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Crowding the market: the dynamics of populist and mainstream competition in the 2017 French presidential elections¹

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*** PRELIMINARY DRAFT – PLEASE DO NOT QUOTE ***

Abstract

The 2017 French presidential elections have seen a considerable rise in support for populist actors at the periphery of the party system, challenging the dominance of the more established parties of the mainstream. The electoral success of Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s *France Insoumise* (LFI) has expanded the political space for populist politics to the left of the political spectrum, competing with Marine Le Pen’s *Front national* (FN) to the right. Meanwhile, the emergence of Emmanuel Macron as a politically viable centrist alternative has dislodged further the traditional bipolar dynamics of competition in French politics, resulting in a significant reshaping of the party system. Based on a national survey of French voters conducted in 2017, this paper examines the dynamics of electoral support for populist candidates in the presidential election, looking at commonalities and differences between the left and right-wing manifestations of the populist phenomenon, and to which extent these differed from the mainstream according to party system location.

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented as part of a comparative analysis. See Ivaldi, G. and A. Zaslove (2017) “Parties and Voters in the Populist Market: left and right populism in France and the Netherlands”, Paper delivered to the ECPR General Conference, University of Oslo, 6-9 September.

Introduction

The rise of populism is one of the most significant phenomena in today's political world. In the last decade, populist parties have gained significance across Europe and America. In the European context, populist parties manifest themselves in both radical left actors such as Podemos in Spain and SYRIZA in Greece, and radical right variants such as the French Front National (FN), the Austrian FPÖ and the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV).

France is no exception to the current populist wave. To the left, populism is found in Jean-Luc Mélenchon's *La France Insoumise* (Rebellious France, LFI) while right-wing populism manifests itself predominantly in Marine Le Pen's *Front National* (National Front, FN). Both populist parties have made significant gains in the 2017 presidential elections, thriving on economic instability and cultural fears, riding the wave of discontent with mainstream politics among French voters. Meanwhile, the rise of Emmanuel Macron as a politically viable centrist alternative has dislodged the traditional bipolar dynamics of competition in French politics further, and this has resulted in a significant reshaping of the party system (Evans and Ivaldi 2018).

France provides a relevant case study for the analysis of the resemblances and dissimilarities between different manifestations of the populist phenomenon. While challenging established parties, French populist parties are fishing from the same pool of voters dissatisfied with 'old' politics and traditional party elites, thus competing against each other, however from different party system locations. Currently, there are only a few countries in Europe where left and right-wing populist parties are found to coexist within the same political system. One reason for this, as March and Rommerskirchen (2015) suggest, is that the presence of a radical right party generally tends to depress support for radical left alternatives. Overall, little is known of what may unite and oppose populist parties and voters operating in a given polity, and of how populist parties effectively compete with neighbouring mainstream parties in their local party sub-system.

Based on a national survey of voters, this paper examines the dynamics of electoral support for populist candidates in the 2017 French presidential election, taking Jean-Luc Mélenchon's *France Insoumise* (LFI) as an illustration of left-wing populism, while Marine Le Pen's *Front national* (FN) serves as an example of right-wing populism. This allows to look at commonalities and differences between the left and right-wing manifestations of populism, and to which extent these differed from the mainstream, most particularly from the new centrist candidate, Emmanuel Macron. In line with the current populism literature, a general expectation in this paper is that populist voters should share similar populist attitudes (Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel 2018), and that they should diverge however on their core attaching ideologies, with FN voters being primarily motivated by cultural issues such as immigration, while economic attitudes should be determinant amongst LFI supporters.

The paper departs from the current literature on populism, however. First, the case study design in the paper allows to capture the diversity of the populist idiosyncrasy beyond left and

right. This paper identifies two areas of populist change/adaptation –namely the interaction of left-wing populism with nationalist claims, and the intersection between right-wing populism and economic redistribution–, which may produce significant changes in the mobilization strategies by those parties, affecting the way in which they compete against each other as well as against the mainstream in their local party sub-systems. Second, this paper examines the link between populism and attitudes towards internationalization. Populists both left and right increasingly mobilize conflicts associated with EU integration and globalization, which may produce more resemblance between left and right instances of populism.

This paper seeks to position itself in the current comparative literature on populism, addressing how populism interacts with other dimensions of competition. This paper is divided into four sections. The first section provides a definition of populism and identifies the main research question. The second section lays the basis for a case study of French populism. The data and methods are explicated in the third section and the results are discussed in the last section.

Populism left and right

Mudde (2004) defines populism as a ‘thin-centred ideology’ which “considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (p.543). The political elite is castigated by populists as an oligarchy and separate ‘caste’. Populist actors claim to represent the ‘ordinary people’ and the latter is given a positive moral connotation as opposed to the ‘corrupt’ elite. These generic anti-elite and people-centred features are shared by all populist actors (Stanley 2008).

Populist agendas and strategies vary considerably across parties and contexts, however. As a thin-centred ideology, populism must attach itself to other more substantial sets of ideas which give it its full meaning (Mudde 2004). In the European context, populism is predominantly found in the radical left and radical right (Rooduijn and Akkerman 2015). The literature suggests that, despite different origins and locations in their party systems, these parties share the core people-centrist, anti-elitist and popular sovereignty features of the populist ideology, but that they diverge however on the more substantial ideologies to which their populism is attached (Rooduijn and Akkerman 2015, Mudde and Kaltwasser 2016, Ivaldi et al. 2017). In the radical right, populism is combined with exclusionary nativism and authoritarianism, whereby the people and the elite are primarily defined along cultural lines (Mudde 2007). The radical left presents on the other hand a universalistic profile embracing a more socially inclusive notion of the people which is essentially pit against an economic elite (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013, Gómez-Reino and Llamazares 2015).

