


ARTICLE

# Going Local, Going Mainstream? Ethnographic Study of Two French Cities Governed by the Rassemblement National

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## Abstract

The government actions of populist radical right (PRR) parties have predominantly been scrutinized at the national level, leaving a critical aspect – their territorial foothold – largely unexplored. Through a comparative ethnographic study of two medium-sized French towns governed by the Rassemblement National since 2014, this article delves into how seizing municipal power has influenced the party's efforts towards mainstreaming. We examine the party's strategy, aimed at institutionalization, which relies on a blend of rhetoric emphasizing proximity, pragmatism, and non-partisan administration while preserving fundamental ideological elements of the radical right. This amalgamation of mainstreaming and radicalism, adaptive to different contexts and audiences, is termed 'adaptable ideology'. Our study makes significant contributions to two pivotal aspects of the literature: understanding the mainstreaming trajectory of PRR parties and exploring the recent, localist turn in the study of this political realm.

**Keywords:** populist radical right; mainstreaming; localism; Rassemblement National; (de)radicalization

The burgeoning significance of power accessibility and the integration of populist radical right (PRR) parties is a focal point in both scholarly and public debate (Akkerman and de Lange 2012; Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015; Albertazzi and Mueller 2013; Caiani and Graziano 2022; Dieckhoff et al. 2021). However, prevailing research has predominantly concentrated on the national domain, leaving sub-national arenas significantly understudied. Nevertheless, the current surge of these parties at the local level, coupled with their ability to anchor territorially and mobilize local sentiments and territorial divides ideologically (Fitzgerald 2018), has urged a departure from a certain 'methodological nationalism' (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). This 'localist turn' in the literature (Chou et al. 2022) emerges as particularly pertinent in examining the mainstreaming and ideological evolution

of PRR parties. This holds true, especially in the municipal sphere, conventionally perceived as less ideological and partisan (Barber 2014; Cann 2018; Lucas 2021; Oliver 2012), ‘the realm of administration, rather than the realm of politics’ (Drápalová and Wegrich 2021: 645–647). Consequently, ‘subnational arenas are often assumed to play a role in the mainstreaming process of radical parties’ (Paxton and Peace 2021: 2).

This article seeks to challenge the aforementioned assumption and, more expansively, explore the interplay between the PRR’s attainment of local power and its processes of mainstreaming. This pursuit first aims to address the dearth of systematic research on the subject. The second rationale is theoretically driven, revolving around the ambivalent status of local politics. On one hand, this sphere undeniably caters to everyday needs and perspectives, inherently leaning towards a (more) pragmatic orientation. On the other, the administrative actions of PRR parties receive comparatively less scrutiny, not just from researchers but also from the media, potentially resulting in surprises in terms of the radicality and ideological undercurrents that remain relatively unnoticed. Furthermore, from a purely theoretical standpoint, a robust pragmatic dimension in politics does not necessarily imply a de-ideologization or de-radicalization; instead, it might signify a distinct articulation of parties’ ideological frameworks compared to national politics.

We empirically test these considerations by analysing two municipalities under the governance of the French Rassemblement National (RN), formerly the Front National (FN), since 2014. Specifically, this article endeavours to address the following question: Does attaining local municipal power lead to a moderation of the party, particularly concerning the core ideological tenets of law and order and nativism within the PRR?

The French party presents a particularly intriguing and paradoxical case: while being one of Western Europe’s oldest and most voted-for PRR parties, a long-standing *cordon sanitaire* by all French democratic forces – that is, their decision not to form a national alliance with this party – has hitherto blocked its access to national power. However, following years of attempts to rebrand itself and ultimately integrate into the mainstream (Mayer 2013), the party achieved unprecedented access to power positions in the 2014 municipal elections, gaining control over several local administrations (Ivaldi and Evans 2020). This amalgamation of electoral growth, exclusion from national governmental positions, and increasing access to local power makes the French case particularly suitable for studying the nexus between the PRR’s mainstreaming, moderation, and the local level.

