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Two of a kind? Marine Le Pen, Éric Zemmour, and the supply and demand for far-right politics in the 2022 French presidential election

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Abstract

The electoral breakthrough of former media pundit Éric Zemmour is one of the most remarkable outcomes of the 2022 French presidential election, which points to the diversification of the far right in France. Taking this as its point of departure, this paper examines the internal heterogeneity of the far right in the 2022 French presidential election, both in terms of supply and demand. It finds that while Le Pen and Zemmour converged on core far right defining characteristics such as nativism and authoritarianism, they significantly diverged on the other hand with regards to their socio-economic agenda, their use of reactionary politics, and their electoral strategy. Drawing from election survey data, the paper shows that such heterogeneity was somewhat reflected in the sociological and attitudinal profile of their voters. The ‘demand-side’ findings suggest that Le Pen and Zemmour may have appealed to different sectors of the electorate, although differences were of relatively small magnitude.

Keywords: Zemmour, Le Pen, French presidential elections, far right, voting

Introduction

The electoral breakthrough of former newspaper columnist and media pundit, Éric Zemmour, has been one of the most remarkable outcomes of the 2022 French presidential election. With a total 7% of the first-round vote and about 2.5 million ballots, Zemmour came in fourth place behind incumbent centrist President Emmanuel Macron (27.9%), Marine Le Pen (23.2%) and radical left candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon (22%). Together, Le Pen and Zemmour received nearly a third of the first-round vote, which marked a new culmination of the far right after the electoral ‘low tide’ in the 2020-2021 local and regional elections during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Such electoral success more broadly illustrates the recent wave of the far right, which has seen many of those parties making significant inroads across the Western world. In their recent analysis of the fourth wave of far-right parties in Europe, Wondreys and Mudde (2022) find substantial internal heterogeneity, however, showing different responses to current socioeconomic and cultural issues, and different effects of such issues on the electoral support for those parties.

Taking the diversification of the far right in France as its point of departure, this paper examines such internal heterogeneity in far-right politics in the 2022 French presidential election. It follows recent literature that emphasizes the need to study both the supply- and demand-side of the far right (Mols and Jetten 2020).

Building on such insights, the paper first looks at the supply of far-right politics in the 2022 French presidential election, and to which extent this differed across Le Pen and Zemmour. The emphasis is on commonalities and differences between the two far right candidates, in terms of their ideology and electoral strategy, thus allowing to set some expectations with regards to voter preferences in the first round.

Next, drawing from national election surveys conducted by CEVIPOF, the paper looks at the profile of voters, and it examines areas of variability in the issues and attitudes that motivate support for the two main far right candidates. Based on the analysis of the ‘supply-side’, this section presents several hypotheses with regards to the individual socio-economic, political and cultural drivers of the far-right vote, asking which factors may explain different voting behavior across the two electoral clusters of the far-right in France.

Overall, the paper finds that while Le Pen and Zemmour converged on core far right defining characteristics such as nativism and authoritarianism, and while they were both populist, they significantly diverged, however, with regards to their socio-economic agenda, their use of reactionary frames and issues, and their electoral strategy, in particular with issues relating to the war in Ukraine and positions vis-à-vis economic sanctions on Russia. As regards voters, the findings suggest that Le Pen and Zemmour may have appealed to different sectors of the electorate, although differences were of relatively small magnitude.

The supply-side of far-right politics

According to Pirro (2022), the far right may be taken as an ‘umbrella’ concept to bring together “ultranationalist collective actors sharing a common exclusionary and authoritarian worldview—predominantly determined on sociocultural criteria—yet varying allegiances to democracy” (p.3).

This section first examines the supply of far-right politics in the 2022 French presidential election, looking more specifically at Marine Le Pen’s *Rassemblement national* (RN, formerly *Front national*, FN) and Éric Zemmour’s *Reconquête!*. The analysis draws from the nativist and authoritarian ideological core, and the ‘thin’ populist ideology that is often associated with the far right in Europe (Mudde 2019), together with key aspects of socio-economic policies, social values and electoral strategy. This section asks in particular to which extent such supply of far-right ideology and discourse differed across Le Pen and Zemmour, thus allowing to set some of our expectations with regards to voter preferences in the first round.

This first section adopts an essentially qualitative approach to the analysis of Zemmour and Le Pen’s ideology and strategy in the 2022 elections, using externally oriented campaign material and party literature. The data include speeches, published statements, and interviews of Le Pen and Zemmour during the campaign, as well as their respective presidential manifestos, namely *22 Mesures pour 2022* (Le Pen) and *Pour que la France reste la France* (Zemmour).

Marine Le Pen: de-demonization and the social populist strategy

The French *Front National* (FN) has traditionally illustrated the typical populist radical right party (Mudde 2007, p.41). In the mid-1980s, the FN pioneered a populist radical right agenda combining nativism, authoritarianism and anti-establishment populism (Rydgren 2005). Under Jean-Marie Le Pen, FN mobilization has been characterized by a niche strategy primarily emphasizing cultural issues such as immigration and law-and-order, while showing heterogeneous and often inconsistent socio-economic policies. During the 1990s, the FN also adopted Euroscepticism and anti-globalization views, rejecting free-trade, international corporations and neoliberal capitalism (Reungoat 2015). Under Jean-Marie Le Pen, the FN has established itself as a significant force in French politics winning an average 15% of the vote in national elections.

In 2011, Marine Le Pen’s accession to party leadership showed a great deal of ideological continuity (Crépon et al. 2015, Ivaldi and Lanzone 2016). Notwithstanding some programmatic recalibration, Marine Le Pen’s strategy has essentially been one of detoxifying the FN’s far right reputation –the so-called ‘de-demonization’– while simultaneously keeping with the party’s traditional far right agenda and identity. Meanwhile, Le Pen has taken her party further to the economic left to address growing socio-economic concerns in the French electorate (Ivaldi 2015). Electorally, the FN grew to over 20% of the vote in national elections, at times establishing itself as the largest electoral party. In 2017, Le Pen progressed to the presidential runoff and won over a third of the vote against Emmanuel Macron.

The 2022 presidential bid by Le Pen did not show any significant departure from the previous years. The RN manifesto continued to emphasize nativist policies calling for ‘national

priority' for the French in jobs, housing and welfare, and pledging that such principle should be enshrined in the Constitution (Le Pen 2022). Central to this claim was the promise by Le Pen to call a national referendum to drastically limit immigration, to impose stricter criteria for entry and citizenship, to deport foreign criminals and delinquents, and to make the so-called identitarian closure (*communautarisme*) amongst immigrant communities illegal (Le Pen 2022). She vowed in particular that she would ban women from wearing Muslim headscarves in all public places, including the streets, eventually contradicting herself later during the campaign. "The Islamic veil is not only an ostentatious sign, but also the uniform of a totalitarian ideology, Le Pen said. I want to ban it from our territory"¹.

While not officially endorsing the 'Great Replacement' conspiracy theory of the extreme right, Le Pen's message on immigration did not substantially vary from old FN arguments regarding the danger of France being 'submerged' by non-European immigrants. Le Pen would also stress traditional FN themes such as the economic burden of immigration, its link with crime, and the risk for the French of losing their identity. As she explained: "in continuous waves, this out-of-control immigration installs lifestyles that are not ours (...) This is a population-swelling immigration and it will be irreversible (...) We will restore France's identity and pride. To say it clearly: the French will be masters in their own home again!" (#Reims).

Moreover, the 2022 manifesto reiterated typical RN law-and-order policies, pledging for harsher sentencing, more police and prison places, less power to judges, the introduction of 'real' life sentences for criminals and abolishing automatic reductions in sentencing. It also emphasized the previous FN principle of 'presumption of legitimate self-defence' for police officers using their weapons (Le Pen 2022). Such policies were accompanied with a 'tough-on-crime' rhetoric, as exemplified in Le Pen's speech in Fréjus: "we will eradicate gangs, mafias and all those who, Islamists and others, want to impose on us rules and ways of life that are not ours from our neighborhoods (...) We will throw the book at criminals: French delinquents in jail, foreigners on the plane! (#Fréjus).

