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# When far right parties compete: a case study of Éric Zemmour and Marine Le Pen in the 2022 French presidential election

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## Abstract

In the previous wave of the far right between 1980 and 2000, far-right parties essentially challenged mainstream parties of the moderate left and right. The current wave has seen new far-right parties challenge the more established far-right players, notably in Italy and France, which raises questions about party competition in this segment of the party system. This paper aims to shed some light on these questions by analyzing the competition between Marine Le Pen and Éric Zemmour in the 2022 French elections. Based on a qualitative case study analysis, it identifies areas of convergence and dissimilarity between the two candidates. By scrutinizing the positions, issue salience, and agency of their respective campaigns, the paper shows how far-right parties in the same party system compete with one another, thus contributing to the broader literature on contemporary far-right politics. The concluding section discusses these findings in relation to voters' concerns in the first round of the 2022 French presidential election.

**Keywords:** Zemmour, Le Pen, French presidential elections, far right, party competition

## Introduction

The rise of far-right parties is among the most striking political phenomena of the past four decades (Carter 2018; Castelli Gattinara 2020; Mudde 2022). During the previous wave of the far right between 1980 and 2000, such parties started to achieve electoral breakthroughs in Europe, in the process challenging mainstream political parties of the moderate left and right (Meguid 2008; Kitschelt and McGann 1995).

The current wave of the far right is characterized by the mainstreaming and normalization of far-right parties (Mudde 2022). This may create opportunities for new far-right actors to emerge and challenge their more established counterparts. For example, divisions began to appear in the far right in countries such as Austria and France already in the late 1990s, and more recently, far-right competition has been observed in the Netherlands (de Jonge 2021) and in Italy following the rise of Giorgia Meloni's *Fratelli d'Italia* (Puleo and Piccolino 2022), as well as in France, which is the focus of this paper.

While the far-right challenge to mainstream parties has been amply documented in the academic literature (Kitschelt and McGann 1995; Meguid 2008; van de Wardt et al. 2014), there has been comparatively less research about how far-right parties compete with one another, and the strategies that new far-right actors may follow to challenge the more established ones. In competing with one another, far-right parties may strategically adapt their positions to attract voters (Carter 2005; Jordan 2022). They may also manipulate issue salience (Meguid 2008) and deliberately blur their positions on established issues in order to attract broader support (Rovny 2013). Finally, the literature on the far-right emphasizes the role of agency (de Lange and Art 2011; Art 2011). Over time, many of these parties have used their agency to escape their extremist image, essentially by downplaying overtly racist and extreme right-wing rhetoric (Akkerman et al. 2016; Bjånesøy 2021).

Taking France as a case study, this paper examines the competition between Marine Le Pen's *Rassemblement National* (RN) and Éric Zemmour's *Reconquête!* Both parties fall within the broad "far right" party family (Lebourg 2021). Moreover, they staked out strong electoral positions in the 2022 French presidential election, where Le Pen and Zemmour received 23.2% and 7% of the first-round vote, respectively. The paper focuses more specifically on the "supply side" of the French far right to investigate the ideology and electoral strategies of the two far-right candidates in the 2022 elections. It looks at areas of convergence and dissimilarity regarding Le Pen and Zemmour's positions, issue salience, and agency. To that end, the paper adopts a qualitative approach, providing an in-depth

examination of the ideology and electoral strategy of Le Pen and Zemmour, using the key features of the far right to structure the analysis. This study is primarily explorative and descriptive in orientation. The data are drawn from a corpus of key speeches, published statements, and interviews of Le Pen and Zemmour, together with their 2022 presidential manifestos.

This paper is organized as follows. The first section provides the conceptual framework for the analysis of far-right party competition and explains the rationale for choosing France as a case study. Next, the paper presents the empirics and methodology before turning to the comparative analysis of Le Pen and Zemmour's ideology and electoral strategy in the 2022 elections. The analysis shows that Le Pen and Zemmour shared the typical nativist and authoritarian agenda of the far right (albeit with some nuances) while varying more in other aspects, a reflection of their distinctive competitive strategies. These findings contribute to the broader comparative literature on the far right by looking at how such parties may compete with one another within the same party system and the strategies they may use in pursuing their objectives. In the last section, these findings are discussed in relation to voters' concerns in the first round of the 2022 French presidential election.

