



The RN in Power: Lessons from Perpignan for French National Politics

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Summary

- * *When the Rassemblement National (RN) won the mayoralty of Perpignan in 2020, allowing it to govern the largest city it ever controlled, observers expected either a radical rupture or an ideological retreat. Neither happened. The RN consolidated authority not by moderating its positions or doubling down on its more extremist stances, but by repackaging them in the language of ordinary administration. An analysis of the mayoralty in Perpignan holds important lessons for a potential RN national government.*

Background/Challenges

- The Rassemblement National (RN) is France's dominant far-right populist party, having transformed from a fringe movement in the early 1970s into a mainstream electoral force. Under leaders Marine Le Pen and Jordan Bardella, the party has pursued the strategy of *dédiabolisation*, distancing itself from its extremist origins while retaining its core positions on immigration, security, and national identity.
- Despite the RN's growing electoral success, including strong performances in the 2022 and 2024 legislative elections, a fundamental question remains unanswered: How would the party govern once elected to executive office? Existing scholarship has focused overwhelmingly on how populist parties win power, not on what happens after.
- Local governments such as the one in Perpignan offer a unique opportunity to examine this question. Governed by RN mayor Louis Aliot, who also serves as vice president of the national party, Perpignan is the largest city ever controlled by the RN and the most sustained experiment in far-right municipal incumbency in contemporary France. Its analysis provides important insights for French and European politics.

KEY FINDINGS

- ◇ Understanding how the RN constructed and stabilized its authority in Perpignan after its electoral victory is not merely of local interest. With the **party positioning itself for national power**, the municipal experience provides the clearest available preview of how an RN-led government might govern France if it were to win power in the 2027 presidential elections.
- ◇ RN governance in Perpignan **did not unfold through ideological moderation**. An analysis of 940 coded sentences from mayoral editorials in the newsletter *Perpignan Ma Ville* and coverage in the regional newspaper *L'Indépendant* between 2021 and 2024 reveals that far-right positions on immigration, security, and cultural identity were retained throughout the mandate. What changed was the register through which those positions were expressed.
- ◇ Early in its mandate, the RN administration justified its authority through performance, pointing to concrete outputs like fiscal restraint and service delivery to demonstrate it could govern effectively. By 2023, this shifted dramatically. **Procedural legitimacy**, appeals to transparency, rule compliance, consultation, and administrative professionalism, rose from 15% to 71% of mayoral discourse, while performance claims collapsed from 42% to 6%.
- ◇ This shift did not signal moderation. Ideologically charged positions were retained but **repackaged in institutional language**. A nativist grievance about a reception centre for unaccompanied minors was framed entirely through the language of judicial constraint and municipal sovereignty. A culturally conservative school uniform proposal was recast as an egalitarian civic measure. The political content survived, the populist register did not.



KEY FINDINGS (continued)

- ◇ This process, which can be termed **procedural sedimentation**, shows that far-right authority may consolidate not through ideological convergence, but through the progressive embedding of incumbency in institutional routine, until its governing authority no longer requires exceptional justification.
- ◇ Media coverage in *L'Indépendant* reinforced this pattern relationally. The most frequent journalistic response to RN governance was **depoliticization**, treating municipal decisions as technically ordinary rather than ideologically distinctive. In 2023, mainstream accommodation of RN governance exceeded contestation for the first time, coinciding directly with the procedural sedimentation in mayoral discourse. Contestation did not disappear, it institutionalized, shifting from questioning the RN's right to govern to debating specific policy choices.
- ◇ The two communicative fields—mayoral self-legitimation and media reporting—**interacted directly at identifiable moments, reinforcing each other**. When the mayor framed the mandate's midpoint through accountability and transparency language, regional media processed that moment through the same institutional grammar. When an ideologically charged policy position was aligned with a national government initiative, the press ratified that repositioning rather than challenging it.
- ◇ Taken together, the findings from the analysis of the two communicative fields suggest that normalization in Perpignan occurred **not through ideological transformation but through administrative ordinariness**. Authority became durable when governance ceased to require exceptional framing. This consolidation did not require coalition compromise or overt democratic rupture. It unfolded through the routines of municipal governance, including budget votes, administrative reporting, and consultation mechanisms. These findings suggest that institutional absorption may be a more common path to far-right stabilization than existing accounts recognize.

Policy Implications

- If procedural sedimentation operates at the national level as it did in Perpignan, an RN-led French government would not need to abandon its core positions to consolidate authority. It would need only to govern through normal institutional channels for long enough for its incumbency to become unremarkable.
- Considering these findings, mainstream actors, opposition parties, journalists, and civil society, face a structural dilemma. Engaging far-right governance on policy-specific terms contributes to normalization. Refusing to engage leaves governance unchallenged. Neither response interrupts the mechanism identified here.
- Democratic monitoring frameworks that focus on overt institutional violations may miss normalization that operates through procedural conformity. Identifying and tracking shifts in legitimacy registers used in governing discourse may offer an earlier warning signal of democratic regression.

Further Reading

- Heinze, Anna-Sophie and Gefjon Off. 2026. "Mainstreaming vs. normalisation: Towards more conceptual clarity on how mainstream parties legitimise the far right." *European Journal of Political Research*, First View. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1475676526100887>.
- Paxton, Fred, and Timothy Peace. 2021. "Window Dressing? The Mainstreaming Strategy of the Rassemblement National in Power in French Local Government." *Government and Opposition* 56 (3): 545–62. <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2020.11>



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