Populism was central to Le Pen's discourse and rhetoric in the election. While somewhat toning down her anti-establishment rhetoric, she continued with her populist claim of authentically representing the 'people' against the so-called 'globalist' elite embodied by Emmanuel Macron and parties of the mainstream left and right, against which the RN would pit itself as the only authentic 'patriotic' force.

In her last campaign rally in Perpignan, Le Pen would stigmatize the "gray commissioners of Brussels" ranked alongside "McKinsey" global consulting firm: "I will give the power back to the people, she proclaimed, to the sovereign people that have been ignored too long by the political caste, that have been despised and sometimes bludgeoned (...) Take back control!, she concluded, if the people vote, the people win" (#Perpignan).

The perpetuation of the typical far right agenda was accompanied with a shift further to the left on the economic dimension. In the wake of the 2008 financial and 2011 Eurozone debt crises, the FN had taken up a neo-Keynesian program of state regulation, government spending, and public services expansion, emphasizing income redistribution and purchasing power (Ivaldi 2015).

¹ https://twitter.com/mlp_officiel/status/1494053773840470016, accessed 8 September 2022

The 2022 campaign attested to similar efforts by Le Pen's to balance cultural issues with economic ones: "I worry about making ends meet as much as the end of France", she explained (#Reims). Her campaign continued to bear the trappings of social populism drawing from both left-leaning egalitarian and nationalist economic traditions, while emphasizing a populist vision of the 'little' people versus 'big' interests. "Between Emmanuel Macron and us, Le Pen said, it is a choice between the power of money for the few, and more purchasing power for all"².

Le Pen's speech in Reims clearly set the social-populist tone of the campaign: "For us, our country comes first, our families come first, our people come first! Protecting our people also means ensuring that all French people can live in dignity. You know how important your purchasing power is to me (...) I will not only give the French their money back, but I will also act on wages that have been too low for too long (...) The impoverishment of the French is not inevitable and in two months I will prove it to you" (#Reims).

Social issues such as wages, pensions, healthcare and public services were strongly emphasized in the 2022 presidential election campaign, primarily as a response to growing concerns over rising prices. Alongside traditional immigration and security themes, Le Pen's presidential platform offered a significant redistributive package of lower VAT, higher wages and pensions, tax exemptions and free transport for young workers (Le Pen 2022). Meanwhile, Le Pen kept with her agenda of economic nationalism, retaining her previous protectionist policies and the defence of national interests against external threats of immigration and globalization (Ivaldi 2022a).

Finally, the 2022 campaign showed the attempt by Le Pen to perpetuate and even amplify her strategy of 'de-demonization' in line with her previous efforts to detoxify the RN and steer it further away from the 'old' FN in order to broaden its electoral appeal (Crépon et al. 2015, Ivaldi 2016).

During the 2022 election, Le Pen continued to work on normalizing her personal profile, in a bid to present herself as the 'ordinary' person and portray a more modest image that would make her look less of a far right threat in the eyes of French voters. Her personal life was for instance part of her presidential convention speech in Reims: "And now, I am going to take a few minutes to tell you about myself, she said (...) I am a mother. With a large family, three children (...) For a few years, I had to raise my children all by myself (...) I am ready because I have met thousands, tens of thousands of French people. I know their sufferings and their expectations, their despair but also their hopes" (#Reims). More generally, Le Pen softened her rhetoric, adopting a less aggressive tone, thus distancing herself from Zemmour's more extremist campaign and aggressive style (see below).

In policy terms, this translated into Le Pen carefully avoiding any reference to moral issues during the campaign, thus perpetuating previous efforts to show a more liberal profile on gender, LGBT and family policies (Crépon 2015). Le Pen only briefly mobilized reactionary frames in her opening presidential convention speech in Reims, however abandoning them during the campaign, in contrast with Zemmour (see below). "Emmanuel Macron is complicit with the destructive ideologies that are corroding the foundations of society, Le Pen said: wokism, repentance, racialism, indigenism, decolonialism" (#Reims).

² https://twitter.com/mlp_officiel/status/1507423384845664262, accessed 8 September 2022

Gender issues were primarily politicized by Le Pen in relation to traditional far-right issues of immigration, Islam and crime. As explained by Le Pen: “We will re-establish the freedom of women and girls to move around without being bothered or threatened. They will be free to wear skirts or dresses if they wish, at any time of the day or night, in any neighborhood (...) We will liberate young girls and women from the abominable obscurantist yoke. As for the Talibans within, we will send them back to where they come from!” (#Fréjus).

Another important area of policy adjustment concerned European integration. Hard Eurosceptic policies had been seen as an important factor of Le Pen’s failure to win the 2017 presidential runoff, which had prompted the FN to moderate its positions (Perrineau 2017). The 2022 campaign essentially reflected the RN’s persistent ambiguity vis-à-vis the EU, and the party’s attempt to de-emphasize European issues. Whilst renouncing her previous plan to pull France out of the Euro and Schengen zones, and the promise to call a French referendum on leaving the EU, Le Pen stayed however with the concept of turning the EU into an association of free and independent nations, that is the traditional Eurosceptic position adopted by the FN in the post-Maastricht era (Hainsworth et al. 2004, Reungoat 2015). Meanwhile, she pledged that she would hold a referendum to make French national legislation superior to EU law while promising to slash France’s contributions to the EU budget.

Eurosceptic frames and policies went largely under the radar during the 2022 campaign, which contrasted with the 2017 election where they had been paramount to the previous FN’s communication and manifesto. In 2022, Le Pen’s presidential manifesto would carefully avoid any explicit mention of the EU, which attested further to the attempt by the RN to dissimulate its positions vis-à-vis European integration. More substantial EU-related themes and policies were found in secondary party literature, further away however from the general public’s eyes.

Zemmour’s reactionary extreme right-wing populism

A well-known political commentator, columnist and book writer, Éric Zemmour originated in mainstream media such as *Le Figaro* and radio station RTL, while also participating in popular infotainment shows. While famed for his many controversial comments and provocations on immigration, Islam or women, and for multiple convictions for inciting hatred against immigrants, Zemmour would identify himself with the Gaullist movement, in reference to the nationalist ideology of the ‘savior’ of France during World War II.

Despite such efforts to establish a Gaullist filiation, the Zemmour phenomenon may be placed within the broader framework of the West European far right, however, adopting its central ideological tenets of nativism and authoritarianism, together with populism (Ivaldi 2021).

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Zemmour entered the 2022 campaign trail as the typical anti-immigration politician making nativism and anti-Muslim rhetoric centerpiece to his presidential bid. Like Le Pen, his campaign embraced ethno-cultural nationalism, claiming that France is being “submerged” by

non-European immigration and in danger of “losing its identity” (Zemmour 2022). Unlike Le Pen, however, such ideas were included in the official endorsement by Zemmour of the extreme-right conspiracy theory of the “great replacement” i.e. a plot designed by political elites to replace natives with non-European immigrants from Muslim and African countries, to undermine the political power and culture of the French.

Zemmour pledged “to save France, so that our children and grandchildren do not know barbarism, so that our daughters are not veiled, that our sons are not subjugated (...) So that we can preserve our way of life (...) So that the French remain French (...) We will not let ourselves be dominated, conquered, vassalized, he said, we will not let ourselves be replaced” (Zemmour 2021).

Zemmour’s immigration policies shared strong similarities with Le Pen’s. His manifesto adopted the typical FN welfare chauvinist principle of ‘national preference’ in jobs, housing and social benefits, together with calls to stop immigration, to limit asylum, and to end family reunification and the right to automatic citizenship for children born in France to immigrant parents. In March 2022, Zemmour went further to propose a Remigration Ministry –another traditional extreme right policy– setting the objective to deport one million “undesirable foreigners” and all those who “do not assimilate” over the next five years³.

Like Le Pen, Zemmour’s interpretation of nativism primarily equated immigration with ‘islamization’, framing Islam as the most serious threat to the national culture and French Republic, while pointing to the danger of *communautarisme* (cultural isolationism). Nostalgic narratives of an idealized and glorified ethnically homogenous community were central to Zemmour’s nativist imagination. As he explained during the campaign: “you walk in your cities and you do not recognize them. You look at your screens and they speak a strange and foreign language (...) You have the feeling that you are no longer at home (...) You feel like strangers in your own country” (Zemmour 2021).

