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Keywords

2017 election cycle, Geert Wilders, Marine Le Pen, economic inequality, political extremism, anti-Islam policy, anti-EU policy

Disciplines

Business | Comparative Politics | Economic Policy | Public Policy

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in France and the Netherlands**

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Abstract

The 2017 election cycle in France and the Netherlands featured candidates widely defined as politically extreme rapidly gaining traction as Election Day approached. Though neither Marine Le Pen of France nor Geert Wilders of the Netherlands were victorious in their bids to lead their respective nations, their second-place finishes led many to question how to typify this growing base of support for politically extreme candidates. As targets of their charged rhetoric felt increasingly threatened by their momentum, even after the elections, many seek to understand which underlying issues motivated support for candidates with such unprecedented views. In the context of their modern political histories, this paper searches for a possible association between economic insecurity and support for politically extreme candidates in the 2017 election cycle, finding a strong association in France and a tenuous association in the Netherlands.

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I. Introduction

After the 2016 election of Donald Trump as President of the United States, widespread uncertainty began to plague global elections, as concerns grew regarding the legitimacy of previously unquestioned polling strategies. As the possibility of unconventional candidates achieving victory appeared more plausible, considerable attention was directed toward forthcoming elections worldwide. Analysis quickly shifted toward Western European nations whose political systems and ideologies most closely mirrored that of the United States. Of these nations, France, the Netherlands and Germany, all economic powerhouses of Europe, would hold elections in 2017, leaving many uncertain of the political stability in the region. In conjunction with the 2016 referendum directing the United Kingdom to begin its removal from the European Union, commonly referred to as “Brexit”, the economic stability of the European Union and its currency also attracted concern (McAllester 2016).

Two candidates served as the centerpiece for discussions concerning the future stability of Europe. Marine Le Pen, a presidential candidate in France, and Geert Wilders, a candidate for Prime Minister of the Netherlands, shared markedly controversial stances on a variety of issues. Unorthodox viewpoints on discrimination against the Muslim community, the status of the European Union and fluxes of immigration all contributed to the simultaneous popularity and controversy of both candidates (Shuster 2017). The existence of politically extreme candidates alone is not atypical of elections in modern nations; however, the widespread popularity of both candidates was unprecedented. While similar political movements have been observed in less developed, less wealthy or less politically stable nations, like Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines, few major candidates of the highly developed Western world have vocally expressed such polarizing opinions.

To examine the reasoning behind this increase in popularity, numerous variables must be considered. Shifting political climate has been attributed to domestic and global political influences, economic recession and cultural changes, in addition to numerous other variables (Ganley 2017) (Cabrera 2017) (Plucinska 2016). This variety of influences on domestic and global politics makes a source of conflict difficult to identify. In the context of Marine Le Pen and Geert Wilders, both candidates’ platforms featured a variety of controversial stances on political, economic, social and cultural issues. Considering that past precedent suggests that any of these individual stances, like banning Muslim immigration or exiting the EU, would alone dissuade a potential voter, the vast popularity of both candidates implies the existence of a possible subset of voters passionate about this brand of politics. This paper attempts to characterize this subset of voters by suggesting that economic status could be a primary differentiating factor when identifying this new type of voter. To evaluate this hypothesis, this paper first will discuss the history of these nations leading to the rise of both candidates and deconstruct the platform of each candidate in relation to these developments. This analysis will include commentary on the shift in political climate and both perceived and actual economic status throughout France and the Netherlands. Within this context, this paper also will provide a statistical analysis to determine whether a potential correlation between weak economic status and politically extreme viewpoints could have been a contributing factor to the candidates’ popularity.

II. Variables & Existing Literature

This paper aims to analyze the association between political extremism and economic status in France and the Netherlands in order to better characterize the typical supporter of Marine Le Pen or Geert Wilders. These two variables, political extremism and economic status, are inherently difficult to define and serve only as a proposition of a potential association.

In the context of this paper, the term “political extremism” will be defined as support for Marine Le Pen, Geert Wilders or any comparable politician sharing similar political views, such as Donald Trump. This variable will be measured by votes for each candidate at a regional level. The use of the expression “political extremism” is naturally subject to personal interpretation; however, this distinction has been drawn on several grounds. First, each candidate frequently has been described as a unique extreme of conservatism. Second, the political stances and policy suggestions of each candidate include several unprecedented actions for each nation. Lastly, certain stances of each candidate are widely considered discriminatory – an action rejected by several multinational organizations, including the United Nations. The potential efficacy or morality of these policy proposals will not be discussed. The electoral data used in this paper is provided directly from the French & Dutch government.

The term “economic status” will be measured by several variables. Throughout, this paper will attempt to recognize possible association between several metrics of weak economic status, measured regionally. The metrics used include: regional GDP per capita, regional GVA per worker, unemployment rate, labor force participation rate growth (base year: 2007) and labor utilization rate. However, when discussing the term from a qualitative and highly simplified perspective, this expression can generally be viewed as financial hardship and/or inequality. All economic data used in this paper comes from the OECD.Stat database for regional statistics and regional wellbeing.

Similar variables have been explored throughout literature regarding political economy in the past two decades. Malgouyres (2017) presents a similar approach to analyze the rise of France’s politically extreme National Front party, but opts to analyze this rise in conjunction with trade shocks to measure low-wage import competition. The impact of trade shocks and import competition has also been explored by Dippel, Gold and Hebllich (2016) and Autor, Dorn, Hanson and Majlesi (2016), who looked at the impact of production increases in China and its neighbors on voting behavior in Germany and the United States, respectively. Market influence was examined by Savita (2015), looking at the correlation between volatility of returns and regional election data in India. Policy-focused decisions were also examined by Revelli (2001), who analyzed tax fluctuations and their influences on incumbent performance in regional elections. Similarly, overall fiscal performance was analyzed by Brender (2003), seeking a potential connection with local electoral results.