Similar differences are found on the demand side of populism. The current research on populist voters suggests variability in the issues and attitudes that motivate support for the

populist radical right and left, respectively –for a comprehensive review of the electoral basis of populism, see Ivaldi (2017). Supporters of the populist radical right show higher levels of cultural exclusionism and they distinguish themselves from other electorates by their opposition to immigration and a multicultural society. Economic equality and support for redistribution are, on the other hand, the most distinctive features of left-wing populists (Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel 2018).

This paper examines the dynamics of electoral support for populist parties in the 2017 French presidential election. Based on a survey of voters, the paper looks at commonalities and differences between the left and right-wing manifestations of populism, and to which extent these differed from the mainstream, in particular from the new centrist candidate, Emmanuel Macron. To a large extent, this paper seeks to corroborate the existing knowledge of populism by suggesting that populist voters share similar populist attitudes (Akkerman et al. 2014, Hauwaert and Van Kessel 2018), but that they diverge in terms of their attaching ideologies, both culturally and economically.

The paper departs from the current literature on populism, however, and it does so on two accounts.

First, the case study design in the paper allows to address the complexity of the populist phenomenon beyond simple left and right. While useful heuristically, the distinction between ‘left’ and ‘right’ populism may conceal areas of convergence and/or variability, and it may fail to capture the diversity of the populist idiosyncrasy across European party systems (Ivaldi et al. 2017). In countries such as France where the populist ‘market’ has become more complex recently, the presence of left and right wing populism simultaneously creates new mobilization opportunities for populist entrepreneurs, which may reshape the competitive dynamics of the party system. Populist actors may compete on different issues and dimensions locally, i.e. within their respective party sub-systems. They may manipulate issue emphasis and change also their positions according to context and opportunities.

This paper identifies two areas in which the distinction between left and right-wing populism should be nuanced, namely the interaction of left-wing populism with nationalist claims, on the one hand, and the intersection between right-wing populism and economic redistribution, on the other hand. The defence of national interests is increasingly relevant to populist organizations located to the left of the party system such as the M5S in Italy and Podemos in Spain, and it is articulated with the anti-globalization agenda that those parties embrace (Gerbaudo and Screti 2017, Ivaldi et al. 2017). To the right, radical right parties increasingly move to the left on socio-economic issues to cater to voters with lower socio-economic status (Harteveld 2016). This may produce significant changes in the mobilization strategies by those parties, thus affecting the way in which they compete against each other and against the mainstream. ‘Localized’ party competition according to party system location may yield different patterns of opposition between populist and mainstream parties.

Second, this paper examines the link between populism and voter attitudes towards internationalization. As Ivaldi et al. (2017) suggest, populists both left and right increasingly mobilize conflicts associated with EU integration and globalization, and this may produce more resemblance between left and right instances of populism. The connection between populism and Euroscepticism is a significant development in West European politics (e.g. Taggart 1997, Sitter 2002, Krouwel and Abts 2007, Pirro and Van Kessel 2017). Eurosceptic frames are increasingly used by populists for voter mobilization, whereby the EU is depicted as the main driver behind impoverishing austerity, as well as being responsible for immigration and multiculturalism. Populist actors have also become more prone to opposing economic globalization and neoliberal capitalism, which they see as operating against the interests of the ‘people’ (Ivaldi et al. 2017).

Populist politics in France

Because it exhibits strong populist movements both left and right, simultaneously, France is a relevant case for the study of resemblances and dissimilarities between different manifestations of the populist phenomenon in a given polity. The French case allows also to look at how populist parties effectively compete with neighbouring mainstream parties within the boundaries of their local party sub-system.

Left-wing populism is found in Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s *La France Insoumise* (Rebellious France, LFI) while right-wing populism manifests itself predominantly in Marine Le Pen’s *Front National* (National Front, FN). Both populist parties have made significant gains in the 2017 presidential elections. Mélenchon polled 19.6 per cent of the first-round vote, taking the fourth place. To the right, Marine Le Pen won 21.3 per cent, progressing into the run-off where she received 33.9 per cent against the centrist and pro-EU candidate Emmanuel Macron. Overall, including other minor organizations such as the NPA and *Debout la France* (DLF), populist parties captured over 45 per cent of the 2017 presidential vote. Meanwhile, the rise of Macron as a politically viable centrist alternative has dislodged the traditional bipolar dynamics of competition in French politics further, and this had resulted in a significant reshaping of the party system (Evans and Ivaldi 2018).

Populist convergence on core generic features

Both LFI and the FN operate on the core defining anti-elitist and people-centred features of populism. The FN is a well-established radical right party in French politics, and it exemplifies the radical right-wing variant of populism (Mudde 2007). A central populist claim of the FN is that it authentically represents the will of the people against the ‘corrupt’ political elite embodied by the so-called ‘UMPS caste’ (Ivaldi 2016). Le Pen’s 2017 manifesto claimed to “give France its freedom back and give the people a voice”. The FN’s idealized people is constructed as the ‘silent majority’ (*majorité silencieuse*), referring to all the ‘left behind’, the ‘invisible’ and the ‘forgotten ones who have been abandoned by political

elites', and who, according to the FN, embody a 'generous and hard-working France'². News media, journalists and intellectuals are castigated by the FN for being complicit with the political elite and financial powers³.