Zemmour’s presidential manifesto included a ban on wearing Muslim headscarves in public spaces, a ban on the construction of minarets and the pledge to impose stricter controls on imams. In September 2021, Zemmour had already sparked controversy by calling for a ban on traditional Muslim names such as Muhammad, a pledge which was later reiterated in his presidential platform (Zemmour 2022).

Alongside his nativism, Zemmour exhibited the core authoritarian feature of the far right, showing a tough stance on law and order and blaming French elites for decadence and civil disorder. As explained in his manifesto, “my proposals have only one goal: to treat the evil at the root (...) I want peaceful streets, I want neighborhoods where order reigns, downtown areas where young women can move freely and serenely. I want victims to leave the courts with the feeling that Justice protects honest citizens and punishes criminals” (Zemmour 2022, p.11).

Furthermore, the authoritarian discourse of Zemmour equated crime with Muslim immigration and terrorism. During a TV debate in September 2021, Zemmour explicated such equation: “For me, this is not simply delinquency, it is a jihad, he said. It is a war that is being

³ https://www.lemonde.fr/election-presidentielle-2022/article/2022/03/22/eric-zemmour-franchit-un-pas-de-plus-dans-la-radicalite-en-proposant-un-ministere-de-la-remigration_6118606_6059010.html, accessed 8 September 2022

waged against us, a war of civilization, a war of pillage, a war of theft, a war of rape and a war of murder (...) Fortunately, there are millions of Muslims who are not terrorists, but I must say that all terrorists are Muslims”⁴.

Like Le Pen, Zemmour pledged more armed police and prison places, less power to judges, the introduction of mandatory minimum sentences as well as ‘real’ life sentences for criminals and abolishing automatic reductions in sentencing, while adopting Le Pen’s idea for a principle of ‘presumption of legitimate self-defense’ for police officers using their weapons. In the early stage of the campaign, Zemmour would criticize France’s decision to abolish death penalty in the early 1980s, indicating that he personally was “philosophically in favor of it”⁵. Zemmour would also support vigilantism and the legitimization of self-defense, explicitly encouraging citizens to take the law into their own hands: “I want those who attack you to know that you have the right to counterattack, he said. Yes, I want predators to be not only afraid of the police, but also of you. I want you to enforce the law at home”⁶.

Unlike Le Pen, Zemmour’s authoritarian views were associated with a strong right-wing reactionary rhetoric on social issues, promoting an essentialist vision of gender roles, slamming the “feminization” or “devirilisation” of society”, while denouncing the so-called ‘tyranny of minorities’ –i.e. LGBT and feminists– and claiming the time had come to break the power of the progressive elite and its political correctness. In Villepinte Zemmour promised to “fight against globalism, against the dubious theory of ‘living together’, against mass immigration, gender theory, and Islamo-leftism, all these infernal machines that have only one goal, he said: to deconstruct our people, to destroy it” (#Villepinte).

Lastly, Zemmour’s campaign displayed the defining characteristics of the thin populist ideology. In his presidential campaign video, Zemmour called upon “the people who have been intimidated, tetanized, indoctrinated and guilt-ridden, who now raise their heads, drop the masks and dispel the miasma of lies and chase away their evil shepherds” (Zemmour 2021). In articulation with his nativist ideology, his concept of the people was constructed as an idealized symbolic community of ‘natives’ who were seen under the threat of exogeneous groups, essentially non-European immigrants and Muslims.

Zemmour’s populism featured the typical polarized view of the political community, predicated on the antagonism between the ‘virtuous’ people and the ‘corrupt’ elite. “Our meetings, Zemmour explained, disturb journalists, irritate politicians and make the political left hysterical. At each of my rallies, they are enraged by the sight of the people that they thought had disappeared forever!”. Zemmour’s populist discourse would vilipend “the media”, “the system”, “the judges”, “Brussels’ technocrats” and “thirty years of political betrayals, renunciations and cowardice” (#Villepinte).

As other populists, Zemmour claimed that politics should be an expression of the “general will” of the people and that this should be privileged above all else. Such vision was laid out in his manifesto which claimed to “give the people their voice back”, and called for an extensive use of referendum for all important political decisions: “the will of the people shall once again be considered as the most sacred thing, as the heart of all political decisions”

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=131CcyG4b5U>, accessed 8 September 2022

⁵ <https://www.leparisien.fr/elections/presidentielle/presidentielle-2022-eric-zemmour-philosophiquement-pour-la-peine-de-mort-15-09-2021-5I7YRSO2RRCEZAU4T3YYD2YEJU.php>, accessed 8 September 2022

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B3TffVWnNqg>, accessed 8 September 2022

(Zemmour 2022, p.6). Meanwhile, Zemmour presented himself, if not as the incarnation of the people, as their spokesman and the one with a superior knowledge of their experiences and true interests: “I am not a professional politician, he explained. I have not spent my life betraying my promises (...) I have not spent my life living off public money. I have spent my life defending you. I have spent my life speaking the truth and paying the price for it” (#Trocadéro).

Zemmour’s authoritarian populism showed strong illiberal tendencies, opposing institutional check-and-balances. “We must give the power back to the people, he argued, take it back from the minorities who never cease to tyrannize the majority, and from the judges who substitute their juridical yoke for the government of the people, by the people, for the people” (#Villepinte). As prophesized by Zemmour in March 2018: “we will have to choose between democracy and the rule of law”⁷. Such arguments were reiterated in 2022: “when the people express themselves, our judges, the Constitutional Council and others, the Court of Justice, the European Court of Human Rights, must be silenced (...) We must take power away from the counterpowers, that is the judiciary, the media and the minorities”⁸.

In the economic realm, Zemmour endorsed a liberal and pro-business agenda which included lowering taxes and cutting regulations, while claiming to put an end to *assistanat*, and vilifying ‘welfare bums’. Zemmour would harshly criticize “welfare abuse” and “social assistance”, pledging to address the concerns of “the France who goes to work every day”. “People of the middle and working class hate welfare, he said. When you get up every morning to go to work, you don’t accept that your neighbor lives better than you without having to work thanks to social assistance” (#Toulon).

In policy terms, his pro-market liberal approach was visible in his proposals to reduce wealth and inheritance taxes, to push retirement age to 64, to exempt overtime working hours from taxation, to redirect funds intended for urban and social cohesion policy, to suspend family allowances for parents of “disruptive” or “truant” pupils, to abolish the social housing law (SRU) and to “fight against bureaucracy” (Zemmour 2022).

Such liberal domestic economic agenda was balanced with a number of protectionist and Eurosceptic policies which placed Zemmour closer to Le Pen on the international dimension, with both candidates reclaiming national sovereignty. Like Le Pen Zemmour cultivated the idea of ultimately transforming the EU into an association of free and independent nations, while simultaneously espousing the concept of establishing the precedence of national law over European treaties and international conventions. Unlike Le Pen, however, Zemmour unambiguously signaled his Euroscepticism to voters, stating his intention to curb the powers of the EU and to question its core principles. As clearly stated in his manifesto: “I will build a Europe of Nations. I will reorient the European construction towards a Europe of Nations that respects national sovereignties rather than a federal Europe that denies them” (Zemmour 2022, p.13).

Finally, differences were perceptible in the adoption by Zemmour of a ‘hard line’ strategy that would set him apart from Le Pen’s efforts to sanitize the RN and moderate her image in the election. Zemmour’s campaign almost exclusively focused on advocating his more radical views of immigration and identity, pushing a constant strategy of radicalization predicated on

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tVwY3SFPvN0>, accessed 8 September 2022

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1j9P6SMSseJ0>, accessed 8 September 2022

toxic extremist views and often unacceptable declarations that would eventually consign him to the extreme-right margins of French politics.