Analysis of economic factors against electoral data have gained popularity in recent decades. While similar analyses have taken place in other countries, the political intricacies of each nation’s electoral system limit the external validity of the results, making the research difficult to generalize. Nonetheless, this paper draws from the ideas of this body of work, looking to apply strategy similar to successful past works.

III. History & The 2017 Election

While France and the Netherlands both featured politically extreme candidates amongst their two most popular choices, various similarities and differences in the recent political histories of each nation could potentially highlight contributing factors to each candidate's popularity.

Considering each nation features comparable characteristics from a global perspective,¹ most similarities and differences can be compared fairly without the influence major lurking variables, like differences in monetary policy or recent regime change. Collectively, the political histories of both nations demonstrate the possible paths to such a drastic political shift.

A. French Political & Economic History

Over the past two decades, the political leadership of France has been defined by three presidencies: Jacques Chirac, Nicolas Sarkozy and François Hollande. This most recent era of French politics began with the tenure of President Jacques Chirac from 1995 until 2007. Initially presented as a neoliberal policymaker during his term as French Prime Minister in the late 1980s, Chirac drastically shifted his policy strategy upon running for the presidency in 1995, aiming to resolve socioeconomic strife in the country with a more socially minded policy strategy. Despite supporting policy beneficial to the average citizen of France, Chirac's goals remained widely focused at a national level, as he attempted to prepare the nation for entry to a unified currency (the Euro) in an increasingly integrated European economy. Chirac's initial strategy included widespread cuts to government spending to reduce a budget deficit; however, these austerity measures were widely unpopular and instigated retaliation from France's working population (Britannica Academic 2017).

After merging with the Union for French Democracy and the Liberal Democratic party, Chirac's Rally for the Republic party (RPR) created the Union for the Presidential Majority, behind which he would run for his second term as President in 2002. Despite stunning victories by Jean-Marie Le Pen, the similarly-minded father of Marine Le Pen, in the first round of the Presidential election, Chirac was able to defeat Jean-Marie Le Pen in the second round with a crushing 82% majority – the greatest differential in the history of the Fifth Republic (Britannica Academic 2017). This election would set the first precedent for the popularity of such policies, but the overwhelming victory of Chirac led many to see these victories as a fluke, resulting from disillusioned voters. Possibly contributing to this disillusionment, France had switched to the usage of the Euro only five months before the presidential election – a transition endorsed and facilitated by Chirac and his allies. In the following years, Chirac would shift his focus from economic policy towards opposition to the invasion of Iraq. This opposition would prove unsuccessful, and despite an unprecedented victory in the 2002 election, Chirac's efficacy and popularity continued to decline steadily throughout his second term. He chose not to seek reelection in 2007 (Britannica Academic 2017).

The election of 2007 would not prove to be as successful for Jean-Marie Le Pen, who, in attempting to recreate his success in 2002, would fall flat, after receiving only 10% of the popular vote and failing to advance to the second round (Britannica Academic 2017). Instead,

¹ Both nations reside in Western Europe, have remained politically stable in recent years, are active actors within the global political and economic communities and share a currency, while being members of the European Union.

Nicolas Sarkozy secured victory with 53% of the popular vote, promising to catalyze neoliberal economic reform and a “rupture” from France’s past fiscal policy. Sarkozy quickly became a critic of monetary policy at the European Central Bank and set a precedent for outspoken opposition to the further integrated European economy from a French leader. Marred by scandal and celebrity-like gossip, Sarkozy’s tenure as President lasted only one term, with many declaring his policymaking ineffective and unfocused (Britannica Academic 2017).

Sarkozy’s presidency would be followed by a reactionary shift towards France’s Socialist Party, with the election of François Hollande in 2012. In a desperate attempt to regain support, Sarkozy drifted further right, mirroring some opinions of Le Pen in an attempt to coerce voters from the National Front (Mondon 2012). Instead, France rejected this effort and opted for a far more center-leaning political figure in François Hollande. Hollande would quickly contradict policies of his predecessor, opposing austerity measures for countries affected by the European debt crisis, attempting to raise taxes on the wealthy and increasing the tax burden on employers. Though these measures would receive varied responses, Hollande’s policy appeared to be widely ineffective, as France unceremoniously experienced a slow recovery from the 2008 global financial crisis (Britannica Academic 2017). As France was rocked by repeated terrorist activity throughout Hollande’s tenure as President, popularity for the Socialist leader rapidly declined, and Hollande left office in 2017 with the lowest approval rating of any French President in recorded history² (Walt 2017).

While the past three leaders of France did not set a direct precedent for a clear political movement in 2017, the politics of recent French elections displayed the general dissatisfaction of the typical French voter. The absence of consistency represents a trend in and of itself, showcasing the typical French voter’s constant desire for that which they do not currently have. Marine Le Pen deftly played to this dynamic in her 2017 presidential bid, presenting herself as a stark alternative to the widely unpopular Hollande (Reguly 2017). Considering every aforementioned leader left his position widely unpopular in the public eye, Le Pen found it easy to capitalize on the faults of her predecessors. Capitalizing on some of the greatest hot-button issues of France’s recent political history (e.g. European economic integration), Le Pen achieved a previously unfathomable victory for her National Front party: attracting the support of younger voters (Cabrera 2017). Though Stockemer (2015) concludes that the National Front has not shifted its political stances since Marine Le Pen took over leadership from her father, her passionate appeal to disillusioned voters using the National Front’s policy platform attracted unprecedented attention for the party. The metrics of Marine Le Pen’s personality or individual appeal are difficult to measure, but her successes since taking leadership of the National Front are significant.