Methodologically, to address our research question, we embraced an ethnographic approach to comparatively investigate two small to medium-sized towns governed by the RN since 2014. These selected towns, located in the south-eastern region of France – a historical stronghold of the party in cultural and electoral terms – represent relatively new developments in local governance. Our article relies on an innovative methodological approach that merges the strengths of qualitative/ethnographic single-case studies with a comparative perspective. The data set was gathered through ethnographic observations of local political and party life, encompassing 42 in-depth interviews with members of the RN municipal team and grassroots party militants, along with 30 interviews involving their primary opponents (individuals elected in the municipality and/or actively engaged in civil society).

In the initial section of our study, we delve into the connections between the PRR's processes of mainstreaming and local politics, highlighting the distinct relevance of our cases for understanding these dual dimensions. Following the exposition of the research context and design, our focus shifts to two primary empirical dimensions that emerged from the comparative analysis of our data: first, the strategy of de-demonization adopted by local RN leaders upon assuming power, and second, the persistence of radical right ideology in the RN's local governance, particularly concerning pivotal issues like security and nativism. We introduce the concept of *adaptable ideology* to showcase how the party's ideological core undergoes reformulation, adapting to diverse contexts and audiences without undergoing substantial de-radicalization. By accentuating this amalgamation of mainstream tendencies and radicalism at the local level, our article substantiates the ongoing discourse on the subnational politics of the PRR, their escalating access to local institutions and, ultimately, the potential broader implications of this territorial dynamic. The article also aims to foster dialogue between quantitative and qualitative approaches in studying the PRR by spotlighting the epistemic advantages of ethnography in revealing the 'hidden face' of mainstreaming processes – specifically, the ambiguities, contradictions and ambivalences unveiled through immersive work on these parties' everyday existence across various territories.

### **Access to power and mainstreaming, between national and local**

Lately, the study of the PRR's mainstreaming has garnered significant academic attention (see, among others, Akkerman et al. 2016; Herman and Muldoon 2018; Moffitt 2022). Despite the prolific nature of the debate, critiques have emerged about the vague employment of the concept of mainstreaming (Brown et al. 2023; Moffitt 2022), with a lack of specificity in empirically distinguishing its theoretical dimensions, which are, according to the literature, the de-radicalization of issue positions, expansion of programmes, softening of anti-establishment stances and an intensified focus on the party's competence (Paxton and Peace 2021).

This clarification of the concept allows us to concentrate our analysis primarily on the first of these dimensions. Indeed, the level of ideological radicalism remains a crucial issue in mainstreaming processes, especially for PRR parties in power, given the significance of the topic for democratic systems (Mudde 2019). Numerous studies have scrutinized how PRR political entities have grappled with governance (Akkerman and de Lange 2012; Albertazzi and Mueller 2013; Kaltwasser and Taggart 2015), particularly examining the effects of governmental responsibilities on radicality and core ideological traits (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015; Dieckhoff et al. 2021). While 'inclusion-moderation' theories (Tepe 2019) suggest a moderating effect, other empirical findings present a more nuanced picture (Akkerman et al. 2016; Caiani and Graziano 2022; Zulianello 2019). They demonstrate that de-radicalization is not an automatic process but depends on multiple factors, such as the party's political tradition and strategies (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2010; Bartha et al. 2020), internal organization and leadership (Bernhard 2020; Zaslove 2012) and the power balance between radical and mainstream forces in coalitions (Askim et al. 2022; Capaul and Ewert 2021).

While the majority of preceding studies have centred on the national level, there has been an escalating focus on the ascension of populist and/or radical right parties to *local* power in recent years, approached from various perspectives. These perspectives span from exploring the influence of PRR parties on local immigration policies (Bolin et al. 2014) or healthcare policies (Falkenbach 2022), to comparative analyses of different PRR administrations (Paxton 2023; Paxton and Peace 2021; Peace and Paxton 2023), and studies of the interplay between populism and technocracy in governing major cities (Drápalová and Wegrich 2021).