Zemmour's campaign was punctuated by a number of provocative statements about the Bataclan terrorist attacks of 2015, disabled children, reinstating death penalty, and giving the middle finger to a protester in the heat of the campaign. Zemmour was also strongly criticized for his well-known links with violent far-right groups such as *Les Zouaves*, whose members were responsible for injuring protesters at his first public rally near Paris in December 2021, and for his revisionist comments that the Vichy regime had "protected French Jews" during WWII⁹.

Moreover, in the context of the war in Ukraine, Zemmour came under fire for his long-held admiration for Russia and Vladimir Putin. In 2018, Zemmour had portrayed the Kremlin's leader as "a true patriot" and "defender of European values", publicly declaring that "he would dream of a French Putin" to stop France's decline¹⁰; After the invasion of Ukraine, Zemmour joined with other far right leaders in Europe to nuance criticism of Putin and blame NATO and the West for their responsibility in the war. Meanwhile, Zemmour sparked further controversy warning over what he deemed an "emotional response" to the war and initially refusing to welcome refugees from Ukraine before changing his position by making a clear distinction between Ukrainians and those fleeing conflicts in Arab Muslim nations. "It's a question of assimilation, Zemmour argued. There are people who are like us and people who are unlike us. Everybody now understands that Arab or Muslim immigrants are too unlike us and that it is harder and harder to integrate them"¹¹.

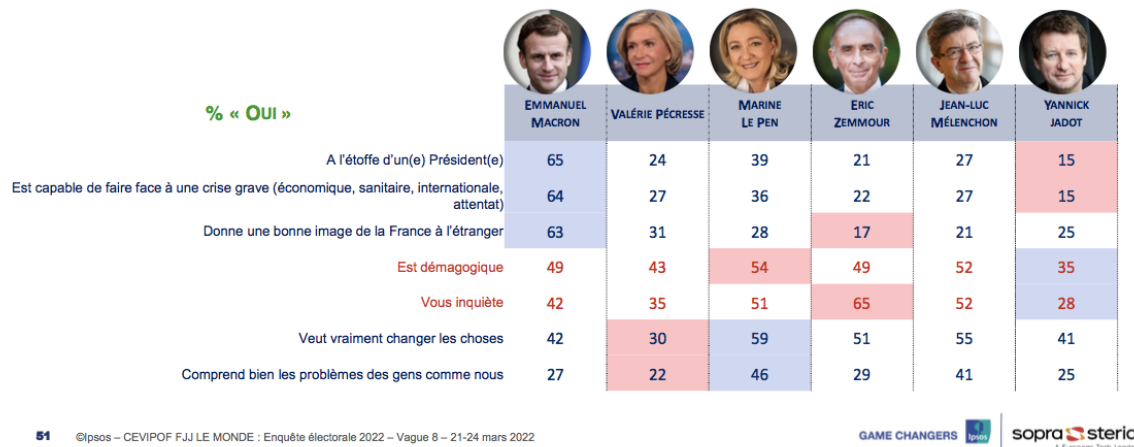
Overall, public opinion polls conducted during the campaign pointed to different perceptions of Le Pen and Zemmour by French voters. Looking at the personal traits and non-policy characteristics associated with each of the two candidates as measured in late March 2022 shows that Le Pen enjoyed a significant edge over Zemmour on statesmanship –with 39% seeing her fit for the job as opposed to only 21% who said this would apply to Zemmour–, as well as on her ability to handle crises (36/22). Le Pen also had substantial advantage over Zemmour on empathy and understanding the problems of the people (46/29) and, albeit much less markedly, on political will to truly change things in the country (59/51). In contrast, negative evaluations dominated voter perceptions of Zemmour, with no less than 65% saying that they were afraid of him, as opposed to 51% for Le Pen (see Figure 1).

⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/oct/08/same-old-french-far-right-the-meteoric-rise-of-eric-zemmour>, accessed 8 September 2022

¹⁰ <https://www.lopinion.fr/politique/eric-zemmour-je-reve-dun-poutine-francais>, accessed 8 September 2022

¹¹ <https://www.valeursactuelles.com/politique/eric-zemmour-assume-une-difference-entre-immigration-blanche-chretienne-et-immigration-musulmane>, accessed 8 September 2022

Figure 1. Presidential candidate personal traits



Source: ENEF, Wave 8, 21-24 March 2022

The context of the 2022 presidential election

In 2022, the electoral vitality of the far right was primarily fueled by cultural fears, economic instability, rising prices, and profound voter disaffection with Emmanuel Macron during most of his presidency (Perrineau 2022).

The 2022 presidential campaign was dominated by substantive concerns about the rising cost of living amidst a receding fifth wave of coronavirus which had seen a dramatic increase in rates of positive cases in the country since November 2021. Following the irruption of Zemmour in the fall of 2021, public debates had been saturated with inflammatory debates focused on immigration and Islam, giving the leader of the newly founded *Reconquête!* an edge in polls.

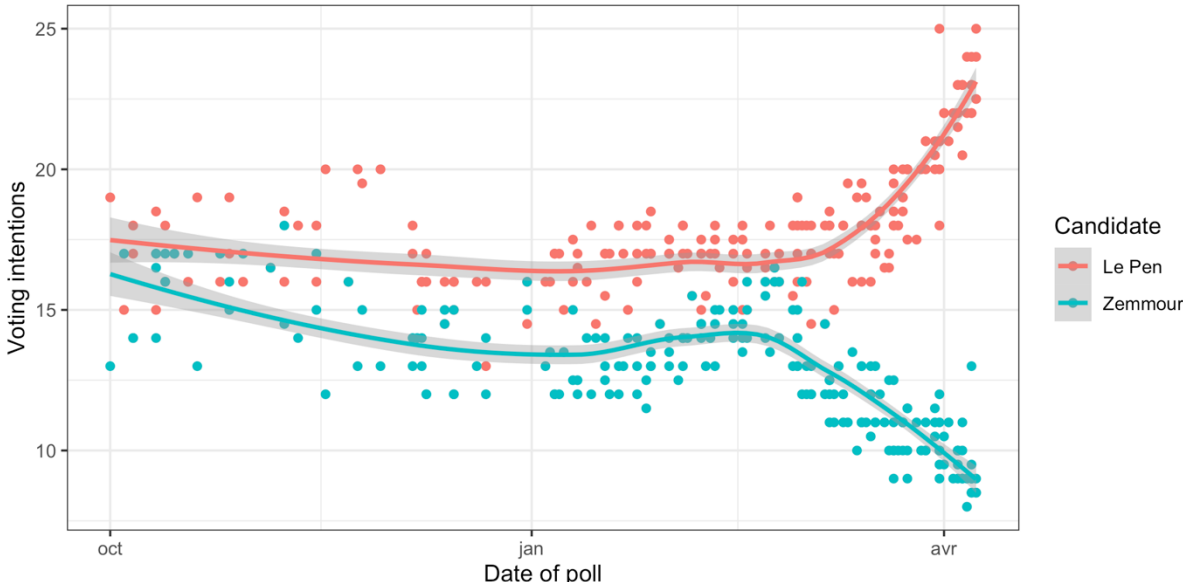
By January, however, socio-economic concerns had taken over the political agenda, as many voters turned their eyes to surging energy prices and the growing inflation that had accompanied the post-Covid-19 recovery of France's economy. Economic fears clearly dominated the later stage of the campaign in the context of the war in Ukraine. According to the final wave of the National Election Panel conducted just a few days ahead of the first round, no less than 57% of the French said that prices and purchasing power would be important to their vote. Meanwhile, the war in Ukraine was becoming less salient politically as a majority of French essentially expressed their concerns about the economic consequences of the Ukraine crisis rather than fears of a wider conflict or even of a nuclear strike by Russia.

Le Pen's social populist agenda clearly resonated with the many economic fears of the French, particularly amongst the lower social strata most severely hit by the economic repercussions of the war and faced with rising cost of living. Soaring fuel prices since the war were easily incorporated in Le Pen's social populist rhetoric, with the RN leader pledging that she would lower petrol taxes and compensate for this by putting an exceptional tax on big oil companies.

Amidst such turbulent economic times, Zemmour’s pro-market ideology appeared on the other hand increasingly at odds with voter demand for protection and state intervention, most evidently amongst working class and lower middle-class voters who were affected the most by rising prices and inflation. Additionally, his niche strategy of almost exclusively politicizing immigration and identity led him to somewhat ignore socio-economic anxieties, while failing to shift voter attention away from such concerns.