B. Political & Economic History of the Netherlands

The past two decades of politics in the Netherlands have also featured three notable Prime Ministers responsible for leading the nation: Willem Kok, Jan Peter Balkenende and Mark Rutte. In general, elections in the Netherlands are more party-focused, with no single party ever holding enough votes to form an individual cabinet. Instead, the party with the greatest votes will seek to

² At the end of his tenure as president, his approval rating was estimated consistently in the single digits (Britannica Academic 2017).

form a coalition government amongst other parties and install their party's top representative as Prime Minister. In most cases, this would place slightly less emphasis on the individuals who would become Prime Minister; however, in the most recent case of Geert Wilders, he is the sole representative of his Party for Freedom – equating votes for his party to votes for him.

Commencing recent political history in the Netherlands, Willem, or “Wim”, Kok was installed in 1994 as the Prime Minister after a sizeable shake up in political control in the Netherlands. Kok had received the most votes in the 1989 election as well, but his Labour Party had failed to secure a coalition government, continuing the leadership of Ruud Lubbers (Álvarez-Rivera 2017). Upon forming a new coalition – the first to exclude the notable Christian Democratic Appeal in 86 years – Kok's Cabinet centered its policy platform around recovery from an ongoing recession. Focused primarily on bolstering employment, Kok attempted to reduce spending, reduce taxes and emphasize employee-friendly policymaking during his first term (Andersen, et al. 2002). His focus on the everyday worker maintained its appeal and his party again received the most votes in 1998, continuing his leadership as Prime Minister . However, Kok's second term would prove to be uneventful, with little notable legislation passed as the economy slowly recovered. As the next election cycle neared, further reports implicating the Netherlands in failing to prevent the Srebrenica genocide led Kok to step down,³ proposing Ad Melkert as his successor. Melkert lacked the appeal of Kok and the Christian Democratic Appeal gained the leadership of the government, installing Jan Peter Balkenende as the new Prime Minister (Álvarez-Rivera 2017).

Unlike his predecessor, Balkenende faced frequent political turmoil while serving as Prime Minister. Although he would eventually serve almost the same amount of time as Kok, Balkenende experienced four elections over eight years, as tensions escalated between parties forming coalitions. Balkenende's first Cabinet collapsed after 87 days and disagreement amongst subsequent coalitions limited the legislative capabilities of the Christian Democratic Appeal (Bickerton 2005). Balkenende focused his economic policy not on workers as before, but on a platform emphasizing competitiveness and economic growth through business success in the Netherlands. In a 2003 speech delivered to the American Enterprise Institution, Balkenende emphasized that the Netherlands were a well-trained and “cosmopolitan” people who had suffered stagnant growth due to increased cost of labor and a failure to innovate (Balkenende 2003). Balkenende's neoliberal policy and support of economic development stimulated rapid growth of the economy in the Netherlands, with the GDP nearly doubling over the course of his first six years in office (World Bank 2017). In comparison to Kok's break-even performance, this growth helped maintain adequate approval for Balkenende amidst political quarrelling within the Dutch government. This growth would stagnate almost entirely after the 2008 global financial crisis (World Bank 2017). Balkenende's approval ratings consistently sank at a slow rate throughout his term, until the Christian Democratic Appeal's extremely poor performance in the 2010 election led him to retire (Kulich 2010).

³ Kok initially announced that he would step down as leader of the Labour Party simply on the grounds of dwindling popularity and retirement. However, after further details emerged regarding the Srebrenica genocide, he stepped down again. Kok maintained his support for Melkert throughout, but he failed to garner the same popularity as Kok, despite an endorsement (Osborn and Brown 2002).

Upon Balkenende's defeat in 2010, current Prime Minister Mark Rutte took leadership of the government, forming a coalition with the Christian Democratic Appeal and Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom. Rutte led the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy, which earned the most votes for the first time in their 62 year history (Álvarez-Rivera 2017). Rutte ran on a center-right platform, mirroring his party's message, focusing on economic recovery via free trade after the 2008 global financial crisis (BBC News 2017). In 2012, while attempting to pass a budget favoring reduced spending as means for economic stimulus, Geert Wilders, who had supported Rutte's efforts until then, withdrew his support for the budget, essentially collapsing the government (Álvarez-Rivera 2017). This would mark the unequivocal beginning of Wilders' antagonizing of the Rutte Cabinet. However, through further elections, Rutte and the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy would maintain power, facing their greatest opposition in the 2017 election when Wilders again challenged Rutte, this time for the position of Prime Minister (Britannica Academic 2017).

Prior to the election, Geert Wilders appeared to be Rutte's most difficult competition to date. Already having served seven years, Rutte neared the end of the standard life cycle for recent Prime Ministers, and Wilders' politically extreme starkly contrasted Rutte's calm, conservative speech. Criticism quickly emerged after Rutte published a page long letter across all major news media in the Netherlands which seemed to concede to some of Wilders' more extreme views. In the letter, Rutte set a hard line against opposition to Dutch values, writing, "If you reject our country so fundamentally, I'd prefer you leave" (Yeginsu 2017). This comment was viewed by many as an indirect slight against the Muslim community in the Netherlands, who constitute approximately six percent of the nation. Through Rutte was driven further right in his platform than ever before to compensate for Wilders' popularity, his firm opposition to Turkish campaigning within the Netherlands before the election boosted his popularity enough for a victory over Wilders (BBC News 2017). Though polling indicated that Wilders would serve as a great competitor to Rutte, Rutte secured victory by a wide margin of 8 percentage points, leaving Wilders' Party for Freedom with only 13.1% of the national vote (Kiesraad 2017) (The Economist Data Team 2017).