Right-wing populism is also found in the neo-Gaullist and 'sovereignist' *Debout la France* (DLF) led by Nicolas Dupont-Aignan. DLF originated as a minority faction of the right in the late 1990s before launching itself as an autonomous Eurosceptic party in 2008. In the 2012 elections, Dupont-Aignan spread a populist discourse, strongly opposing both the left and right, while vilipending the "caste of incompetent politicians" and claiming to "represent the only alternative to the system of the UMP and the PS"⁴. During the 2017 elections, he repeatedly attacked the "political caste that no longer wish to talk to the French and does not listen to them anymore"⁵, portraying in particular Emmanuel Macron as the "candidate of the elite that is disconnected from the people"⁶. Dupont-Aignan won 4.7 per cent of the vote in the first round of the 2017 presidential election, and he endorsed Marine Le Pen in the run-off.

To the left, the main populist party is Mélenchon's LFI. The party was founded in February 2016 from the previous *Parti de Gauche* (Party of the Left, PG). LFI is taking its inspiration from the political philosophy of post-Marxist writers such as Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau. Post-Marxist theorists define left-wing populism as a struggle between conflicting hegemonic projects. Populism refers in their view to a new form of political organization where the unity of progressive people is achieved by the determination of an adversary which is primarily represented by the coalition of neoliberal forces (Mouffe 2016).

LFI shows strong anti-establishment features and the party's discourse and ideology seek to offer an alternative to what is deemed the neoliberal hegemony. During the 2017 elections, Mélenchon called upon the 'era of the people' (*L'ère du peuple*), suggesting that people should 'clear out' politicians (*dégagisme*). Mélenchon pledged that he would "sweep away the oligarchy and abolish the privileges of the political caste", notably denouncing political corruption and the collusion with financial powers⁷. According to Mélenchon, the 'people' refers to a variety of social groups at the bottom of society. It is constructed as an inclusive entity which tries to transcend conventional political affiliations. Mélenchon's populism claims to articulate the plurality of social demands emerging from the economic crisis. It addresses the needs of a global political subject which is defined as the plural 'people' (*les gens*). This was illustrated by Mélenchon's concession speech after the first round of the 2017

² Marine Le Pen, Speech in Brachay, 3 September 2016, <http://www.frontnational.com/videos/discours-de-rentree-politique-de-marine-le-pen-a-brachay-2/> (last accessed: 8 April 2017).

³ Marine Le Pen, Speech in Nantes, 26 February 2017, <http://www.frontnational.com/videos/discours-de-marine-le-pen-a-nantes-26022017/> (last accessed: 10 April 2017).

⁴ http://www.liberation.fr/france/2012/01/23/dupont-aignan-vent-debout-contre-ump-et-ps_790353

⁵ <http://video.lefigaro.fr/figaro/video/nicolas-dupont-aignan-denonce-une-caste-politique-qui-n-ecoute-plus-les-francais/5394117468001/>

⁶ <http://www.europe1.fr/politique/macron-candidat-a-la-presidentielle-les-reactions-des-politiques-2902154>

⁷ <https://laec.fr/section/2/balayer-l-oligarchie-abolir-les-privileges-de-la-caste>

presidential, in which he addressed the ‘people’ (*les gens*). Mélenchon said: “we can be proud of what we have undertaken and what we have achieved. We are a conscious and enthusiastic force”⁸.

Looking comparatively at LFI and FN populist voters, the paper assesses first the relationships of varieties of populism within the French voter market. The theory of populism as ‘thin-ideology’ postulates that populism is a common denominator of all manifestations of populism (Mudde 2004, Stanley 2008) and that stronger populist attitudes characterize supporters of populist parties (Akkerman et al. 2014, Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel 2018), which differ in that respect from the mainstream.

H1. LFI and FN voters share similar populist attitudes

H2. Both LFI and FN voters have stronger populist attitudes than mainstream party voters, irrespective of party system location

Attaching ideologies

As a thin ideology, populism attaches itself to host ideologies which provide more substantial sets of ideas and policies. In radical right parties, populism is found in combination with exclusionary nativism and an authoritarian stance on moral and social issues, while the radical left emphasizes economic issues, egalitarianism and a more inclusive view of society associated with a culturally liberal agenda (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2016).

LFI presents a radical left profile and it operates primarily along socio-economic lines. LFI’s economic populism embraces socialism against the neoliberal establishment. Since 2012, Mélenchon’s policy package has been inspired by ‘alternative’ economists such as Jacques Généreux. During the 2017 campaign, Mélenchon’s left-wing populist profile was mired in controversy over his promise to take France into the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) set up by Cuba’s Fidel Castro and Venezuela’s Hugo Chavez in 2004⁹.

LFI strongly opposes austerity while advocating economic redistribution, increased labour rights, public spending and state intervention in the economy. In 2017, Mélenchon’s platform ‘*L’avenir en commun*’ pledged to reduce socio-economic inequalities, promising to ‘eradicate poverty and unemployment’, to raise the highest tax rate at 90% and to put forward a €100bn state investment plan. LFI’s economic policies included higher taxes on capital, the expansion of public services, nationalizing the banking sector to fight speculation, raising lower wages, and reducing the retirement age to 60. It also claimed that the highly controversial 2016 El Khomri labour law would be repealed. Additionally, the 2017 platform emphasized

⁸ https://www.lesechos.fr/23/04/2017/lesechos.fr/0212005750236_premier-tour-de-l-election-presidentielle---melenchon-en-opposant-irreductible.htm

⁹ http://www.lemonde.fr/election-presidentielle-2017/article/2017/04/14/qu-est-ce-que-l-alliance-bolivarienne-pour-les-ameriques_5111256_4854003.html

environmental issues, attesting to the more general ‘greening’ of left-wing politics in France. Mélenchon moved towards an ‘ecological transition’, advocating a wide range of green policies from ecological sustainability to a complete phase out of nuclear power by 2050, one of the issues that has traditionally opposed Mélenchon to his former Communist allies. Finally, LFI shows a predominantly libertarian-universalistic profile of social inclusion, although this profile has been toned down recently.