Most importantly, Zemmour most likely paid a heavy electoral price for his ongoing support and admiration for Russia and Vladimir Putin, and for refusing to welcome refugees from Ukraine. Voting intentions showed a decline in support for Zemmour from mid-March onwards down to an average 9.8% in the two weeks preceding the first round, from an average 13.7% in January and February. Meanwhile, polls showed a sharp rise in support for Le Pen from 16.7% in the early stage of the campaign up to an average 21.8% in the last two weeks, which suggests that she was increasingly seen as the ‘strategic vote’ by a growing number of far right voters (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Voting intentions for Le Pen and Zemmour in the first round of the 2022 presidential election



Note: N=212 polls published from 1st October 2021 to 8 April 2022.

Far right voting in the 2022 presidential election

This section turns to the ‘demand-side’ of far-right mobilization by looking at the socio-demographic and attitudinal profile of Le Pen and Zemmour voters in the first round of the 2022 French presidential election. The analysis explores the similarities and differences between the electoral orientations towards the far right and other party choices in the electoral competition, thus looking more closely at what sets the far-right candidates and their electorate apart from the rest, and which factors may also differentiate between Le Pen and Zemmour voters.

Hypotheses

Several hypotheses can be derived from the analysis of the supply of far-right politics across Le Pen and Zemmour. First, it is important to investigate the socio-demographic profile of their voters. Based in particular on the assumption that the Zemmour phenomenon may fit the model of cultural backlash popularized by Norris and Inglehart, we may expect a different sociology in his electoral support compared with Le Pen's. It should be anticipated in particular that the former should be found amongst older generations. It may also be expected that the anti-feminist and sexist positions taken by Zemmour during the campaign should have alienated support from women, as opposed to the more 'liberal' profile adopted by Le Pen on moral issues; consequently, Zemmour's electoral base should be predominantly male, and preferences for Zemmour should be driven by socially conservative attitudes and the values of the cultural backlash, most particularly sexism.

Moreover, we should expect to see differences in the educational and occupational profile of the two groups of far-right voters. The RN has widened its electoral base amongst less educated working and lower middle-class voters who tend to show pro-redistribution preferences that set them apart from the conservative right and the liberal center (Evans and Ivaldi 2018). In contrast, Zemmour's more pro-market liberal views should primarily appeal to far-right voters with right-wing economic preferences, who are found in the upper and middle class, as well as in the petty bourgeoisie, most particularly amongst the self-employed. In contrast to Le Pen supporters, Zemmour voters should therefore be more highly educated and they should also be leaning towards the economic right.

On the other hand, we should anticipate convergence amongst Le Pen and Zemmour supporters on the core far right issues of immigration and law-and-order. Both groups of far-right voters should exhibit higher levels of cultural exclusionism and authoritarianism, which should differentiate them from the other electorates. Additionally, we should anticipate that the resonance of identity-related issues and grievances should be higher amongst Zemmour voters, in line with his 'niche' profile and hard line identitarian strategy of publicizing extreme right themes such as the 'Great Replacement' conspiracy and 'remigration'.

Eurosceptic attitudes should have a significant effect on voting for Zemmour and Le Pen, and such effect should be larger for Zemmour, reflecting his more explicit anti-EU and sovereignist stances during the campaign. Similarly, we should expect populist attitudes to be significant predictors of the far right vote in 2022, although populism should also play a role in voting for the populist left, as amply demonstrated by the empirical literature on populist voting across both the left and right of the West European party spectrum (Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel 2018, Ivaldi 2020).

Finally, we may expect attitudes vis-à-vis Russia and economic sanctions to play a role in the electoral support for far-right candidates, most likely amongst Zemmour's voters who should be more critical of such sanctions and who should also show lesser concern with the war in Ukraine.

Data and methods

The paper uses observational data taken from a large representative national sample of 5,979 French presidential voters in a two-wave panel survey conducted by OpinionWay on behalf of CEVIPOF (Sciences Po Paris) in early January (Wave#1) and April-May 2022 (Wave#2). Participants were selected by the polling company from their national panels recruited via the internet. The survey used quota-sampling based on gender, age, occupation and type of municipality, with regional stratification.

The analysis includes standard socio-demographics (gender, age, education and religion), which are traditionally seen as important factors of vote choice in France (Lewis-Beck et al. 2011). In line with Norris and Inglehart's cultural backlash hypothesis, we also test possible generational effects by distinguishing between commonly-used current generations – i.e. Interwar/silent generation (born 1900–45), Baby Boomers (1946–64), Generation X (1965–79), Millennials (1980–96) and Generation Z (born after 1996). In addition to socio-demographic indicators, the analysis includes a measure of subjective poverty. Feelings of material deprivation are taken from the following question: “thinking of your household's total monthly income is your household able to make ends meet? With great difficulty, With some difficulty, Fairly easily, or Very easily”.

Next, the analysis adds a set of economic and cultural attitudes that are relevant to the study of far-right voting, and which allow to evaluate the diversity of the attitudinal profile of Le Pen and Zemmour voters based on the hypotheses formulated above. Table 1 shows the attitudinal items used in the multivariate analysis. The models include also a slightly modified version of the populism scale designed by Akkerman et al. (2014), as well as a ‘root’ political affiliation (left right ideology) which traditionally represents an important factor of electoral behavior in France (Tiberj 2017).

Finally, we add two variables regarding the war in Ukraine, namely voter egotropic concerns about the impact of the war on the household's finances, and individual support for economic sanctions on Russia. Let us note here that most of our independent variables were measured in Wave#1, that is four months before the election. Support for the EU and attitudes towards the war in Ukraine were measured in Wave#2 immediately after the election. The details of all variables are summarized in Table 1.

The dependent variable is the recalled vote in the first round of the 2022 presidential election, which was measured in Wave#2 after the second-round runoff in April-May 2022. Abstainers, spoiled and blank ballots, and non-responses are excluded from the models.

The analysis provides two separate sets of binary logistic regression models for Le Pen and Zemmour voters, which first include standard socio-demographics, then add the ‘root’ political affiliation (left right ideology) together with our set of economic and cultural attitudes. In these models, Le Pen and Zemmour voters are contrasted with the rest of the electorate, successively. Then we add two models contrasting Le Pen and Zemmour voters with one another to further examine differences and commonalities in their socio-demographic and attitudinal profiles within the far-right cluster of the party system.

Table 1. Attitudinal items in the analysis

| <i>Attitude</i> | Item | Time of measurement* |
|---|---|-----------------------------|
| <i>Economic redistribution</i> | To ensure social justice, one should take from the rich to give to the poor (Likert scale 1-4) | Wave #1 |
| <i>Islam</i> | Islam is a threat to the Republic (Likert scale 1-4) | Wave #1 |
| <i>Authoritarianism</i> | Instead of new rights, what our country really needs is a good dose of law-and-order (Likert scale 1-4) | Wave #1 |
| <i>Cultural Backlash / Sexism</i> | We have gone too far in promoting rights for women (Categorical: ‘too far’, ‘just about right’, ‘not far enough’) | Wave #1 |
| <i>Support for the EU</i> | To solve France’s problems, we should give more power to the EU (Likert scale 0-10) | Wave #2 |
| <i>Populism**</i> | <p>Populism scale (modified version of Akkerman et al. 2014) (all items are Likert scales 1-5)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The people, not the politicians, should make our most important policy decisions - The political differences between ordinary citizens and the elite are greater than the differences between citizens - I would rather be represented by an ordinary citizen than an experienced politician - Elected officials talk too much and take too little action - What people call “compromise” in politics is really just selling out on one’s principles - Politicians are detached from reality and serve only their own interests | Wave #1 |
| <i>Left-right ideology</i> | Where would you place yourself on the following scale going from ‘very much Left’ to ‘very much Right’? (Likert scale 0-10) | Wave #1 |
| <i>Egotropic concerns Ukraine war</i> | Thinking of the war in Ukraine, how worried are you about the financial consequences of the war for yourself and your household? (Likert scale 1-4) | Wave #2 |
| <i>Support for economic sanctions on Russia</i> | European countries have adopted economic and financial sanctions on Russia. Do you personally approve such sanctions? (Likert scale 0-10). | Wave #2 |

*Wave #1 was conducted from 23 December 2021 to 10 January 2022; Wave#2 was conducted from 25 April to 25 May 2022;

** The 6-item populism scale showed good internal consistency with Alpha=0.7 and Loewinger H=0.4

Results

We begin by looking at how the socio-demographic profile of far-right voters may differ across Le Pen and Zemmour. Table 2 shows the results of the socio-demographic model (1) of voting in the first round of the 2022 presidential.