C. Issues of 2017 Election Cycle

Using the shortcomings of previous French leaders as justification for her politically extreme views, Marine Le Pen presented herself as an alternative for a French electorate displeased with the current state of their nation (Walt 2017). A 2017 article in The Globe and Mail listed the pressing issues of the modern National Front as: "the EU, the euro, foreigners, radical Islam, the EU's passport-free travel area (known as the Schengen Area), big government, free trade and globalization." The nimety of issues presented by the National Front evidenced Le Pen's attempt to appeal to a wide variety of potential dissatisfied voters. However, given Le Pen's highly controversial viewpoints on many cultural, economic and political issues, two potential scenarios could describe her support: a willingness of her supporters to condone certain views on which they do not agree in exchange for her support of issues on which they do agree, or the emergence of a new political faction which genuinely mirrors the majority of beliefs held by the National Front.

Simultaneously in the Netherlands, Geert Wilders led a similar charge against Western political norms. Basing a lifelong political platform in opposition to the Islamic faith, Wilders created his own party in 2006 in opposition to the Turkish bid to join the European Union. After the murder of a similarly-minded filmmaker, Theo van Gogh, in 2004, Wilders furthered his campaign on the dangers of the Islamic faith as an “ideology” which threatens the citizens of the Netherlands (Britannica Academic 2017). Since then, Wilders has rounded out his populist policy platform by staunchly opposing the European Union and fighting the development of globalization (Koebel 2016). Despite verbally distancing himself from Le Pen in a 2008 interview with the Guardian,⁴ Wilders’ political platform shared nearly policy stance with his French counterpart (Traynor 2008). Though Le Pen also has been critical of Wilders at times, the two shared a stage with the leader of Germany’s Alternative for Germany (AfD) in 2016, signifying a unified populist front for the upcoming election cycle across Europe (Shuster 2017).

Whether these parties will continue to unite around a populist message throughout Europe remains to be determined, but their popularity in the most recent election cycle reached an unprecedented peak. To analyze the potential emergence of a sizeable voter base in support of Le Pen’s National Front and Wilders’ Party for Freedom, each issue will be analyzed individually and in relationship with one another.

The oldest formative issue for both the National Front and Party for Freedom related to the Islamic faith and its impact on European life. Founded on long standing tensions between Western European nations and Near Eastern countries like Turkey, both Marine Le Pen and Geert Wilders have strongly opposed the existence and support of the Islamic faith within their respective nations. These beliefs are rooted in a history of cultural conflict between two vastly different ways of life. Wilders has often stated that he does not take issue with individual Muslims but rather the religion itself, arguing that it is incompatible with the values of the Netherlands (BBC News 2011). He further denigrates the religion by arguing that it serves only as an “ideology”, usually coupling that description with a derogatory label (Traynor 2008). Le Pen has also called Islam, in addition to globalization, the “two totalitarianisms” which plague the people of France (Ganley 2017). Citing an unwillingness to adapt to cultural norms,⁵ Le Pen has argued that immigrants from Muslim nations are not fit to be French residents.

The debate on immigration has fueled politically extreme populist viewpoints on the Muslim community in Europe. Further, the ongoing Syrian refugee crisis has only exacerbated these concerns, with politicians like Le Pen asserting that accountability is impossible when refugees are accepted without thorough screening (Nossiter 2015). Wilders has echoed these comments, calling the influx of Syrian refugees an “Islamic invasion” of people who threaten “our prosperity, our security, our culture and our identity” (Newsweek Team 2015). All of these comments have been met with opposition from both the Muslim community and the political opposition.

⁴ In Wilders’ 2008 Guardian interview, he argued that Le Pen and similar company were right-wing fascists with whom he never wished to be associated. Yet as the view of both politicians continued to converge and their populist movements gained traction, both were slower to condemn each other’s language and actions.

⁵ Wilders has not explicitly defined the specific tenants of Dutch culture required for proper assimilation; however, he repeatedly has asserted his assessment that Muslim culture, customs and ideals are not compatible with Dutch culture (BBC News 2011).

However, Wilders and Le Pen's claims lacked any significant empirical backing until the onset of violent, terroristic activity in Europe, primarily propagated by the Islamic State (otherwise known as ISIS.) After 130 people were murdered at a 2015 concert in Paris, Le Pen flaunted that she and her party had warned of such an incident for a decade before (Nossiter 2015).

Capitalizing on the fear and frustration of a nation recently attacked, Le Pen gained widespread support for her blunt accusations and readiness to cast blame. While many saw this as an attack on the Muslim community who were generalized by Le Pen's accusations, the timing and emotion of her statements garnered widespread support for a candidate whose anti-Islam views were seen as outlandish only a few years prior. After a 2016 terrorist attack in Nice killing 86, Le Pen solidified her platform, using the terrorist's Tunisian ethnicity and Islamic faith as proof of a supposed spike in Islamic fundamentalism radicalizing residents of France and the greater European community (Plucinska 2016). Wilders has echoed these comments, receiving one of his greatest spikes in polling directly after the 2015 Paris attack (Reuters Staff 2015).

Undoubtedly, the pair's nationalist, populist and anti-globalist ideology has further supported their popularity in an increasingly ethnocentric society. Scholte (2005) categorized this approach to the results of globalization as rejectionist. While these rejectionist viewpoints usually focus on economic and cultural nationalism, Scholte notes that such efforts are often coupled with attractive or persuasive platforms to provide support for their beliefs. Wilders and Le Pen have capitalized on this strategy, using generally indisputable issues like terrorism or religion as support for their policy recommendations.