This resurgence of interest in the PRR's hold on local power stems from several interconnected reasons. First, it has been less systematically explored (Faury 2021; Paxton 2022), despite the significant role subnational anchorage and territorial organization play in fostering party growth (van Kessel and Albertazzi 2021). Second, there is the ongoing ideological reclamation of localism and (Fitzgerald 2018) territorial affiliations by the PRR, mobilizing territorial divisions and rekindling anti-modern, traditionalist, anti-urban sentiments (Le Galès 2021). Thirdly, the access to local power presents intricate empirical and theoretical quandaries. On one hand, the pragmatic nature of local political arenas (Barber 2014; Cann 2018; Lucas 2021; Oliver 2012) might suggest potential stronger effects of de-radicalization at that level compared to the national level. However, studies focused on the Italian (Northern) League have revealed the opposite. Despite championing good local governance and the valorization of local identities as its ideological pillars, this party has leveraged its widespread institutional presence at the municipal level to implement stringent law-and-order policies (Gargiulo 2021) and locally focused welfare chauvinism (LAW 2022), significantly validating the party's core ideology. Recent contributions have also shed light on how administrative politics, due to its problem-solving nature, might facilitate an ideological alliance between populism and technocracy (Drápalová and Wegrich 2021), paving the way for new research avenues on technopopulism.

Amidst this 'localist turn' in the discourse (Chou et al. 2022), the Front National – renamed Rassemblement National in 2018 – stands out as a particularly compelling case. Established in 1972, the party (henceforth RN) ranks among Western Europe's oldest and most electorally successful PRR organizations (Mudde 2007: 41). Nonetheless, it embodies a notable paradox: despite its remarkable electoral success, the party has failed to integrate into the mainstream or to secure national power, due to the enduring cordon sanitaire that has surrounded it for decades – both institutionally and societally (Igounet 2014).

The drive to overcome this prolonged isolation was central to the former party leader Marine Le Pen, with her 'de-demonization' strategy (Mayer 2013), which aimed to reshape her political entity into a more acceptable and less divisive party (Dézé 2015; Mayer 2018; Stockemer 2017) in order to attain access to power. The pivotal name-change from FN to RN in 2018 epitomized this strategy, reflecting the aspiration to broaden the party's consensus and social base.<sup>1</sup> This mainstreaming strategy involved a renewed emphasis on a populist style, centred around Marine Le Pen as a symbol of renewal and a pivotal figure in expanding the party's social foothold among young people and women (Stockemer and Barisione 2017), alongside positioning the party as the custodian of French republican values and liberal democracy (Mayer 2018).

Another crucial element of this de-demonization strategy involved a programme of territorial anchorage (Igounet 2014) that tempered the party's historical nationalism by infusing it with localist nuances. This strategic shift paid dividends: during the 2014 municipal elections, the RN secured victory in 12 municipalities,<sup>2</sup> marking one of the party's most significant forays into institutional power. Subsequently, in the electoral round of 2020, eight of these RN municipal teams were re-elected, while the party clinched victory in six new municipalities.

However, these victories in 2014 and 2020 were not the party's first experiences of local governance. In the 1990s, the FN triumphed in four municipalities (Toulon, Marignane, and Orange in 1995, and Vitrolles in 1997), sparking concern within the French public sphere. Governance in these initial 'FN cities' was characterized by intense ideological fervour, particularly in the implementation of policies centred on the 'national priority' (*préférence nationale*). These policies encompassed welfare chauvinism and exclusionist agendas, notably in Vitrolles, where the municipality provided a financial bonus solely for French children born to European parents. This *préférence nationale* approach, deemed discriminatory and unconstitutional under French law (Rousseau 2023), sparked significant media and political controversy and was ultimately overturned by judicial intervention.

Two decades later, facing a renewed opportunity for local influence and institutionalization, the party recognized the necessity of evading over-ideologization in municipal governance. Consequently, this recent and unprecedented access to local power has been under intense scrutiny: a centralized control strategy employed a 'window-dressing' approach (Paxton and Peace 2021), seeking to demonstrate the party's governance capabilities while distancing the party from its far-right reputation (Sabéran 2014). Therefore, the access to local power becomes a potential catalyst for moderation within the RN – a premise that our fieldwork-based research aims to investigate.