This first model shows no gender gap amongst Le Pen voters (Model 1a in Table 2), which corroborates previous empirical studies suggesting that the RN has recently expanded its appeal to women (e.g. Amengay et al. 2017). Reflecting also the increase in support for the RN amongst younger voters, the model indicates that the probability of voting for Le Pen decreases significantly and substantially with age. We see no clear effect however of religion and of feelings of economic deprivation.

While the data confirm that lower levels of education are associated with voting for Le Pen, this primarily concerns individuals with a university degree above Bac+2. Such individuals are much less likely to support the RN, with a predicted probability of 16% as opposed to 23% across the other groups, up to 29% amongst those with a lower-secondary degree (CAP-BEP). No significant differences are observed across the other educational groups, however, which suggests that Le Pen may have somewhat narrowed the traditional far-right education gap in the first round of the 2022 presidential election.

Turning to Zemmour (Model 1b in Table 2), individual level analysis confirms that his electorate, in line with our expectation, is more male, although the gender gap is of small magnitude. In the model, the predicted probability of voting for Zemmour is 8% for men as opposed to 6% for women. Beyond the effect of gender, we see no significant differences as regards age, education, religion and subjective poverty, when contrasted with all the other voters in the election, which suggests that Zemmour may have appealed to a more heterogenous electoral constituency with no clearly defined sociological profile.

As suggested by the localized far-right Model 1c in Table 2, gender, age and education were significant factors of voting for Zemmour as opposed to Le Pen: men, older voters and those with a university degree above Bac+2 were significantly more likely to turn to Zemmour in contrast with Le Pen. In the far-right Model 1c, the overall probability of voting for Zemmour was 23%, up to 26% amongst men as opposed to 20% amongst women; the predicted probability was down to about 16% for voters aged 25 years compared with 28% in those aged 70 years.

Table 2. Model 1. Socio-Demographic profile of Le Pen and Zemmour voters in 2022

| | <i>Model 1a</i> | <i>Model 1b</i> | <i>Model 1c</i> |
|---|------------------|-----------------|-----------------------|
| | Le Pen Vote | Zemmour Vote | Le Pen / Zemmour Vote |
| GenderFemme | 0.04 (0.07) | -0.30** (0.11) | -0.34** (0.13) |
| AgeContinuous | -0.01*** (0.002) | 0.005 (0.004) | 0.01*** (0.004) |
| Education5CAP-BEP | 0.24 (0.13) | 0.10 (0.21) | -0.04 (0.24) |
| Education5Baccalauréat | -0.05 (0.12) | 0.07 (0.21) | 0.14 (0.23) |
| Education5Bac+2 (DEUG, DUT, BTS) | -0.05 (0.13) | 0.10 (0.22) | 0.17 (0.25) |
| Education5Supérieur Bac +2 | -0.52*** (0.13) | 0.02 (0.21) | 0.49* (0.24) |
| ReligionCatholiques pratiquants irréguliers | 0.30 (0.16) | -0.02 (0.24) | -0.20 (0.28) |
| ReligionCatholiques non pratiquants | 0.11 (0.20) | -0.07 (0.30) | -0.13 (0.35) |
| ReligionAutres religions | -0.07 (0.19) | 0.02 (0.28) | 0.03 (0.33) |
| ReligionSans religion | 0.05 (0.16) | -0.45 (0.24) | -0.36 (0.28) |
| DeprivationFacilement | -0.005 (0.17) | 0.14 (0.28) | 0.11 (0.33) |
| DeprivationDifficilement | 0.30 (0.17) | 0.31 (0.28) | 0.005 (0.33) |
| DeprivationTrès difficilement | 0.41 (0.21) | 0.03 (0.37) | -0.33 (0.41) |
| Constant | -0.84** (0.27) | -2.79*** (0.44) | -1.72*** (0.51) |
| <i>N</i> | 5,105 | 5,105 | 1,499 |

Notes:

***Significant at the 0.1 percent level.

**Significant at the 1 percent level.

*Significant at the 5 percent level.

Binary Logistic Regressions

Std err. in brackets

Data: Barometer of Political Trust (CEVIPOF), Waves #13 and 13bis

Testing the hypothesis that Zemmour phenomenon may fit the sociological model of cultural backlash popularized by Norris and Inglehart, Model 1bis in Table 3 replicates the previous analysis taking into account the specific effect of generations, with the anticipation that Zemmour's nostalgic reactionary nativism should have primarily appealed to older cohorts based on their common experience of the socio-economic and cultural circumstances of the 'golden age' during the post-war period.

We see no clear evidence of such generational effect for Zemmour. Model 1b_bis in Table 3 shows no significant differences across the five cohorts considered for analysis when contrasted with the rest of the French electorate. On the other hand, the generational analysis confirms that Le Pen primarily drew her electoral support amongst post-boomers i.e. individuals born after 1965, much less so amongst voters in the older cohorts. The predicted probabilities were 14% and 19% in the Silent and Baby Boomer generations, respectively, compared with 24%, 27% and 25% in the Gen X, Millennials and Gen.Z cohorts.

Generational differences were more visible in the localized far-right model contrasting Le Pen with Zemmour (see Model 1c_bis in Table 3), which confirmed that voting for Zemmour over Le Pen was overrepresented in the Silent generation and, albeit less markedly, amongst Baby

Boomers, thus lending only partial support to the hypothesis of a generational gap within the cluster of far-right voters in 2022.

Table 3. Model 1bis. Socio-demographic profile of Le Pen and Zemmour voters - Generational effects

| | <i>Model 1a_bis</i> Le Pen Vote | <i>Model 1b_bis</i> Zemmour Vote | <i>Model 1c_bis</i> Zemmour / Le Pen Vote |
|---|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--|
| GenderFemme | 0.05 (0.07) | -0.30** (0.11) | -0.34** (0.13) |
| GenerationBoomers (1946-1964) | 0.38 (0.23) | -0.34 (0.25) | -0.63 (0.33) |
| GenerationGén.X (1965-1980) | 0.64** (0.23) | -0.46 (0.27) | -0.93** (0.34) |
| GenerationMilleniaux (1981-1996) | 0.82*** (0.23) | -0.45 (0.28) | -1.03** (0.35) |
| GenerationGén.Z (1996-2012) | 0.72** (0.25) | -0.45 (0.31) | -1.05** (0.38) |
| Education5CAP-BEP | 0.22 (0.13) | 0.11 (0.22) | -0.02 (0.24) |
| Education5Baccalauréat | -0.06 (0.12) | 0.07 (0.21) | 0.13 (0.23) |
| Education5Bac+2 (DEUG, DUT, BTS) | -0.07 (0.13) | 0.11 (0.22) | 0.17 (0.25) |
| Education5Supérieur Bac +2 | -0.53*** (0.13) | 0.01 (0.21) | 0.48* (0.24) |
| ReligionCatholiques pratiquants irréguliers | 0.26 (0.16) | 0.02 (0.24) | -0.16 (0.28) |
| ReligionCatholiques non pratiquants | 0.08 (0.20) | -0.03 (0.30) | -0.09 (0.35) |
| ReligionAutres religions | -0.08 (0.19) | 0.03 (0.29) | 0.03 (0.33) |
| ReligionSans religion | 0.02 (0.16) | -0.42 (0.24) | -0.32 (0.29) |
| DeprivationFacilement | -0.002 (0.17) | 0.15 (0.28) | 0.13 (0.33) |
| DeprivationDifficilement | 0.30 (0.17) | 0.33 (0.28) | 0.04 (0.33) |
| DeprivationTrès difficilement | 0.40 (0.21) | 0.05 (0.37) | -0.30 (0.41) |
| Constant | -1.97*** (0.32) | -2.18*** (0.44) | -0.24 (0.54) |
| <i>N</i> | 5,105 | 5,105 | 1,499 |

Notes:

***Significant at the 0.1 percent level.

**Significant at the 1 percent level.

*Significant at the 5 percent level.