Yet the unity of Wilders and Le Pen's message is not limited to political issues. In line with their anti-globalist rhetoric, Le Pen and Wilders have also been outspoken critics of the European Union and European economic integration. Carrying the momentum of "Brexit", both leaders proposed the possibility of their economies following suit (McAllester 2016).

However, from a global perspective, the removal of another key nation from the European Union could prove to be catastrophic for the EU. As member nations still attempt to assess the impact of the United Kingdom's eventual exit in 2019, speculation has emerged that a French, or even Dutch, exit from the EU could cause irreparable damage to European economic integration (Pisani 2017). As of March 2017, the United Kingdom boasted the second largest economy in the EU behind Germany, with France as the third largest. The Netherlands tout the sixth largest economy in the EU behind Italy and Spain (Imbert 2017). The UK will provide the first example of the effects of a nation leaving an economically integrated Europe, but the removal of another nation would be unequivocally damaging to the stability of the European economy.

Though Le Pen and Wilders share similar ideology regarding an exit from the EU, the reasoning from each varies slightly. In a 2016 interview with German newspaper *Der Spiegel*, Wilders argued that removal from the European Union was an issue of sovereignty, relating a "Nexit" to his primary platform of removing the Islamic faith from the Netherlands. Arguing that membership in the EU restricts the nation's ability to set its own immigration laws, Wilders presented an exit from the European Union as a necessity to effectively remove and ban Muslims from the country (Koebl 2016). Meanwhile, Marine Le Pen argued for an exit from the European Union in order to cripple the Euro and "defeat globalists" (Cabrera 2017). While Le Pen's reasoning for the necessity of a French exit was not rooted in anti-Islamic arguments, her

language against the Euro was equally as divisive. With 72% of voters wishing to keep the Euro as their currency, Le Pen's attack on the European Union was certainly one of her less popular efforts (Cabrera 2017). Nonetheless, her appeal to ordinary citizens feeling cheated by monetary policy catering to global markets over individual citizens drove her popularity on the subject.

On matters both political and social, Le Pen and Wilders secured widespread appeal given their controversial language which focused on accusations in the name of accountability in the context of Europe's most pressing issues: terrorism, immigration, economic integration and more.

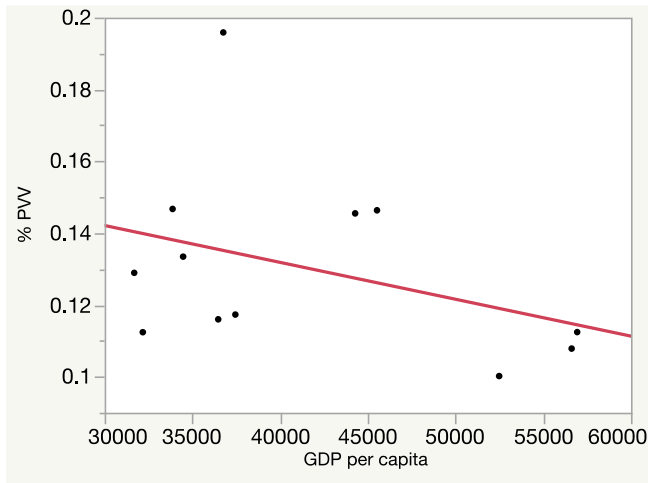
Though this language secured neither an outright victory, both still gained extreme momentum and maintain their influence in their respective nations today. As Wilders' brother shared in a 2017 article in the Atlantic, "he's still in a strong position of opposition and this is exactly what he wants—he doesn't want to be prime minister" (Marsh 2017).

IV. Assessing Politically Extreme Platforms against Economic Inequality

The support for Marine Le Pen and Geert Wilders was obviated by positive results in the 2017 elections. Aside from characterizing an ideological perspective and history aligned with Wilders and Le Pen's political ideals, little research exists attempting to identify other variables potentially associated with support of politically extreme candidates in the recent election cycle. This paper will pair regional election data with the following regional economic metrics to test for correlation: regional gross domestic product (GDP), regional gross value added per worker (GVA), unemployment rate, labor force participation rate growth and labor utilization rate. The French results will be measured at a departmental level, within administrative regions. The Netherlands results will be measured by electoral regions. These groupings are made based on the publically available data regarding both regional election results and regional economic data. In the Netherlands, an available sample size of only $N = 12$ makes meaningful regression analysis impossible. However, given the limited data, visual trends still emerged which could be compared to the French data which features a much larger sample size. The publicly available corresponding data for France includes a regional sampling of $N = 22$ and a more specific sampling of departments within the regions, giving $N = 96$. Certain regional economic data provided by the OECD was only available at a broader regional level.

To begin, major metrics of economic health in the Netherlands were fit against the percentage of the vote captured by Geert Wilder's Party for Freedom (PVV). In Figure 1, the PVV's performance is compared to the gross domestic product per capita of each region, producing a correlation coefficient of $r = -0.3689$. Given the small sample size, the $\text{Prob}(F) = 0.2380$ indicates that this association is inconclusive, but could be further investigated if more specific regional data becomes available. Similarly, Figure 2 compares the PVV's performance to the gross value added per worker in each region. Again, a weak negative association was found with a correlation coefficient of $r = -0.2873$ and yet more inconclusive $\text{Prob}(F) = 0.3652$, making this association possibly coincidental.

