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Allez votez!

Researchers in France overwhelmingly oppose the far right and can stamp out its rise by turning out to register their disapproval.

As France prepares to vote on Sunday in the first of two rounds to elect a president for the next five years, it's worth recalling the shock waves that reverberated across the country on 21 April 2002, when Jean-Marie Le Pen, the leader of the National Front, narrowly made it into the second-round run-off. In response, an estimated 2 million people took to the streets in protest. Jacques Chirac, the centre-right candidate, went on to be elected with 82% of the vote.

Fast-forward 15 years, and Marine Le Pen, who took the helm of the National Front in 2011, is omnipresent in the media. Most commentators have taken it as a given that she will easily qualify for the second round, and there is little of the shock and disbelief of 2002.

Researchers in France, as we report this week, are solidly ranged against Le Pen (see page 277). Most, after all, are middle-class intellectuals and staunchly pro-European. Europe seems to figure most prominently among researchers' concerns in the highly unlikely event that Le Pen should be elected.

Le Pen has promised to renegotiate European Union membership and has promised a referendum on France's place in Europe and on leaving the euro. But she has been vague on details, and for good reason. Opposition to Brussels and the EU make for good election-campaign rhetoric. But even if soft Euro-scepticism is widespread in France, more than two-thirds of French people, including many among Le Pen's electorate, have no appetite for leaving.

Another paradox is that the National Front's intolerance is similarly out of touch with the bulk of French society. The annual report published last month by the French National Consultative Commission on Human Rights, an independent state watchdog, found that tolerance continues to increase in French society, with a broad rejection of racism and xenophobia, and increased acceptance of minorities.

Conducted since 1990, the commission's surveys have shown that tolerance has risen with each new generation and with the progressive increase in levels of advanced education in the population. Counter-intuitively perhaps, this year's report also said that events such as the terrorist attacks in France and the refugee crisis had not dented the large increase in tolerance over the past few years.

But the commission rightly cautioned that everyone has tolerance and intolerance within them. Indeed, social science tells us that people might not care much about, say, immigration day-to-day, but with attention they can easily come to believe that it is a major issue for the country.

Many social and political scientists are taking an interest in populism, the idea that has helped to normalize extremist parties such as the National Front and banalize their theses. It comes from perhaps an unlikely quarter — once purely an academic concept, populism has been uncontrollably released into the wild, with disastrous results.

Yet populism alone — defined roughly as an ideology that views society as being made up of two antagonistic groups, with a homogeneous, pure 'people' struggling against a corrupt elite — has

little utility or meaning. The left-wing Spanish party Podemos is populist but pro-European, progressive and inclusive, and it staunchly defends minorities, including refugees. It has almost nothing in common with the National Front, which is also 'populist'.

In his bid to stay in the presidential race, the centre-right candidate François Fillon has increasingly shifted to the far right and has co-opted many of Le Pen's themes. Social scientists rightly see this co-opting of far-right policies by mainstream parties as being as dangerous to liberal democracy as populist far-right parties themselves — or perhaps even more so in the long run.

When the time to vote comes around, the French would do well to bear in mind that Jean-Marie Le Pen's success in the first round in 2002 did not result from a surge in support for his ideas. Le Pen's share of the registered vote was no different from the low levels he had obtained in other presidential elections. His success was down to record levels of abstention, and a dispersion in the centre-left vote towards smaller parties. One of the few routes to victory by Marine Le Pen in a second-round contest would be a high turnout of her voters and a low turnout of her opponent's. So the message to scientists and others in France is clear — *allez votez!* ■

“Populism has been uncontrollably released into the wild, with disastrous results.”

Help yourselves

Cutting funding for research in foreign aid would make the United States less competitive.

With severe cuts proposed for US agencies that handle environmental and health research, it might seem that scientists can't prioritize the possible dismantling of US foreign-aid programmes. But they should. President Trump's proposed 37% budget cut to the state department and the US Agency for International Development (USAID), which manages foreign assistance, would wreck a burgeoning and successful example of evidence-based policymaking.

US foreign aid has transformed significantly, so that it now involves fewer handouts and savvier science. In 2009, former president Barack Obama heralded a greater role for research in foreign policy when he used a speech in Cairo to argue that science and innovation provide the means to tackle climate change, hunger and epidemics. These problems foster poverty, which can in turn breed political instability, conflict and disease — all of which have ripple effects that don't respect borders.