Binary Logistic Regressions

Std err. in brackets

Data: Barometer of Political Trust (CEVIPOF), Waves #13 and 13bis

Next, we look at the attitudinal profile of Le Pen and Zemmour's voters by replicating the socio-demographic model to which we add socio-political attitudes and the left-right ideological control (see Model 2).

Not surprisingly, support for Le Pen is motivated by voter attitudes towards Islam (Model 2a in Table 4): it is stronger amongst individuals who see Islam as a threat to the French Republic, although such differences remain of relatively small magnitude. Moreover, we see no significant effect of populist and authoritarian attitudes. This may possibly attest to the salience of socio-economic and pocketbook concerns and the decreased salience of traditional far right cultural issues in the 2022 presidential elections, in the context of post-pandemic inflation and rising cost of living. Populist attitudes in particular were widespread in the 2022 electorate in France (Ivaldi 2022b) and such attitudes traditionally play a role in voting for the populist radical left as well as the far right (Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel 2018, Ivaldi 2020).

In line with our expectation from the analysis of far-right supply of Euroscepticism, the results confirm that Le Pen typically attracts voters who are opposed to European integration: Model 2a shows that support for Le Pen is negatively and significantly correlated with the idea of giving more power to the EU, with predicted probabilities ranging from 9% to 28% from one end of the scale to the other.

Le Pen voters are predominantly found to the right of the political spectrum and left-right affiliation emerges as an important predictor of RN voting: we see a strong effect of individual self-placement on the left-right scale, with probabilities ranging from 11% to 27% from left to right of the scale. Despite such ideological profile, we see no evidence of right-leaning economic attitudes, however: redistribution preferences fail to achieve significance in the model of Le Pen voting, thus indicating that Le Pen voters do not differ significantly from the rest of the electorate with regards to their support for economic redistribution.

Finally, the analysis corroborates that the war in Ukraine may have played a significant role in voting for Le Pen in 2022. Support for the RN candidate is higher amongst voters most concerned with the impact of the war on their household's finances: predicted probabilities range from 22% amongst those who say there are "very worried" down to 14% for those who say they are "not worried". Meanwhile, Le Pen voters are more likely to oppose economic sanctions on Russia: predicted voting probabilities range from 16% to 31% from one end of the scale of support for such sanctions to the other.

Table 4. Model 2. Socio-demographic and attitudinal profile of Le Pen and Zemmour voters

| | <i>Model 2a</i> | <i>Model 2b</i> | <i>Model 2c</i> |
|---|------------------|-----------------|-----------------------|
| | Le Pen Vote | Zemmour Vote | Zemmour / Le Pen Vote |
| GenderFemme | 0.09 (0.09) | -0.17 (0.15) | -0.26 (0.17) |
| AgeContinuous | -0.02*** (0.003) | 0.005 (0.005) | 0.01* (0.01) |
| Education5CAP-BEP | 0.25 (0.17) | 0.07 (0.27) | 0.02 (0.32) |
| Education5Baccalauréat | -0.06 (0.17) | 0.10 (0.25) | 0.13 (0.31) |
| Education5Bac+2 (DEUG, DUT, BTS) | 0.09 (0.18) | -0.03 (0.28) | -0.12 (0.33) |
| Education5Supérieur Bac +2 | -0.34 (0.18) | -0.05 (0.27) | 0.22 (0.32) |
| ReligionCatholiques pratiquants irréguliers | 0.18 (0.20) | 0.24 (0.31) | 0.18 (0.38) |
| ReligionCatholiques non pratiquants | -0.17 (0.26) | 0.26 (0.40) | 0.41 (0.48) |
| ReligionAutres religions | -0.01 (0.24) | 0.69 (0.36) | 0.68 (0.44) |
| ReligionSans religion | 0.08 (0.20) | 0.23 (0.32) | 0.18 (0.39) |
| DeprivationFacilement | -0.06 (0.21) | 0.24 (0.35) | 0.25 (0.41) |
| DeprivationDifficilement | 0.10 (0.21) | 0.36 (0.35) | 0.18 (0.42) |
| DeprivationTrès difficilement | 0.19 (0.27) | 0.16 (0.45) | 0.03 (0.54) |
| ScalePopulism | 0.08 (0.07) | 0.02 (0.10) | -0.08 (0.13) |
| IslamMenace | 0.14* (0.05) | 0.16 (0.08) | 0.08 (0.10) |
| TropLoinDroitsFemmesComme il faut | -0.06 (0.10) | 0.38* (0.15) | 0.36* (0.18) |
| TropLoinDroitsFemmesTrop loin | 0.03 (0.15) | 0.28 (0.22) | 0.20 (0.26) |
| PrendreRiches | -0.02 (0.06) | -0.36*** (0.08) | -0.32** (0.10) |
| AutoriteOrdre | 0.04 (0.06) | 0.07 (0.09) | -0.02 (0.11) |
| PlusPouvoirsUEV13b | -0.16*** (0.02) | -0.35*** (0.04) | -0.17*** (0.04) |
| lr11 | 0.11*** (0.02) | 0.05 (0.03) | -0.03 (0.04) |
| InquietUkraineEgotropV13b | 0.20** (0.07) | 0.05 (0.10) | -0.07 (0.11) |
| ApprouveSanctionsRussieV13b | -0.08*** (0.02) | -0.16*** (0.02) | -0.09*** (0.03) |
| Constant | -1.41** (0.53) | -1.49 (0.82) | 0.18 (0.98) |
| <i>N</i> | 3,077 | 3,077 | 886 |

Notes:

***Significant at the 0.1 percent level.

**Significant at the 1 percent level.

*Significant at the 5 percent level.

Binary Logistic Regressions

Std err. in brackets

Data: Barometer of Political Trust (CEVIPOF), Waves #13 and 13bis

Turning to Model 1b, we discern some important aspects of the electoral support for Zemmour. One first notable aspect concerns the rights of women. Support for Zemmour is significantly higher among individuals who say that “we have done just about right” in promoting rights for women, with a predicted probability of 6% as opposed to 4% in those who say “we haven’t gone far enough”. While such differences remain of small amplitude, they corroborate that voter preferences for Zemmour may be partially driven by the values of the cultural backlash.

Another significant effect is found in economic attitudes: Zemmour supporters are less likely to support economic redistribution when contrasted with all the other electorates, with predicted probabilities of voting ranging from 3% to 8% (Model 2b in Table 4). This indicates that Zemmour may have primarily appealed to voters with right-wing economic preferences, which is in line with the expectation drawn from the analysis of his supply of market liberal economics.

Thirdly, Zemmour voters converge with those of Le Pen on their opposition to European integration. Zemmour voters show a higher level of Euroscepticism, and individual support for giving more power to the EU typically decreases the likelihood to vote for the former polemist. As anticipated, the effect of opposing the EU is substantial, with predicted probabilities ranging from about 1% up to 13% from one end of the scale to the other.

Finally, the effect of approving economic sanctions on Russia is statistically significant: support for Zemmour is less pronounced amongst voters who tend to back such sanctions. Here, predicted probabilities from one end of the scale to the other range from 3% to 14%. Unlike Le Pen, however, we find no significant effect of egotropic concerns related to the war and its impact on household finances.

Such distinctive attitudinal traits are confirmed in the localized far-right model contrasting Zemmour and Le Pen voters (Model 2c). Compared with Le Pen’s supporters, Zemmour voters are significantly more socially conservative with regards to women’s rights, and they are also more opposed to economic redistribution. In line with our expectations, Zemmour voters are characterized by a higher level of Euroscepticism and lesser support for sanctions on Russia. As can be seen from Model 2c, Zemmour voters are more likely than their lepenist counterparts to oppose giving more power to the EU, and they are also less likely than Le Pen voters to approve economic sanctions on Russia.