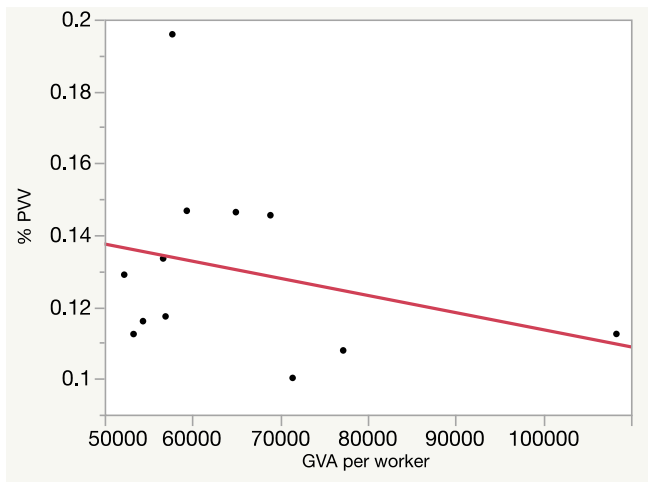
Figure 1



Summary Statistics:

$r = -0.368921$
 $R^2 = 0.136103$
RMSE = 0.025437
Prob(F) = 0.2380
 $N = 12$

Figure 2



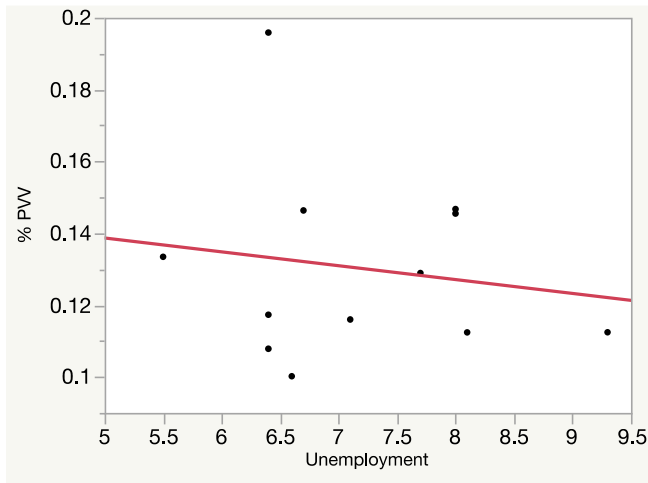
Summary Statistics:

$r = -0.287317$
 $R^2 = 0.082551$
RMSE = 0.026213
Prob(F) = 0.3652
 $N = 12$

Further analysis of labor metrics also provided relatively ambiguous results. A comparison of the Party for Freedom's performance and the unemployment rate in Figure 3 provides a minimal negative association with no clear trend. With a correlation of $r = -0.1556$, no conclusions can be drawn from this data. Analysis of the same election results with labor force participation rate growth provided even less meaningful results, nearly absent of association.

A final analysis of the data fit against the labor utilization rate in Figure 4 shows slightly more promising association with an $r = -0.3074$. Again, with such a small sample and Prob(F) = 0.3311, this possible association must be taken with any amount of certainty.

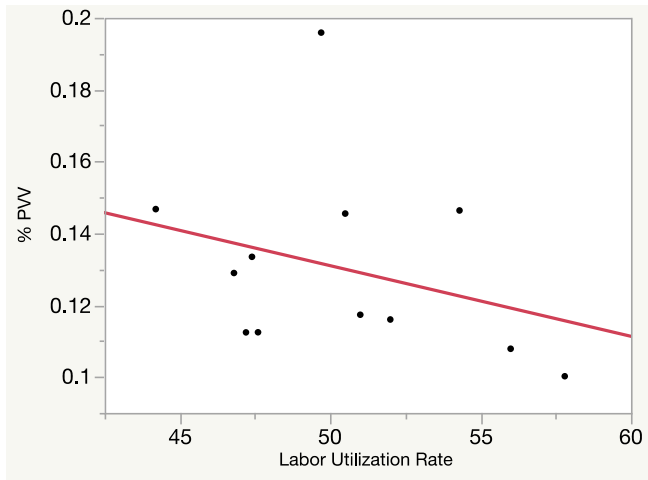
Figure 3



Summary Statistics:

$r = -0.155628$
 $R^2 = 0.02422$
RMSE = 0.027034
Prob(F) = 0.6291
N = 12

Figure 4



Summary Statistics:

$r = -0.307389$
 $R^2 = 0.094488$
RMSE = 0.026042
Prob(F) = 0.3311
N = 12

Given the extremely small sample size, no certain conclusions can be drawn from the data regarding an association. A spread of economic data and election results (including Wilders' extremely strong performance in Limburg, at nearly 20%) did not present any obvious connections.⁶ Nonetheless, the data consistently shows a weak negative correlation between economic prosperity and support of the PVV. If more detailed regional data becomes available, these associations can be further explored to see if there is statistical basis in the claim.

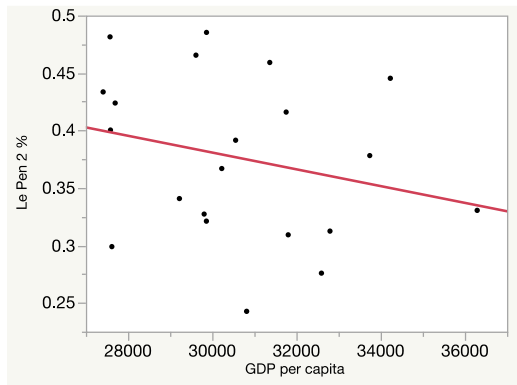
The regional economic and election data in France provides a larger sample and greater clarity on possible associations. Similar to the Netherlands, analysis begins with basic metrics of economic health against Marine Le Pen's performance in the second round of elections.⁷ In

⁶ For more on Wilders' performance in Limburg, see Robinson 2017.

⁷ In every case, the results of Le Pen's performance in the first and second rounds showed very similar statistical significance, unless otherwise denoted.