The FN exemplifies, on the other hand, the populist radical right ideology which is dominated by nativism and authoritarianism (Mudde 2007, Ivaldi 2016). Le Pen’s campaign of 2017 emphasized typical FN nativist policies calling for ‘national preference’ –renamed ‘national priority’ to give it a softer tone– and a drastic reduction in immigration, as well as a range of measures to combat the so-called identitarian closure (*communautarisme*) of French Muslims. In 2017, Le Pen pledged that she would enshrine the principle of ‘national priority’ in the Constitution (FN 2017). In the final stage of the campaign, she called for “an immediate moratorium to stop all legal immigration”, arguing that “for many French, mass immigration is an oppression (...) Immigration, Le Pen said, is not a chance for France, it’s a tragedy”¹⁰.

In 2015, the FN had intensified its anti-immigration rhetoric amidst the EU refugee crisis, raising the spectre of an ‘invasion’ and a ‘submersion’ by migrants. Immigration was depicted as a threat to France’s national identity and social welfare system¹¹. In the context of Islamic terrorism, the FN endorsed a hard stance on national security, in line with its traditional strong law and order agenda. In 2017, Le Pen pledged for instance that she would close all ‘extremist’ mosques and that anyone associated with the Jihadist movement would be stripped of their French citizenship and deported.

According to current literature (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013 & 2016, Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel 2018), a general expectation in this paper is that populist voters diverge on the host ideologies to which their populism is attached. FN voters should be primarily motivated by cultural issues such as immigration, while economic attitudes should be determinant amongst LFI supporters.

H3. FN voters are the most culturally exclusionist, showing a significantly stronger opposition to immigration, which differentiates them from all other voters

H4. FN have stronger authoritarian views, and this sets them apart from all other voters

H5. LFI voters have the highest level of support for (a) economic equality and (b) state intervention in the economy

¹⁰ <http://www.frontnational.com/videos/grand-meeting-de-marine-le-pen-au-zenith-de-paris/>

¹¹ Marine Le Pen, Speech in Marseille, 6 September 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qkEJoz7GZQI> (last accessed: 9 April 2017)

Localized patterns of populist/mainstream competition

In the French context, populism is embedded in the bipolar delineation of the party system, whereby competition for votes primarily occurs between the populist party and its proximal governing party within each local pole of the left and the right. Populist actors may compete on different issues and dimensions within their respective party sub-systems. They may manipulate issue emphasis and they may change their positions according to context and opportunities.

This paper identifies two areas in which the distinction between left and right-wing populism should be nuanced, that is the interaction between left-wing populism and nationalist claims, and the intersection between right-wing populism and economic redistribution.

Beginning with the populist left, Mélenchon has recently adopted a more patriotic tone, advocating national interests. LFI's patriotism defends the 'homeland' against foreign forces of globalization. During the 2017 presidential election, Mélenchon regularly resorted to patriotic values and claims. The traditional iconography of the French radical left, such as red flags and singing the Internationale, almost disappeared from LFI's meetings to be replaced with tricolor flags and the national anthem. References to the 'homeland' were paramount during the campaign. According to Mélenchon: "now is the time to show what the sovereign people are worth. The ballot papers must be used for a sweep that makes all of them [politicians] go away, without exception (...) They must all go away so that we can abolish the privileges of finance, those of the insolent caste that occupies all the powers, those of the presidential monarchy and of all the luxurious suites of the capital. We must think big for the French people, for our homeland"¹². This was illustrated also in Mélenchon's first-round concession speech in which he romanticized his 'beautiful country' and 'beautiful homeland' while simultaneously vilipending the so-called 'mediacrats and oligarchs'¹³.

At policy level, LFI's 2017 presidential platform de-emphasized previous pro-immigration policies such as its 2012 claim to regularize all undocumented migrants. Five years earlier, Mélenchon had made vibrant calls celebrating ethnic diversity and multiculturalism, portraying immigration as an 'opportunity' for the country while denouncing the "morbid and paranoid idea of a choc of civilizations"¹⁴. The 2012 platform stated that "immigration was not a problem", denouncing "the myth of zero immigration, which weakens and divides our country"¹⁵. In contrast, the 2017 campaign clearly acknowledged growing immigration fears among lower and middle class voters which form the core electoral support of LFI. This was revealed in particular in the claim that France should immediately opt out from the EU directive on posted workers. During the 2015 refugee crisis, Mélenchon had taken an

¹² <https://melenchon.fr/2017/03/18/defile-6e-republique-18-mars-a-paris/>

¹³ <http://www.ouest-france.fr/elections/presidentielle/presidentielle-jean-luc-melenchon-chacun-sait-quel-est-son-devoir-4945769>

¹⁴ <http://www.jean-luc-melenchon.fr/2012/04/14/discours-sur-les-plages-du-prado-a-marseille/>

¹⁵ https://melenchon.fr/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/humain_dabord.pdf

ambiguous stance, criticizing Germany's decision to accept large numbers of refugees, and arguing that "this was not the solution to the problem"¹⁶. In a controversial speech in the European Parliament in July 2016, Mélenchon had denounced a Europe of "social violence where posted workers come and steal the bread from local workers"¹⁷. We can assume therefore that LFI draws support from the culturally protectionist sector of the French left.