## Research context and methodology

Our study zeroes in on two of the 12 cities conquered by the RN in 2014, both situated in the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur (PACA) region of south-east France. PACA presents an ideal landscape for studying the party's mainstreaming and de-radicalization, being considered its ideological and electoral cradle. First, the region houses the party's strongest and most sustained electoral base since its emergence in the French political arena in 1984 (Gombin 2010). Second, the RN's electorate in PACA predominantly comprises the lower-middle and upwardly mobile working classes, diverging from the poorer and more precarious electorate of the de-industrialized north – a secondary stronghold for the party (Huc 2019). This socioeconomic composition bears significant ideological implications. While the blue-collar base in the north represents a more recent electoral expansion aligned with the party's 'new' social message (Peace and Paxton 2023), the south-east embodies the party's historical ideological core: staunchly anti-leftist and anti-immigrant, with a distinct penchant for law-and-order policies (Huc 2019). Moreover, the return to France of considerable numbers of *pieds-noirs* (European settlers) following the Algerian war of independence (1954–1962), coupled with

a historical military presence (Bayle 2014), nurtured a territorially rooted, militarist nostalgia for France's colonial past. This cultural context significantly bolstered support for Le Pen's party (Veugelers 2019). These regional idiosyncrasies further facilitated cultural overlaps between the party and the mainstream right, leading to increasingly structured local political alliances (Ivaldi and Evans 2020), thereby establishing the region as a pivotal outpost for the RN's mainstreaming efforts.

We have assigned the pseudonyms 'Middletown' and 'Littletown' to the two towns under study due to their respective sizes – approximately (60,000 inhabitants for Middletown and 20,000 for Littletown).<sup>3</sup> The population difference bears significance since mayors of smaller towns typically contend with fewer resources to execute public policies compared to their counterparts in larger municipalities. Consequently, they are often perceived as less capable of effecting ideologically distinctive actions (Paxton 2020: 7; Peace and Paxton 2023: 19). Thus, including a small city in our comparison enables an analysis of whether the variance in institutional power influences ideological radicalism.

Despite this contrast, the two cases exhibit several notable similarities that facilitate comparison: shared territory, a similar political subculture, and analogous political histories. Both towns have been under continuous governance by right-wing parties affiliated with the *droite républicaine* for decades. Therefore, Middletown and Littletown represent typical instances of the RN's prolonged journey towards mainstream acceptance. Initially, they were sites of strong electoral support but political isolation; subsequently, they became part of the recent wave of institutional success in 2014, reaffirmed in the subsequent 2020 municipal elections, now standing as laboratories for the RN.

Both cases underwent independent ethnographic studies, employing the same qualitative approach. We conducted 72 semi-structured interviews (for more details, see the Appendix in the Supplementary Material) over a six-month period in Middletown and 15 months in Littletown. Interviews encompassed two participant categories: (1) elected RN local officials, local RN party members, and governing allies in the municipality ( $n = 42$ ); and (2) key figures from the opposition, including city council members, representatives from associations, and informal groups ( $n = 30$ ).<sup>4</sup> This broad selection allowed us to extend our focus beyond the party and its local governance to encompass opposition forces within civil society. Additionally, we engaged in participant observation at various public events, spanning city council sessions, official appointments, and cultural and social gatherings.

Regarding fieldwork access, all research objectives were fully disclosed and successfully negotiated with the party branches. However, the case of Middletown was characterized by a significant level of distrust and a controlling stance towards the researcher. This aspect, as we will see shortly, significantly influenced the research outcomes.

### The RN in local power: 'Common sense' politics

As previously mentioned, the RN has allocated substantial political resources at the municipal level, deeming it a pivotal battleground in the de-demonization process. The wave of RN-led municipalities secured in 2014 and 2020 were presented as 'showcases' to exhibit the party's capacity for responsible governance, moving away from excessive ideological pursuits.

According to our findings, in both Littletown and Middletown, a ‘politics of depoliticization’ (Luukkonen and Sirviö 2019) relies on a fusion of two narrative strategies: proximity and pragmatism. First, in both instances, mayors adopt the persona of the ‘friendly local’ (*l'enfant du pays*, as articulated by party leaders in both towns), positioning themselves as intimately connected to residents and their everyday issues. For instance, shortly after being elected in Littletown, the new mayor initiated monthly neighbourhood visits, engaging with residents’ concerns to cultivate a ‘personalized proximity’:

[Neighbourhood X.] Every month the mayor organizes a meeting in a neighbourhood of Littletown, to hear the local residents’ concerns. During the meetings, the mayor spends a lot of time engaging in informal conversations with the inhabitants. He shakes hands, makes jokes, insisting that everyone call him by his first name. During these conversations, he often brings up childhood memories, which gives him an opportunity to remind people that he grew up in Littletown, thus proving his local identity and attachment to the community. (Ethnographic notes, Littletown)