## Party competition on the far right

According to Pirro (2022, 3), the far right comprises “all those ultranationalist collective actors sharing a common exclusionary and authoritarian worldview—predominantly determined on sociocultural criteria—yet varying allegiances to democracy.” Typically, far-right parties formulate a nativist platform that frames immigration as a threat to the welfare and cultural fabric of Western societies (Mudde 2022). Moreover, their nativism is combined with an authoritarian view of society, which argues for reinforcing social cohesion and order at the expense of individual autonomy and diversity. Finally, many of these parties have adopted populism (Carter 2018: 74). Following Mudde (2004: 543), populism may be defined as “an ideology that 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.”

During the “third wave” of the far right between 1980 and 2000, such parties began to achieve electoral breakthroughs in Europe (Mudde 2022). They adopted a distinctive “niche” profile emphasizing a narrow set of cultural issues such as immigration and law and order (Rydgren 2005; Meguid 2008; van de Wardt et al. 2014). During the 1990s, far-right parties

also developed Eurosceptic stances and have remained largely ambivalent regarding the European Union (EU) ever since (Vasilopoulou 2018; Lorimer 2021; McMahan 2022).

During the third wave, far-right parties primarily competed with established mainstream parties of the moderate left and right (Kitschelt and McGann 1995; Meguid 2008). Over time, however, the more established of them have been challenged, in turn, by the rise of new far-right actors competing for the same electorate. Divisions on the far right were already emerging in countries such as Austria and France during the late 1990s, exemplified by the fights between the FPÖ and the BZÖ and Jean-Marie Le Pen and Bruno Mégret. More recently, competition within the far-right has been observed in the Netherlands (de Jonge 2021) and, most significantly, in Italy, where Giorgia Meloni's *Fratelli d'Italia* has successfully challenged Matteo Salvini's *Legha*, which had long dominated (Puleo and Piccolino 2022).

While there is a voluminous body of research on party competition and the far-right challenge to mainstream parties, there has been comparatively little literature about how far-right parties compete with one another and the strategy new far-right actors follow to challenge their more established counterparts. This section formulates some general theoretical arguments about party competition on the far right before outlining the rationale for taking France as a case study.

### **Far-right party strategies: policy positions, issue salience, and political agency**

In competing with one another, far-right actors may first choose to adapt their supply of far-right policies to move into spaces left vacant by competitors (Mols and Jetten 2020). Previous research has highlighted how far-right parties strategically adapt their positions to attract voters (Carter 2005; Jordan 2022). While there is a broad agreement that far-right parties generally share a common nativist and authoritarian ideology, the literature has identified areas of diversity that may inform our analysis of far-right strategy and competition (Wondreys and Mudde 2022).

The scholarship has found, in particular, a good deal of heterogeneity in the socioeconomic policies of far-right parties across space and time (Michel 2020). Some of those parties have embraced neoliberalism, while others have more recently turned to neo-Keynesian policies, emphasizing social protection and adopting an agenda of redistribution (Otjes et al. 2018). To operationalize the economic dimension, this paper follows the classic opposition between the state and the market. Kitschelt (1994) defines this opposition as a conflict between “socialist” and “capitalist” economic models. The former focuses on the

demand side of the economy and advocates state intervention, more social and welfare spending, and higher (and more progressive) taxation. In contrast, the capitalist model touts economic liberalism (free, competitive markets) and focuses on the supply side, favoring lower taxes, smaller government, and economic deregulation.

Diversity on the far right is also reflected in the sphere of moral conservatism. While most far-right parties still hold a traditional view of the role of men and women in society, often embracing sexism, patriarchal family models, and opposition to gay rights, some have moved contrariwise, co-opting feminism and liberal values (Duina and Carson 2020; Linders et al. 2022). Far-right leaders increasingly exploit feminist themes and gender equality to justify their nationalist policies and to dissimulate their cultural racism against Muslims, a strategy that has been dubbed “femonationalism” (Farris 2017).

Alongside shifting policy positions, political parties may also manipulate the perceived salience of issues (Meguid 2008). Far-right parties may thus decide to deemphasize or emphasize certain issues or deliberately blur their positions on established issues to attract broader support (Rovny 2013). As suggested by Lefevere (2023), party positions are “ambiguous” to the extent that parties deemphasize them, remain vague, or are inconsistent. Manipulating issue salience in this way offers far-right parties a potentially useful tool against their far-right competitors.

Finally, the literature on the far right emphasizes the importance of agency and the ability of far-right parties to build a “reputational shield” to deflect accusations of racism and extremism (de Lange and Art 2011; Art 2011). Many far-right parties in Western Europe have used their agency and revamped their platforms, personnel, and public profiles to distance themselves from the legacy of far-right extremist ideology and establish an image that is more “tolerable” to a broad swathe of voters (Akkerman et al. 2016; Bjånesøy 2021). Contrarily, new far-right actors may chart a more radical course to differentiate themselves from counterparts that are “moderating” their positions.