H6. LFI voters are less tolerant about immigration than the mainstream left

Turning to the FN, in the context of the economic crisis, the FN has moved towards the left on the economy. Its current program shares similarities with the left –e.g. lowering the retirement age to 60, increasing social spending minima and repealing the 2016 labour law. More generally, the FN under Marine Le Pen has adopted a Keynesian platform of redistribution and state regulation, advocating fiscal justice, bolstering public services and a more generous welfare state, albeit reserved to the French (Ivaldi 2015). This has helped the FN address the economic concerns and grievances of voters with lower economic status, who form the bulk of the electoral support for the populist radical right in France (Mayer 2013, Stockemer 2015, Gougou 2015, Jaffré 2016, Perrineau 2017). In 2017, Le Pen ran on a mixed economic platform of state intervention and redistribution, combined with more market liberal measures for small entrepreneurs, thus addressing the needs of both her working class and petty-bourgeois electorates (Evans and Ivaldi 2018).

H7. FN voters show higher support for a) state intervention and b) economic redistribution than the mainstream right

Populists against the EU and globalization

Finally, LFI and the FN increasingly converge on a common protectionist agenda, opposing European integration and economic globalization. Both parties show strong opposition to economic globalization and neoliberal capitalism, which they see as operating against the interests of the people. They manipulate Eurosceptic frames for voter mobilization, although the arguments they use against the EU and the intensity of their opposition to European integration vary.

Euroscepticism has been a strong ideological feature of the FN since the mid-1990s (Hainsworth et al. 2004, Ivaldi 2018). FN's Euroscepticism taps into a wide range of institutional, economic and cultural issues. The EU is castigated by the FN as an elite-driven project and a 'totalitarian jail' for the people. It is blamed for its agenda of free circulation and immigration, which, according to the FN, is leading to a 'Europeist and multicultural magma'. Finally, the EU is vilified as the incarnation of neoliberalism and it is depicted as 'the first

¹⁶ <http://www.lefigaro.fr/politique/le-scan/2015/09/11/25001-20150911ARTFIG00089-pour-melenchon-accueillir-les-refugies-n-est-pas-la-reponse-au-probleme.php>

¹⁷ <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+CRE+20160705+ITEM-005-01+DOC+XML+V0//FR&language=fr&query=INTERV&detail=2-192-000>

step towards savage globalization’ (FN 2014). The FN opposes the EU’s free market liberal agenda and austerity policies, and during the Eurozone crisis, it strongly objected to EU bailout plans. In 2017, Le Pen’s presidential campaign claimed that France should restore national sovereignty over laws, borders and currency, while also opposing free trade agreements such as TAFTA and CETA (FN 2017). The campaign reiterated the party’s previous claim to hold a French referendum on EU membership within six months in the presidency, so that the French could “emerge from this nightmare and become free again”¹⁸.

In LFI, Euroscepticism is primarily motivated by economic arguments. Since 2009, the PG has been a significant driver behind the contestation of the market liberal trajectory of European integration, however endorsing the EU as polity. The PG’s critique focused essentially on the EU’s agenda of austerity and fiscal orthodoxy, while simultaneously blaming Europe for labour market liberalization and privatization of public services. In the lead-up to the 2017 elections, Mélenchon shifted to a harder Eurosceptic stance, promising to renegotiate European treaties and threatening to take France out of the EU if negotiations failed¹⁹. The 2017 platform strongly objected to international trade agreements such as TAFTA and CETA, calling for ‘equitable protectionism’ in order to relocate production and jobs in France. Mélenchon’s B-plan included the suspension of France’s contribution to the EU’s budget, transforming the Euro into a common currency and re-establishing controls over the free movement of capital and goods. Additionally, the party claimed that the ECB should no longer be independent, and it called for a moratorium on national debts within the Eurozone. The 2017 platform opposed what was deemed the ‘tyranny’ of the EU, suggesting that France should ‘disobey’ the European treaties to ‘preserve the national sovereignty of the French people’²⁰.

Postulating convergence in populist mobilization against the general process of ‘denationalization’, LFI and FN voters share similar negative views of European integration and globalization.

H8. LFI and the FN draw their support from a same pool of voters who see (a) European integration and (b) economic globalization negatively; they should not differ from one another, but should differ however from the mainstream

Data and methods

This paper looks at the data from a large representative national sample of 19,454 French presidential voters in a survey conducted by BVA on behalf of the University of Nice and as

¹⁸ Marine Le Pen, Speech in Lyon, 5 February 2017, <http://www.frontnational.com/videos/assises-presidentielles-de-lyon-discours-de-marine-le-pen/> (last accessed: 9 April 2017).

¹⁹ <http://melenchon.fr/2016/06/24/lunion-europeenne-on-change-on-quitte-lheure-plan-b-sonne-2017/>

²⁰ <https://laec.fr/section/49/prendre-les-mesures-immediates-et-unilaterales-de-sauvegarde-des-interets-de-la-nation-et-d-application-de-notre-projet>

part of the European project SCoRE between 11 May and 25 June 2017²¹. The dependent variable in the French survey is the recalled vote in the first round of the 2017 presidential election: “Which candidate did you vote for in the last presidential election of April 2017?”, which includes all 11 candidates that were running. Our final indicator is a categorical variable with seven main categories, which include all six main candidates i.e. Hamon, Macron, Fillon, Mélenchon, Le Pen and Dupont-Aignan. Other minor candidates are grouped together in the ‘others’ category. Non-voters and Don’t Knows are excluded from the models, resulting in a final analytical sample of 10,699 French voters.