This style aligns with the more direct nature of interactions between representatives and citizens at the local level (Drápalová and Wegrich 2021). It also resonates with the profile of populist movements, emphasizing one-man leadership and direct engagement. Alongside this, there is an apolitical glorification of locality, where leaders advocate for ‘the city first’. This prioritization of local interests often contrasts with national partisan politics, enabling local leaders to criticize the national government indirectly, while distancing themselves from the RN’s ideological label.

The second facet of this local-centric narrative revolves around the strong emphasis RN municipal leaders put on pragmatic and efficient policymaking. Similar to findings from Hénin-Beaumont (Paxton and Peace 2021), both our cases centre their municipal communication strategy on infrastructure enhancement, city attractiveness and financial sustainability. In particular, executive teams in both Littletown and Middletown have underscored their city’s financial clean-up, such as the reduction of the public debt without increasing local taxes – a campaign pledge in all cities won by the RN in 2014.

In Middletown, the financial aspect held particular relevance, considering the gravity of accrued debt from previous decades marked by persistent political continuity, corruption, clientelism and financial scandals. To address this, the municipal council opted to sell off public assets and land – a move aligned with the party’s strategy of professionalization and ‘technocratization’ at the national level (Ivaldi 2016). This was aimed at demonstrating its credibility and competence in responsible governance. In a city where green spaces and public areas are already scarce due to the dominance of the building sector in the local economy, this decision sparked concern and criticism from political opponents and civil society. It led to polarization and the mobilization of certain associations and groups.

However, local RN leaders portrayed these policies as ‘common sense’ initiatives, transcending traditional political divisions and focusing on addressing residents’ daily concerns:

In the end, to be honest with you, it is all about common sense. The files on my desk are about everyday life – the condition of the roads, public parking, schools, and local planning and management. Ninety per cent of the things we deal with are not about left or right politics, but about common sense. (Mayor's chief of staff, Middletown)

This emphasis on 'common sense' politics resonates with what scholars term 'populist pragmatism' (Peace and Paxton 2023) or 'technocratic populism', prioritizing efficiency, outcomes and performance over ideology (Drápalová and Wegrich 2021: 645). It represents a method of depoliticizing local governance, aiming to distance itself from PRR ideology, which was crucial if the party was to overcome the stigma of previous municipal administration experiences.

However, confining our analysis to these 'depoliticization' strategies in the RN's local governance would present an incomplete picture. We contend that the process of local mainstreaming has not led to the eradication of core ideological traits. In the next section, we focus on the enduring prominence of the PRR's distinctive ideological facets – specifically, law-and-order policies and nativism – demonstrating their continued centrality in local power management.

### The persistence of radical right ideology in RN local governance

In both Middletown and Littleton, security has been established to be of paramount concern during the RN mayors' tenures. Measures to improve it include augmenting police numbers, acquiring new equipment and updating police vehicles. This alignment reflects the ideological stance of the PRR political faction (Mudde 2007, 2019) and, particularly, the historical inclination of the FN/RN, marked by a robust emphasis on law and order, often intertwined with anti-immigrant and anti-Islamic sentiments (Igounet 2014; Ivaldi 2016):

In Middletown, from 2014 onwards, we decided that the police should be considered sacred. That's where we have to put the money, because people don't feel safe any more. ... So, for the first time, our local police truly serve the people. ... Because the national police don't do enough to be considered the front line, not any more. These days it's the local police that do the everyday work on safety. (Mayor's chief of staff, Middletown)

[After the elections of 2014] The emphasis was placed on safety from the beginning. So, we have basically tripled the number of serving officers. ... We were given carte blanche to ensure safety. Before [under the previous mayor] we had a 'cushy' police force. ... Now, when we recruit, it is for real police work, not [just] municipal work. ... Some colleagues [in a nearby town] tell us that when they talk to thugs [*racaille*], they say: 'We don't go to Littleton any more, because as soon as we get there, the police are behind us five minutes later.' Even if they are walking around peacefully, without doing anything wrong. (Chief of the municipal police, Littleton)



