of run-offs and regions. Each coefficient is simply computed at constituency level as the ratio of the percentage of valid votes between round 1 and 2, with ratios above a value of one indicating an increase in party vote share. However, because of the regional structure of competition, we have invariant run-offs across all constituencies within the same region. The Front républicain, with the second-placed mainstream candidate standing down to ensure the defeat of the FN, in Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur (PACA) and Nord-Pas-de-Calais – Picardie (NPDCP) means also that there is no way to test electoral swings in three-way runoffs in those two regions. In cases where our

hypothesized legislative run-off has a different format from that to the second round of the regional election, the earlier 2015 departmental elections are used as an alternative. In both cases, the coefficients allow the calculation of the share of the votes for all competing parties/blocs in the run-off, and therefore identify the winning candidate.

**Figure 1. Expected FN seats in the 2017 legislatures according to turnout and party competition on the left**

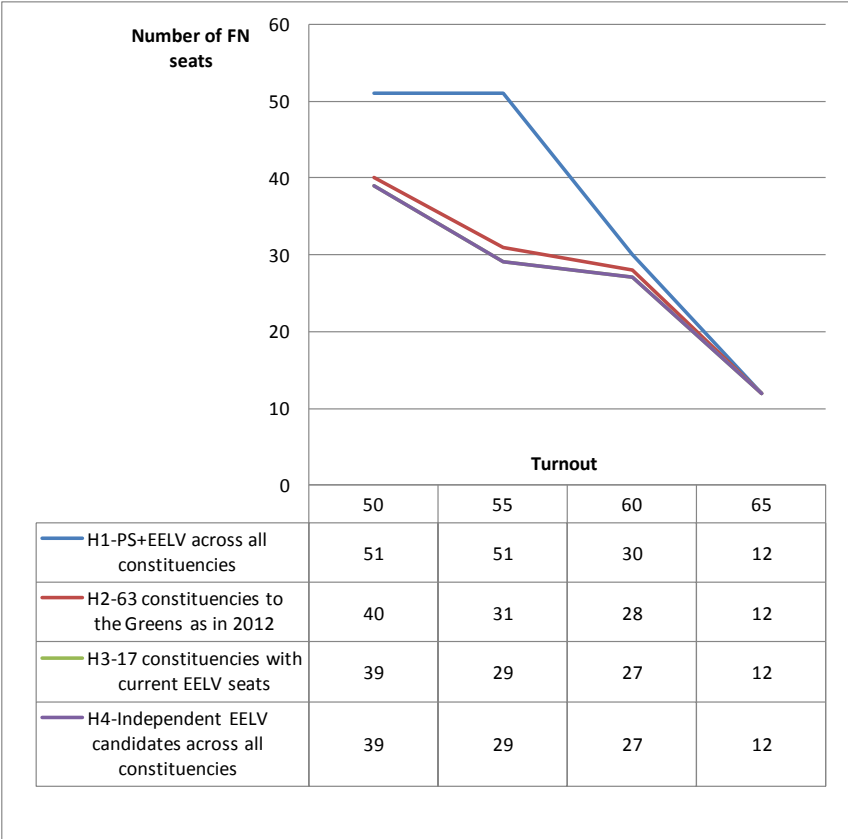


Figure 1 shows the distribution of expected FN seats in 2017 for various levels of turnout under each of the four hypothesized scenarios of left-wing party cooperation. There are some effects worth noting. First, left-wing unity benefits rather than weakens the FN vote. At any level of turnout, the number of FN seats equals or exceeds the other three scenarios. This reflects the competitive dynamics in second round run-offs since 2012. In 2015, cases of two-way contests between the FN and the left in particular showed higher support for the FN in the second round, suggesting that a significant tranche of mainstream right support may have radicalized since 2012. This produces more substantial swings from the moderate right to the FN, with conservative voters not moving over to left-wing candidates in the face of FN competition. In 2017, a generalized PS-EELV alliance across all constituencies would increase the presence of the left and therefore the number of FN-left duels and

three-way run-offs which tend to be more beneficial to the FN, resulting in larger numbers of FN seats.

Only at a higher level of turnout does the left alliance hold back the party – but no more than under any other scenario. The most likely scenario, H4, which will weaken the Left vis-à-vis the mainstream Right, conversely restricts the FN the most. If decline in turnout continues at the pace of previous legislative elections, a likely 55% of voters will take part, giving the FN 29 seats and the opportunity to form its own group in the National Assembly.

The largest returns would be expected from the FN's strongholds in NPDCP, PACA and Languedoc-Roussillon-Midi-Pyrénées (LRMP). The Northern region alone would give 14 seats to the FN, with the southern regions of PACA and LRMP providing an additional 6 and 5 seats respectively. Under this scenario, most FN leaders would win a legislative seat in 2017: Florian Philippot in Moselle (5706), Marion Maréchal-Le Pen in Vaucluse (8403), Gilbert Collard in Gard (3002), Marine Le Pen in Hénin-Beaumont (6211) and Louis Aliot in Pyrénées-Orientales (6601) – provided they all run in the same constituency as 2012.

Assuming a 65% turnout, however, the FN would only secure 12 seats in PACA and NPDCP. These 'safe seats' would include most notably the party's electoral fiefdoms of Hénin-Beaumont (6211) and Calais (6207) in the North. In PACA, seats would be won for instance in Marignane-Vitrolles (1312), Brignoles (8306), Draguignan (8308) and Carpentras (8403), as well as in the Orange constituency (8404) where the FN outperformed Jacques Bompard's Ligue du Sud in the 2015 regionals. At a higher level of turnout, Marion Maréchal-Le Pen would win reelection in Vaucluse whilst Gilbert Collard would be defeated by the left in a three-way contest in the department of Gard. In the Fréjus constituency, David Rachline would also fail to take the legislative seat from Les Républicains, as had already been the case against the UMP in 2012.

### *Discussion*

Given the focus on and expectations of FN performance in recent elections, a forecast of 29 seats looks conservative. Equally, given the reality of FN performance in those same elections, which has fallen short of expectations in many cases, a conservative forecast is probably required. We would emphasise that, in the nature of the nowcast, this model simply reflects the status quo in December 2015. Given the nature of our predictors, namely previous election results, we cannot update the estimate between now and the 2017 race. The outcome of the Presidential race, other campaign

events, and the state of public opinion between now and June 2017 will all undoubtedly vary, and as a result so will the vote and seat shares. Similarly, the level of turnout will prove crucial to the number of second round run-offs the FN can reach. However, we believe this model provides a useful benchmark for assessing the FN's performance across two rounds of an election with very different dynamics, and where – excluding the PR exception of 1986 – the number of FN deputies to date can be literally counted on the fingers of one hand. If the FN performs at the level suggested by this model, the move from a marginalised party with no national representative impact to a party with sufficient deputies to form a formal group in the National Assembly will mark as important a sea-change in the party's support as any electoral performance in its 45-year history.

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