The (preliminary) analysis is performed by means of a multinomial logistic model which includes standard socio-demographics (gender, age, education, occupation, religion, religiosity, patrimony), a ‘root’ political affiliation (left right ideology) as a control variable, a set of economic and cultural attitudes that are relevant to the hypotheses formulated above (e.g. state intervention, economic redistribution, welfare chauvinism, authoritarianism, etc.), as well as attitudes towards the EU and economic globalization. The survey includes also the populism scale designed by Akkerman et al. (2014), which has been used extensively in recent research on the effect of populist attitudes on populist party support²². The details of attitudinal variables and their descriptive statistics are summarized in Table 1 below. Correlations between attitudinal predictors are shown in Table 2.

Table 1. Here

Table 2. Here

Results

As would be expected, there are significant differences in voter populist attitudes across the array of presidential candidates. The mean score of populism is at 4.1 across all voters (sd=0.7), which reflects the general distrust of parties and elites in the French public. Le Pen’s voters show the highest level of populism. Mélenchon’s voters are significantly more populist than mainstream party voters, however less so than their radical right counterparts. The lowest level of populism is found at the political centre, amongst voters who supported Macron (see Figure 1 below).

²¹ Sub-national context and radical right support in Europe (<https://www.researchgate.net/project/SCoRE-Sub-national-context-and-radical-right-support-in-Europe>).

²² The summation scale constructed from the six populism items shows consistency with an alpha of 0.78, corroborating the growing body of literature that employs that measure of populism among voters.

Figure 1. Here

Table 3 below shows the results of the multinomial logistic model of French presidential voting with Le Pen's vote as reference category. The model confirms that populism is a trait that is common to supporters of both LFI and FN, which supports H1. LFI and FN voters are also more populist than supporters of the mainstream right and left, thus corroborating H2. Populism significantly increases the probability to vote for populist candidates –Mélenchon or Le Pen– in the 2017 French presidential election, and this holds true when controlling for socio-demographic, traditional left-right affiliation and attitudinal predictors.

While this paper makes no assumption as regards the socio-economic profile of populist voters, the results show support for populist parties to be significantly higher amongst the youngest cohorts. The model indicates that the probability of voting for populist candidates decreases with age, thus corroborating that populism both in its left and right variants was predominant among young voters in the 2017 French elections. The data suggest that populism is found in the lower socio-economic strata, clearly opposing LFI and FN voters to supporters of Fillon and Macron who are more bourgeois and upper class.

Significant differences between LFI and FN voters are found across gender and education. The results in Table 3 show only a marginal gender gap amongst Le Pen voters, which confirms that the FN has expanded its appeal to women, recently. In contrast, support for LFI's left-wing populism is more male and the difference with the FN is significant. Lower levels of education are strongly associated with voting for Le Pen, while people with a degree are much less likely to support the populist right. LFI supporters show higher educational attainments compared with their FN counterparts and Mélenchon achieves a higher support amongst voters with a high school and university diploma.

Table 3. Here

The results support our hypotheses regarding variation in the 'thicker' ideologies to which populism is anchored. FN voters are significantly more likely to have welfare chauvinist views. These voters agree that immigrants should never get the same rights to social benefits as citizens already living in the country. They differ in that respect from all other voters in the 2017 French electorate, including Dupont-Aignan's supporters, which corroborates H3. Turning to authoritarianism, which is taken from the item concerning the need for more law and order and fewer civil rights in society, we find that Le Pen's voters are indeed significantly more authoritarian than the rest of the electorate, which confirms that the FN is firmly located to the right of the cultural axis, thus lending support to H4.

As was anticipated, the highest support for economic redistribution –that is the claim that the government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels – is typically found amongst Mélenchon's voters. Those are statistically different from both their right-wing populist counterparts and mainstream parties, left and right, and this confirms H5a –although

the difference is small between Mélenchon and Hamon's voters, mostly due to the more radical economic profile of the socialists in the 2017 presidential. The results show little support for H5b however and there is no clear evidence that LFI voters are more likely to endorse state intervention in the economy. The size of the regression coefficients in the mainstream left suggests that LFI voters share similar views about authority with their counterparts in the mainstream left, which is not surprising given the libertarian tone in Hamon's 2017 election campaign (e.g. voting rights for immigrants, legalization of cannabis).

Turning to areas of populist adaptation, the size of the regression coefficients suggests that Mélenchon voters are indeed more likely to have stronger anti-immigration attitudes –which are measured here from welfare chauvinist claims– than voters of the mainstream left. While differences are small, this corroborates H6 and it may be explained both by Mélenchon's more ambivalent immigration rhetoric in 2017, and the clear pro-immigration stance taken by Hamon during the campaign (Evans and Ivaldi 2018). To the right of the party system, the results suggest that FN voters are indeed more strongly in favour of economic redistribution compared with Fillon's supporters in the mainstream right, meaning that they agree more generally with the view that the government should take measures to reduce inequalities. This confirms H7b and it is consistent with the economic positions taken by both candidates during their 2017 campaigns –left leaning for Le Pen and more market liberal for Fillon (Evans and Ivaldi 2018). There is little support on the other hand for H7a: Le Pen voters share very similar views with their counterparts in the mainstream right about economic intervention by the state, as well as with Dupont-Aignan's supporters, which suggests a more traditional left-right economic divide.

Finally, looking at the extent to which supporters of populist parties are more anti-EU and anti-globalization, the data provide support for the effect of Euroscepticism as appears in H8a. Populist voters disagree more generally with the claim that European unification should go further, and they are significantly more Eurosceptic than those in the mainstream, most notably Macron's voters, with the exception of Dupont-Aignan's supporters, however. The effect of opposing EU integration is quite large as regards probabilities of voting for populist candidates, which confirms that opposition to the EU is intersecting with populist politics in France. Contrary to the expectations for H8a, however, the results show significant differences amongst populists: Le Pen's supporters exhibit the highest level of Euroscepticism of all French voters, and they are significantly more Eurosceptic than their left-wing counterparts.