In contrast, we see no statistically strong evidence of significant effects of populist, authoritarian and nativist attitudes on voting for Zemmour, which corroborates that such attitudes are shared by all far right voters.

Discussion

This paper has examined the internal heterogeneity in far-right politics in the 2022 French presidential election, looking at commonalities and differences between Marine Le Pen and Éric Zemmour, in terms of their ideology, strategy, and electoral support.

The ‘supply-side’ analysis confirms that Le Pen and Zemmour both displayed typical far right characteristics such as nativism and authoritarianism. Both were also populist, adopting the central tenets of the ‘thin’ ideology of populism. They shared economic nationalist views and an opposition to European integration which translated into claims of national sovereignty and the concept of establishing the precedence of national law over European treaties and international laws. Ultimately, they both endorsed the far-right agenda of transforming the EU into an association of free and independent nations, however with some nuances that were essentially strategic.

Le Pen and Zemmour significantly diverged on other aspects, on the other hand. In the economic realm, Zemmour pushed a right-wing market liberal agenda, which was aligned with his political ambition to create a broad ‘union of the right’, by bringing together conservative and far-right parties and voters. This contrasted with Le Pen’s positioning to the economic left, which was embedded in her project to build a ‘patriotic union’ beyond left and right, and which primarily aimed to address post-pandemic socio-economic concerns about rising prices and the cost of living among French voters.

Another area of dissimilitude was that of the use of reactionary politics. While Le Pen essentially perpetuated her previous agenda of moderation on moral issues, Zemmour’s authoritarian views were associated with sexism and a strong right-wing reactionary rhetoric, while simultaneously vilipending of progressive elites, political correctness, and the so-called ‘tyranny of minorities’. Zemmour propagated a reactionary criticism of modernity and progressive values, which sees cultural change as deeply eroding the nation and its traditional way of life.

Finally, the analysis found significant differences in the electoral strategy of the two candidates. Le Pen continued with her previous strategy of ‘de-demonization’ to enhance the RN’s credibility and increase its electoral appeal to voters. This contrasted with the hardline strategy of Zemmour, as revealed in his endorsement of extreme right concepts such as the ‘great replacement’ conspiracy theory, and ‘remigration’, and his use of radical scare tactics. Unlike Le Pen who sought to balance cultural and economic issues, Zemmour emphasized a ‘niche’ approach centered on immigration and Islam, primarily seeking to mobilize cultural grievances. Meanwhile, Zemmour would politicize toxic extremist views while making multiple provocative statements during the campaign, including lending support to Putin’s Russia amidst the war in Ukraine.

Overall, despite such differences, these findings corroborate both Le Pen and Zemmour fit the ‘populist radical right’, that is a subgroup of the far right, which is traditionally defined by the mix of nativism, authoritarianism and populism (see Mudde 2007). Both candidates would reject key liberal values such as minority rights, illustrating the typical ‘illiberal’ agenda that is found in the contemporary wave of authoritarian populism (Crewe and Sanders 2020). Illiberal themes and policies were most evident in Zemmour, however, who cultivated extreme majoritarianism and an overt opposition to institutional check-and-balances, constitutional courts and the rule of law. Such tendencies were less visible on the other hand

in Le Pen's 2022 campaign, on the other hand, primarily reflecting strategic adjustments embedded in de-demonization.

Turning to voters, the paper has explored areas of variability in the issues and attitudes that motivated support for Le Pen and Zemmour in the first round of the 2022 presidential election, asking which factors may explain different voting behavior across the two electoral clusters of the far-right in France.

The 'demand-side' findings confirm that Le Pen and Zemmour may have appealed to different sectors of the electorate, although differences are of relatively small magnitude. Le Pen was more successful among women, younger voters, and those with lower education. The data suggest however that she may have somewhat bridged the educational divide in the 2022 election, making significant inroads among people with intermediary and higher levels of education –i.e. Baccalauréat and up to two years university. The gender gap was more pronounced on the other among Zemmour voters who were more male on average. Beyond gender, however, the 2022 Zemmour constituency essentially resembled the rest of the national electorate, showing no distinctive sociological profile.

Additionally, there was little empirical evidence of a generation effect for Zemmour, thus somewhat contradicting the 'cultural backlash' hypothesis that his nostalgic reactionary nativism should have primarily appealed to voters in the post-war Silent and Baby Boomer cohorts. This more broadly corroborates recent criticism of the 'cultural backlash' theory in the European context. Recent studies such as Schäfer (2021) shows that there is no polarization of such attitudes between younger and older cohorts, and that younger cohorts are more likely to vote for authoritarian-populist parties such as the French RN and *Reconquête!*.

In terms of socio-political attitudes, an important finding is that the effect size of typical far right attitudes such as nativism and authoritarianism was relatively marginal. Nor do we see a significant effect of populist attitudes. Zemmour's voters had a more distinct profile with regards to their attitudes towards women's rights and economic redistribution, showing reactionary views about gender issues and right-leaning economic preferences, which set them apart from all the other voters.

Moreover, the data confirmed that the war in Ukraine –and in particular its domestic economic impact– may have played a significant role in presidential voting in 2022. Support for Le Pen and Zemmour was significantly higher among voters who opposed economic sanctions on Russia, and this was even more pronounced among Zemmour supporters. Reflecting the salience of socio-economic anxieties, Le Pen voters were much more likely to say they were worried about the financial impact of the war on their household finances, and this set them apart from all other voters.

Finally, while the EU was not a salient issue in the 2022 election, the data confirm that both Zemmour and Le Pen voters were characterized by their opposition to European integration and their lower level of support for giving more power to the EU, which corroborates previous research on the impact of EU-related attitudes on vote choice in France (Evans and Ivaldi 2018).

To conclude, while these findings clearly need to be investigated further, they nevertheless point to significant changes in party competition to the right of French politics, which should be put into the broader comparative perspective of the current wave of the far right across Europe.

First, the findings in this paper reflect the mainstreaming of far-right frames and issues in contemporary French politics, both supply and demand. Recent research such as Mudde (2022) and Wondreys and Mudde (2022) argues that far right ideas have become normalized and that they are increasingly propagated by mainstream parties in Europe and America, thus potentially concerning larger pools of voters. With all due caution, the 2022 French data seem to suggest that far right attitudes such as nativism, authoritarianism and populism may have become more widespread in the general electorate, and that they may have become less distinctive of the far right.

Second, like elsewhere in Europe (Mudde 2022, p.104), the French elections of 2022 confirm that the boundaries between the conservative and the far right have become more 'porous'. Polls suggest that Zemmour managed to attract voters from both the radical and conservative sectors of the French right, by locating himself at the political intersection between mainstream and far right politics, winning support from right-wing conservative voters who had previously supported the Republican candidate, François Fillon, in the 2017 elections. Meanwhile, Valérie Pécresse's Republicans (LR) dramatically collapsed at less than 5% of the national vote –as opposed to over 20% five years earlier.

Third, our data suggest that Le Pen's social-populist agenda clearly resonated with the many economic fears of the French, particularly amongst the lower social strata most severely hit by the economic repercussions of the Ukraine war, and faced with rising cost of living. The RN's economic recalibration and shift to the economic left may have helped Le Pen win a larger slice of the French electorate.

Fourth, the data point to the electoral effect of RN 'de-demonization' over time. While the impact of such normalization is difficult to evaluate empirically, our findings strongly suggest that Le Pen may have managed to attract voters from outside the traditional nativist-authoritarian cluster, and that her strategy of detoxifying her party and of moderating her discourse may have helped her win a broader constituency in the 2022 elections, largely capitalizing on war-related concerns, economic instability and profound voter disaffection with Macron in the French electorate.

Together with the waning of the 'Republican Front' in the presidential runoff and the historical breakthrough of the RN in the 2022 legislative elections, the findings in this paper suggest a new phase in the already long history of far-right politics in France, possibly heralding a more significant reshaping of the party sub-system of the Right in the future, with Le Pen's party as its predominant force.

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