Despite their different sizes, which entail distinct local political and financial capabilities, both Littletown and Middletown adopt a similar stance on security and law enforcement. This alignment emphasizes a localized approach to safety, allowing the party to contrast local authority with the perceived weakness and inefficiency of the national level. This strategic communication portrays a rootedness in the area and a close relationship with citizens, in line with the personalized proximity discussed earlier. The emphasis is on robust and authoritative security, which employs ‘real’ police measures to keep ‘thugs’ (*racaille*, a term in France carrying connotations of youth, social marginalization and crime, often with racist undertones) out of urban spaces, as paraphrased by Littletown’s police chief. Interestingly, this vision of strong security is presented as part of the same results-oriented management style, where efficiency and tangible outcomes – such as decreased numbers of burglaries – are highlighted in both cases. This law-and-order approach intertwines with the rhetoric of ‘common sense politics’ previously mentioned.

Now, moving on to the second ideological aspect observed in the comparison – nativism – the RN has opted to downplay and soften its discourse, even at the local municipal level (Igounet 2014; Sabéran 2014). Echoing earlier research, nativist themes rarely find explicit mention in mayoral statements (Peace and Paxton 2023: 12). However, beyond the official communication channels, anti-immigration sentiments persist in the party’s local political agenda in Littletown and Middletown, albeit less conspicuously. For example, in Littletown, the RN mayor’s demeanour can range from highly technical and detached when presenting the city’s urban plan to occasional displays of alignment with the party’s electoral supporters, as observed in a neighbourhood meeting:

The meeting takes place in a town hall; the mayor and his councillor are on a small stage, facing an audience of about 15 people. The meeting lasts more than an hour and the mayor is asked questions focused mostly on parking problems, the state of the roads, etc. Regularly during the meeting, these issues are linked to the ‘problem’ of the Muslim presence in the city, e.g. noise pollution during Ramadan. This is also the case when issues of cleanliness are raised. When the discussion focuses on the uncontrolled dumping of rubbish in the streets, the mayor recounts an anecdote, smiling: ‘Let me tell you, yesterday I found a pile [of rubbish] that was insurmountable [laughter in the hall] ... Well, there were some drums of ketchup. I think I know where they come from [he smiles; some laughter in the audience]. It’s halal ketchup!’ [general laughter] (Ethnographic notes, Littletown)

In this example, ideological cues are subtly conveyed through an ironic code with Islamophobic undertones, associating Muslims (‘halal ketchup’) with concepts of filth and decay. These instances of ‘coded racial appeals’ (Haney López 2013) are more than mere anecdotes, especially at the local level. Such discreet ideological appeals serve to reassure the core local electorate without featuring prominently in the party’s official communication. This holds particular importance in a small municipality like Littletown, where the mayor has limited political means to appease voters.

The scenario in Middletown differs slightly. The difficulty encountered in gaining fieldwork access proved indicative of stringent control by the local party leadership to avoid allegations of extremism (clear control of the mayor and his inner circle on militants' interactions and statements, a centralized communication strategy, etc.). Alongside the standardized responses on contentious issues during interviews, the data revealed variations in open racist viewpoints, typically inversely proportional to the interviewees' visibility, power and prestige. This aligns with the town's political significance, particularly scrutinized by the media and public after being a key 2014 conquest. Despite this high level of control, the municipality faced a major scandal involving an RN municipal councillor, which evolved into a legal procedure. A racist Facebook post led to his temporary suspension by the mayor, followed by his eventual reinstatement.

However, institutional racism in Middletown was less associated with public displays and more with specific decisions conveying xenophobic messages. For instance, an aggressive policy of slashing support for social centres was implemented during the mayor's initial term. Social centres in France are important spaces of proximity, partially financed by public funds. They provide assistance and organize cultural, pedagogical and social initiatives at the neighbourhood level. Two of the existing three centres were closed, and the remaining one suffered considerable cutbacks:

In the Villebelle neighbourhood [a socially fragile area with high numbers of immigrants or French citizens of North African origin] where I work with children ... it is problematic, because basically the mayor does not want to hear about the social centres. He closed the social centre in La Douane [another working-class neighbourhood with a high ethnic population, socially and ethno-culturally segregated from the rest of the city]. He also closed the one in Villeverte [another poor neighbourhood] because the director employed a manager who was a socialist and was also elected to the municipal council, where she opposed the mayor. (Member of neighbourhood association and volunteer in a local social centre)