The data provide support for H8b which concerns the perception of globalization as an opportunity for economic growth. Compared with the mainstream, populist voters have significantly more negative views of globalization, one exception being again Dupont-Aignan's supporters. Both LFI and FN voters share similar negative views of globalization. As is the case with Europe, anti-globalization attitudes are also more pronounced amongst FN voters.

Tables and figures

Table 1. Summary of attitudinal indicators and descriptive statistics

Dimension	Item	Measurement	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Max
Populism	Scale Akkerman et al. (2014)	Scale	4.1	0.7	1	5
Left-Right	Left-right self-placement	low values = left	6.4	2.8	1	11
State intervention	The less that government intervenes in the economy, the better it is for France [INV]	low values = disagree	4.3	1.8	1	7
Redistribution	The government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels	low values = disagree	5.7	1.5	1	7
Welfare	When should immigrants receive benefits	low values = earlier	3.2	1.0	1	5
Chauvinism	European unification should go further	low values = disagree	4.6	2.0	1	7
EU integration	It's a good thing that same-sex marriage is equal to opposite-sex marriage in the eyes of the law	low values = disagree	5.1	2.1	1	7
Same sex marriage	Globalisation is an opportunity for economic growth in France	low values = disagree	4.6	1.7	1	7
Globalization	What our country really needs instead of more 'civil rights' is a good stiff dose of law and order	low values = disagree	4.8	2.0	1	7
Authoritarianism						

N=10,699 French voters

Table 2. Correlations between attitudinal predictors

	Populism	Left Right	State Intervention	Economic Redistribution	Welfare Chauvinism	European Integration	Same Sex	Globalization Opportunity	Authoritarianism
Populism	1	0.078	-0.126	0.310	0.167	-0.224	-0.052	-0.208	0.273
Left Right	0.078	1	-0.175	-0.230	0.314	-0.145	-0.319	-0.015	0.455
State Intervention	-0.126	-0.175	1	0.103	-0.098	0.044	0.135	-0.039	-0.170
Economic Redistribution	0.310	-0.230	0.103	1	-0.056	-0.038	0.173	-0.092	-0.010
Welfare Chauvinism	0.167	0.314	-0.098	-0.056	1	-0.210	-0.223	-0.121	0.340
European Integration	-0.224	-0.145	0.044	-0.038	-0.210	1	0.156	0.427	-0.173
Same Sex	-0.052	-0.319	0.135	0.173	-0.223	0.156	1	0.137	-0.255
Globalization Opportunity	-0.208	-0.015	-0.039	-0.092	-0.121	0.427	0.137	1	-0.049
Authoritarianism	0.273	0.455	-0.170	-0.010	0.340	-0.173	-0.255	-0.049	1

Table 3. Multinomial logistic regression of populist voting in the 2017 French presidential elections

	(Reference=Le Pen)					
	Hamon	Macron	Fillon	Mélenchon	Dupont-Aignan	Others
Gender Female	0.156 (0.104)	-0.154* (0.080)	0.192** (0.086)	-0.191** (0.089)	0.336*** (0.113)	-0.181 (0.141)
Age Continuous	0.020*** (0.005)	0.035*** (0.004)	0.055*** (0.004)	0.005 (0.004)	0.018*** (0.005)	0.019*** (0.006)
Education Lower Sec.	-0.170 (0.198)	-0.049 (0.144)	-0.067 (0.154)	0.197 (0.163)	0.248 (0.227)	0.461* (0.268)
Education BAC	-0.068 (0.198)	0.233 (0.147)	0.428*** (0.156)	0.329** (0.166)	0.571** (0.228)	0.267 (0.281)
Education University	0.629*** (0.199)	0.826*** (0.151)	1.150*** (0.157)	0.782*** (0.171)	1.030*** (0.232)	0.824*** (0.283)
Occupation Independent	-0.615* (0.345)	-0.553** (0.230)	-0.186 (0.222)	-0.279 (0.269)	-0.580* (0.346)	-0.165 (0.416)
Occupation Technician	0.051 (0.186)	-0.337** (0.151)	-0.639*** (0.163)	-0.114 (0.169)	-0.075 (0.202)	-0.030 (0.263)
Occupation Employee	-0.259 (0.170)	-0.632*** (0.136)	-0.893*** (0.146)	-0.205 (0.151)	-0.286 (0.184)	-0.158 (0.240)
Occupation Worker	-0.307 (0.268)	-0.896*** (0.205)	-1.430*** (0.271)	-0.328 (0.214)	-0.392 (0.280)	0.086 (0.318)
Occupation Retired	-0.358* (0.197)	-0.257* (0.154)	-0.194 (0.156)	-0.121 (0.175)	-0.341 (0.217)	-0.240 (0.272)
Occupation Inactive	-0.251 (0.211)	-0.390** (0.168)	-0.365** (0.182)	-0.117 (0.185)	-0.155 (0.231)	0.519* (0.276)

Table 3 continued...