Figure 6, Le Pen's performance is fit against regional gross domestic product in France with an $N = 21$.⁸ The analysis provided a similarly weak correlation compared to the Netherlands, with a correlation coefficient $r = -0.2486$ and $\text{Prob}(F) = 0.2771$. The regression between Le Pen's second round performance and gross value added per worker provided an unexpected weak positive correlation, with $r = 0.3329$ and $\text{Prob}(F) = 0.1403$. While these metrics are inconclusive, analysis at a departmental level will provide a more specific look at these variables to evaluate the validity of these possible associations.

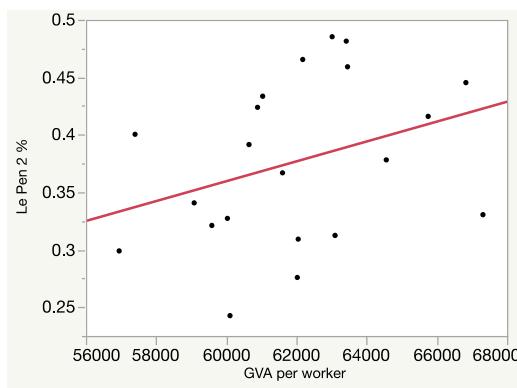
Figure 5



Summary Statistics:

$r = 0.248638$
 $R^2 = 0.061821$
 $\text{RSME} = 0.070921$
 $\text{Prob}(F) = 0.2771$
 $N = 21$

Figure 6



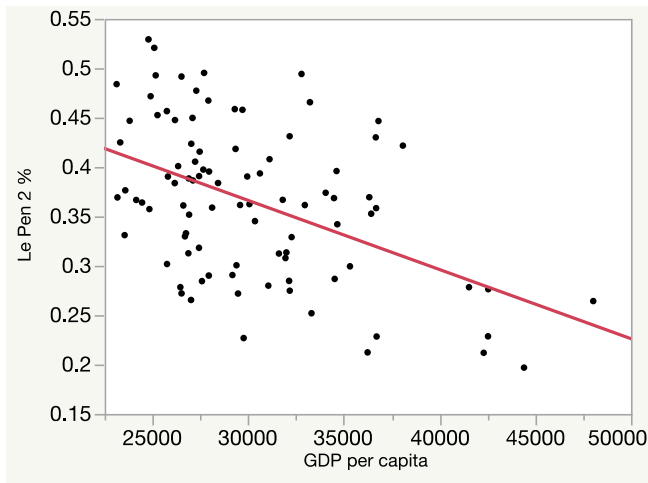
Summary Statistics:

$r = 0.332949$
 $R^2 = 0.110855$
 $\text{RSME} = 0.069043$
 $\text{Prob}(F) = 0.1403$
 $N = 21$

However, when regional GDP and regional GVA are evaluated at a departmental level ($N = 92$), a clearer trend emerges. Figures 7 & 8 display the same data, at a more specific level. Now, a clearer negative correlation emerges on both charts at a statistically significant level. Figure 7 provides a correlation coefficient of $r = -0.4670$ with a $\text{Prob}(F) < .0001^*$. Therefore, it is remarkably unlikely that these results are coincidental and a negative association between economic security and support for Marine Le Pen is formed. Figure 8 also provides better clarity in its data, with $r = -0.2897$ and a $\text{Prob}(F) = 0.0051^*$. Once again, while the possibility exists, a strong F-statistic implies that it is unlikely that this association is the result of random chance.

⁸ France contains 22 regions, but this analysis removes Île-de-France which contains the metropolitan area of Paris, because its economic performance is an extreme outlier by nearly every metric – including a GDP per capita twice as large as the mean of all other regions.

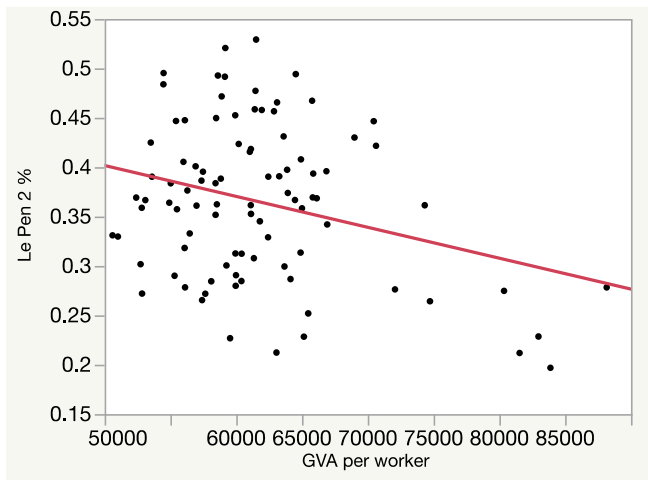
Figure 7



Summary Statistics:

$r = -0.466996$
 $R^2 = 0.218085$
RSME = 0.069476
Prob(F) = **<.0001***
N = 92

Figure 8



Summary Statistics:

$r = -0.289737$
 $R^2 = 0.083948$
RSME = 0.0752
Prob(F) = **0.0051***
N = 92

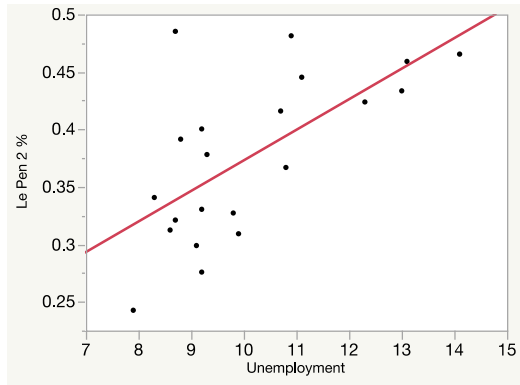
Though regional GDP per capita and GVA per worker were the only major metrics available with that level of specificity, the broader regional analysis of the remaining variables also produced significant results.⁹ Measurements of unemployment, labor force participation rate growth and labor utilization rate all provided a noteworthy negative correlation with Le Pen's second round performance.¹⁰ Figure 9 shows unemployment fit against Le Pen's performance with a comparatively strong positive correlation coefficient of $r = 0.6502$ and Prob(F) = 0.0014*. Le Pen's first round performance indicated an even stronger positive association with $r = 0.7105$. Figure 10 shows the same election data fit against labor force participation rate growth since 2007, with a base of 100. This regression provides an $r = -0.5230$ and Prob(F) = 0.0135*, another noteworthy negative association. Finally, Figure 11 again displays a clear negative

⁹ This broader region analysis will again use $N = 21$, removing Île-de-France as a disruptive outlier, for both fit purposes and consistency.

¹⁰ However, it should not be forgotten that with a sample size of $N = 21$, a more specific sample will be needed to evaluate possible associations.

correlation between labor utilization rate and Le Pen's performance, giving an $r = -0.6167$ and $\text{Prob}(F) = 0.0029^*$.

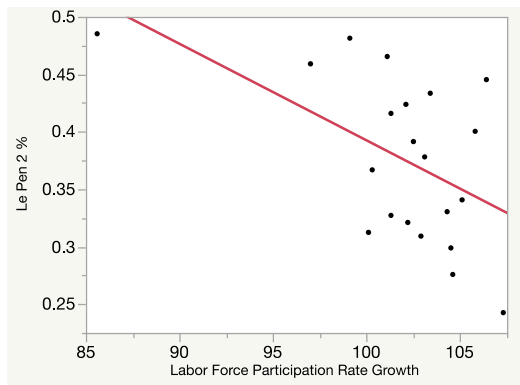
Figure 9



Summary Statistics:

$r = 0.650205$
 $R^2 = 0.392386$
 RMSE = 0.05563
 $\text{Prob}(F) = 0.0014^*$
 $N = 21$

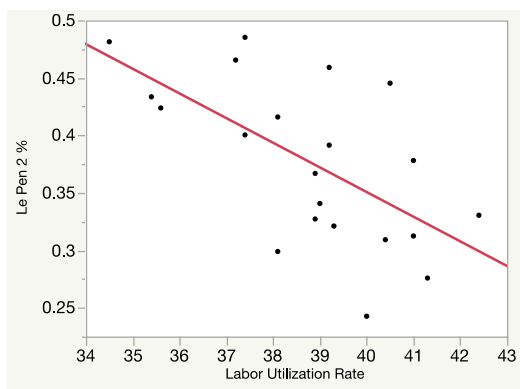
Figure 10



Summary Statistics:

$r = 0.529985$
 $R^2 = 0.243036$
 RMSE = 0.062092
 $\text{Prob}(F) = 0.0135^*$
 $N = 21$

Figure 11



Summary Statistics:

$r = 0.616656$
 $R^2 = 0.380265$
 RMSE = 0.057642
 $\text{Prob}(F) = 0.0029^*$
 $N = 21$

While each of these three metrics alone could be explained by random chance given the small sample size, the consistency in sizeable correlations with low F-statistics implies the strong

possibility of a negative association between economic strength and support for Marine Le Pen. Like the Netherlands, if more data becomes available at a regional level, the possibility of these associations can be further solidified. Still, the results of the departmental analysis of GDP and GVA per capita are remarkably favorable towards such an association.

V. Conclusions

After analyzing the history, issues and statistical results of the 2017 elections in the Netherlands and France, several conclusions can be drawn. Qualitatively, both nations have favored vast changes in political leadership about every 8 years, meaning the politically extreme views of Le Pen and Wilders could be simply named another dip in a cyclical trend. Citing recent terroristic events, both candidates were able to appeal to the concern of citizens who felt their current government could not protect them. Both candidates' staunchly anti-Islam views played a key role in supporting their popularity. Economically speaking, France and the Netherlands share a tradition of each politician supporting deficit reduction and job creation, though policies on achieving these goals may vary. Again, Wilders and Le Pen's outspoken opposition to an integrated European economy may simply represent a dip in a cyclical favorability for isolationist/populist economics.

Regardless, the rapid shift in favorability for both candidates issued many questions of how to typify a Le Pen or Wilders voter. This paper provided a rudimentary statistical analysis in the context of each nation's history and issues to determine whether economic instability may play a role in motivating politically extreme voters in France and the Netherlands. The Netherlands lacks adequately specific regional election and economic data to confidently draw associations, though the data visually indicated a consistent weak negative correlation between support for Wilders and economic stability.

Meanwhile, more specific data on French voters and their economic conditions provided a more telling analysis of Le Pen voters' motivations. Though regional data regarding GDP and GVA per capita provided inconclusive results, a more specific look at the same results, at the departmental level, showed a notable correlation between weak economic production and support for Le Pen. Even regional data regarding unemployment, growth in labor force participation and labor utilization provided strong correlations between economic strife and votes for the National Front. While more specific analysis will be required for both countries before associations can be confidently drawn, these results indicate the strong possibility of an association between economic instability and support for Marine Le Pen in France. Given the results of this exploratory research, further regression analysis should be completed to detect possible causal relationships between the metrics of inequality and the rise politically extreme political movements in France and the Netherlands. The results of these findings will be tested in future election cycles, to evaluate whether improvements or declines in these economies will lead to shifts in support for similar candidates.

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