The mayor's decision had three primary implications, all benefiting the party. It bolstered political control over the public apparatus, sidelining dissenting voices. This illiberal stance towards civil society was confirmed in interviews with local association members, who raised concerns about appointments in high-ranking positions. The president of a democratic vigilance association recounted, 'they try to insert their men everywhere. The last case made it into the local newspaper, involving a big association with a substantial budget.' The second objective of the cuts was to fortify the party's base identity and ideology by clashing with 'the leftists'. Third, it aligned with the RN's traditional neoliberal approach to welfare expenditure, contrasting with Marine Le Pen's recent 'social' narrative targeting the working classes (Dézé 2015). An overall xenophobic dimension unifies these three goals, particularly in highly ethnically segregated areas, like those predominantly composed of people from the Maghreb. Therefore, the mayor's targeted cuts had significant ethnic implications, even if these were not officially declared.

A further, major illiberal aspect in the municipal attitude towards local civil society was the punitive attitude against critical associations on various issues, from ideological concerns like racism to more neutral ones like urban development policies. The most frequently observed retaliatory tactic involved attempts to shut down physical meeting spaces under municipal jurisdiction. (The president of a neighbourhood association said: ‘The RN took us to court and is attempting to take away our headquarters. This distinguishes them from the old right-wing mayors.’)

## Discussion and conclusion

The goal of this article has been to bridge the subnational gap in the study of PRR parties, particularly their process of mainstreaming upon assuming municipal office. By focusing comparatively on two southern French towns governed by the RN since 2014, we have delved into how local power and localism as an ideology facilitate the party’s mainstreaming. This article relies on an immersive ethnographic approach that enabled an in-depth analysis of the sociopolitical management of a PRR party in local governance, potentially extending its validity to other cases and contexts. The following remarks are rooted in this bottom-up logic. Derived from our case studies, we highlight dynamics that might emerge elsewhere, by employing a logic of analogy rather than statistical replicability. In this process, we identify pivotal themes crucial for the study of the PRR in local governance.

The RN case illustrates that the local level does not inherently possess ‘mainstreaming power’. Contrasting municipalities won by Jean-Marie Le Pen’s party in the 1990s and those gained in 2014 reveals distinct outcomes. Jean-Marie Le Pen’s first victories led to highly ideologized governance, while the later ones adhered to the ‘window-dressing’ (Paxton and Peace 2021) strategy established at the national party level. In this strategy, localism emerges as a vital tool for legitimizing local government action, substantiated through two primary elements. One element is what we called ‘pragmatic efficiency’, which de-emphasizes political ideologies in favour of efficiency-oriented choices, aligning with recent research on party action at the local level (Paxton and Peace 2021). The other is ‘personalized proximity’ – that is, an emphasis on typically populist elements of leadership and disintermediation between local politics and ‘the people’. This aligns with other recent research, confirming a national party strategy (Paxton and Peace 2021) configured as ‘national localism’ arising from the interplay between central directives and local implementation. Additionally, the recourse to an apparently apolitical, ‘what works’ narrative contributes to debates regarding the potential connections between populism and technocracy (Drápalová and Wegrich 2021). This alliance might be highly functional, appealing to non-political principles in decision-making: the people and the *techné* (Bickerton and Invernizzi 2021).

These findings add two main points to this debate. First, we distinguished and reconciled populism and radical right elements in the analysis, which we believe is a crucial aspect. In our cases, the appeal to technicity (pragmatism and efficiency) and populism (disintermediation and simplification) legitimizes radical right contents and messages such as security and nativism. Second, this mix of technicality

and populism works particularly well in conjunction with localism, precisely because the horizon of proximity and the focus on everyday problems reinforces the idea of a politics *super partes*, dictated simply by common sense. Hence, focusing on the local level might be pivotal in studying young and/or just locally institutionalized parties – such as Alternative für Deutschland – leveraging the local level to access the national mainstream.