	Hamon	Macron	Fillon	Mélenchon	Dupont-Aignan	Others
Patrimony	0.058 (0.052)	0.148*** (0.039)	0.186*** (0.040)	0.064 (0.045)	0.173*** (0.054)	0.114 (0.069)
Religion Catholic	-0.027 (0.117)	-0.067 (0.088)	0.347*** (0.097)	-0.246** (0.099)	0.042 (0.122)	0.025 (0.156)
ReligionOther religion	0.664*** (0.234)	0.626*** (0.192)	0.391* (0.209)	0.719*** (0.205)	0.062 (0.292)	0.799*** (0.289)
Religiosity Occasional	-0.269 (0.220)	-0.268 (0.164)	-0.552*** (0.154)	-0.119 (0.196)	0.338 (0.260)	-0.120 (0.283)
Religiosity Never	-0.469** (0.229)	-0.282* (0.171)	-0.922*** (0.164)	-0.178 (0.202)	0.258 (0.268)	-0.202 (0.295)
Populism	-0.509*** (0.082)	-0.615*** (0.066)	-0.674*** (0.071)	0.045 (0.075)	-0.127 (0.097)	0.093 (0.121)
Left Right	-0.680*** (0.025)	-0.355*** (0.018)	0.218*** (0.021)	-0.694*** (0.021)	-0.120*** (0.024)	-0.403*** (0.030)
State Intervention	0.102*** (0.029)	0.133*** (0.022)	0.015 (0.023)	0.052** (0.024)	-0.003 (0.030)	-0.060 (0.038)
Economic Redistribution	0.140*** (0.042)	-0.068** (0.028)	-0.268*** (0.027)	0.241*** (0.036)	-0.099*** (0.037)	-0.026 (0.052)
Welfare Chauvinism	-0.597*** (0.057)	-0.370*** (0.046)	-0.288*** (0.050)	-0.481*** (0.050)	-0.257*** (0.065)	-0.567*** (0.076)
European Integration	0.313*** (0.031)	0.420*** (0.023)	0.331*** (0.023)	0.142*** (0.025)	0.076** (0.030)	0.098** (0.039)
Same Sex	0.153*** (0.029)	0.154*** (0.020)	-0.046** (0.020)	0.132*** (0.022)	0.010 (0.026)	0.027 (0.034)

Table 3 continued...

	Hamon	Macron	Fillon	Mélenchon	Dupont-Aignan	Others
Globalization Opportunity	0.195*** (0.034)	0.415*** (0.026)	0.315*** (0.027)	0.084*** (0.028)	0.092*** (0.035)	0.038 (0.043)
Authoritarianism	-0.408*** (0.031)	-0.249*** (0.026)	-0.084*** (0.029)	-0.408*** (0.027)	-0.082** (0.037)	-0.359*** (0.039)
Constant	4.560*** (0.639)	1.830*** (0.492)	-1.540*** (0.526)	4.310*** (0.560)	-0.487 (0.715)	2.880*** (0.865)
Akaike Inf. Crit.	25,573.000					

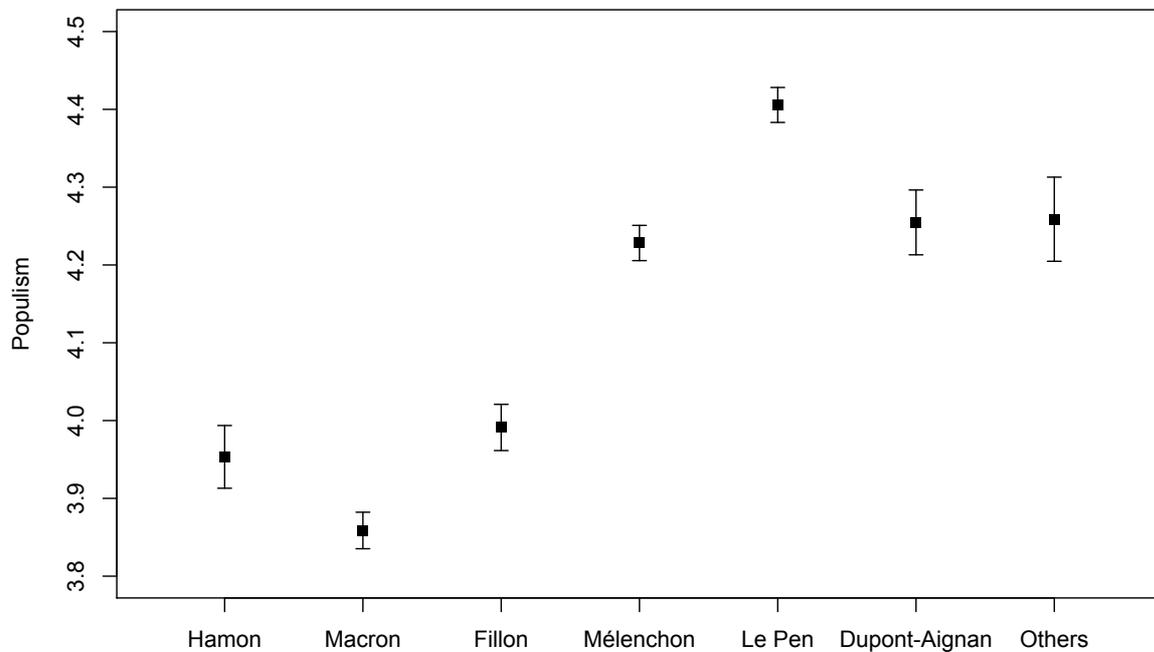
Notes:

*** Significant at the 1 percent level.

** Significant at the 5 percent level.

* Significant at the 10 percent level.

Figure 1. Populism and vote in the first round of the 2017 French presidential election



Hamon (PS, mainstream left), Macron (LREM, centre), Fillon (Republicans, mainstream right), Mélenchon (LFI, populist left), Le Pen (FN, populist right) and Dupont-Aignan (DLF, right-wing sovereignty)