Our second major finding revolves around ‘adaptable ideology’, coined to describe a process that allows the party to performatively display radical right ideological elements according to circumstances and audiences. This selective and adaptive process manifests differently in Littletown, where an overtly racist institutional discourse persists on a rhetorical level, from Middletown, where such rhetoric is more controlled. However, this rhetoric seeps into local policies, particularly in the reduction of social centres and structures of sociocultural integration. The classic liberal policy of cutting social expenditures – that is, the closure of the social centres – turned out to be a powerful instrument of social exclusion on an ethnic basis, as the cuts impacted neighbourhoods that were strongly segregated in this respect. This aspect warrants further investigation: if confirmed on a larger scale, it could facilitate the reintroduction of an ‘indirect national preference’, enacted through spatialized policies of social expenditure cuts disadvantaging ‘the strangers’. These results in turn emphasize the importance of the municipality’s size in influencing public communication and policy implementation.

Beyond the RN’s specific case, these findings suggest two significant directions for future debates and empirical research. First, studying local PRR policies, like implementing locally based welfare chauvinism and exclusionism (Gargiulo 2021), and testing territorially circumscribed programmes is extendable nationwide (Paxton 2023). The spatial element might play a crucial role in making discrimination possible while formally concealing it, emphasizing the need to analyse PRR policies and actions with sensitivity to territories, space and spatialization – especially in contexts that ghettoize ethnic minorities such as France (Safi 2013).

Second, adaptable ideology in Middletown combines with an illiberal attitude towards critical voices and an attempt to build hegemony over local associative networks. These results, indicative of democratic backsliding and sociopolitical polarization, highlight the significance of local arenas in gauging the distance between PRR forces’ self-representation and their effective institutional practices once in power.

We conclude with two final considerations. First, theoretically, our research results confirm the necessity, as previously emphasized (Brown et al. 2023; Moffitt 2022), for a more precise use of the concept of mainstreaming. Our research revealed processes of institutionalization and effective access to the mainstream that do not imply the abandonment of radical ideological traits. Rather, these are achieved through strategic management of rhetoric and communication. Hence, our study illustrates a case of mainstreaming occurring without ideological de-radicalization, with radical ideological elements that persist in subtler forms. Second, the imperative to address carefully the ideological dimension of mainstreaming also pertains to the article’s methodological and epistemological contribution. We believe that the ethnographic approach, in this regard, can be very helpful, alongside the incorporation of critical voices, conflicts and polarization

processes generated by the action of PRR parties in government. Indeed, the immersive nature of ethnography often unveils, at least partially, the social desirability bias of interviewing PRR militants, exposing the 'dark side' of their political actions. This serves as a crucial corrective to existing studies that might overlook such subtle radicalism by relying solely on public statements and interviews. For these reasons, we argue that ethnography and qualitative methods are extremely useful for studying PRR parties (Martin 2022), especially at the subnational level, where an in-depth understanding of the local context is paramount.

**Supplementary material.** The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2024.4>.

**Data availability statement.** Due to the qualitative nature of the research, and in accordance with the advice of the Ethics Committee of our host institutions, research data are not available, as they would compromise the non-recognizability and privacy standards of the research.

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**Ethics statement.** The paper meets the EU and national legal and ethical requirements of the countries where the task of raising ethical issues is to be carried out. We are also aware that data protection is a fundamental right, guaranteed by European law and enshrined in Article 8 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. In consideration of both these legal obligations, and our deontological duties as researchers, we declare that the protection of the physical and moral integrity of individuals involved in the research has been respected at every stage of the research. The data presented have been fully pseudonymized (including geographical locations). Both studies were approved by the ethics committees of the respective institutions.

## Notes

- 1 In this article we will mainly use the party's current name, Rassemblement National, except when discussing events that precede 2018, when we will use the abbreviation FN or FN/RN.
- 2 If we include Béziers and Camaret-sur-Aigues, where non-party candidates were endorsed by the RN.
- 3 The two towns and the interviewees have been pseudonymized due to legal and deontological reasons: one of the two cases was indeed part of a wider study, financed by the European Commission, which imposed an anonymization or pseudonymization protocol. The information provided about the territorial context counterbalances this restriction, by giving a nuanced picture of the sociopolitical context.
- 4 See the data availability statement at the end of the article.

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