### **The rationale for a French case study**

Recent developments in far-right politics in France make it a relevant case for analyzing far-right party competition. Like the Netherlands and Italy, France now has two electorally relevant far-right parties competing with one another, namely Marine Le Pen’s RN and Éric Zemmour’s *Reconquête!* Both parties fall within the broad “far right” party family (Lebourg 2021) and achieved electoral relevance in the first round of the 2022 presidential election, where Le Pen and Zemmour received 23.2% and 7% of the vote, respectively.

France's *Front National* (FN)—the predecessor of today's RN—was for decades an archetypal populist radical right party, combining nativism, authoritarianism, and populism (Mudde 2007: 41). Since becoming party leader in 2011, Marine Le Pen has maintained the nativist, authoritarian and populist agenda of the FN, while simultaneously seeking to address the crucial issues of credibility, identity, and strategy (Crépon et al. 2015; Stockemer 2015). Her “de-demonization” strategy has sought to detoxify the party’s radical reputation by distancing the RN from overtly extremist rhetoric, professionalizing the party, and recruiting more competent members (Mayer 2018).

The 2022 elections also witnessed the meteoric rise of a new far-right actor in Éric Zemmour. A former journalist and author, Zemmour entered French politics as a typical anti-immigration politician, making nativism and anti-Muslim rhetoric the centerpiece of his presidential bid. Following a national book tour and extensive media coverage, Zemmour’s profile rose steadily in the run-up to the 2022 presidential election, and he eventually founded a new party, *Reconquête!*, with the ambition of reconfiguring the party sub-system on the French right (Jacquet-Vaillant 2022). Zemmour’s entry into France’s presidential politics has created new challenges for Marine Le Pen.

Taking the competition between Le Pen and Zemmour as its point of departure, this paper focuses on the “supply side” of the far right in France to investigate areas of convergence and dissemblance in the ideology and electoral strategies of these two candidates. Here we may sketch some general assumptions in the empirical analysis that follows. First, we would expect both candidates to have converged on the far right’s nativist and authoritarian issue dimensions to address voters’ cultural concerns and grievances, which traditionally fuel support for such parties. Second, and in contrast, we would expect more variability on the socioeconomic dimension of competition, where far-right parties often adopt different positions and where they may choose to manipulate issue salience. Specifically, Le Pen’s move to the economic left may have created new opportunities for a far-right appeal combined with market liberalism. Finally, we would expect differences in party agency and reputational strategies, reflecting Le Pen’s (re)positioning of the RN in the competitive system and Zemmour’s response to this move. Le Pen’s search for credibility and normalization may have left vacant the more radical space to the far right of the political spectrum for a new political actor such as Zemmour to try and occupy.

## Data and methods

This paper adopts a qualitative approach to Le Pen and Zemmour's ideology and strategy, using the main features of the far right to structure the analysis. Specifically, it adopts the qualitative content analysis, which relies on "rich, dense information concerning specific cases" (Collier and Elman 2008, 784). In line with this method, the paper aims to provide a "thick description" of Le Pen and Zemmour's ideology and strategy. The study thus follows Mudde's (2007, 39) observation that "qualitative content analysis is a far more effective approach to studying phenomena like the core features of a party ideology. It provides the proximity to the data and flexibility in operationalization necessary for studying highly complex concepts such as nativism, authoritarianism, and populism." Studies of the populist radical right, such as Pirro (2014), have amply demonstrated the effectiveness of qualitative content analysis of party literature to discern commonalities and differences in the ideology of such parties.

This study is primarily descriptive and exploratory in nature, drawing on externally oriented campaign material and party literature. Specifically, it draws on a rich corpus of major speeches, published statements, and interviews with Le Pen and Zemmour during the 2022 campaign, including the non-official "pre-campaign" period from September 2021. The paper focuses predominantly on speeches delivered by the two candidates at their most important public rallies, together with interviews deemed most relevant to the analysis. The list of public speeches considered in the analysis is presented in Table 1 below. Additional sources, such as published media interviews, are referenced in the endnotes.

The data also include the official campaign video posted by Zemmour on YouTube on 30 November 2021 announcing his presidential bid (Zemmour 2021). Additionally, we examine Le Pen and Zemmour's presidential manifestos to assess the two candidates' policy positions (Le Pen 2022; Zemmour 2022). Party manifestos are generally considered authoritative policy statements and reliable textual sources of information concerning political parties' policy priorities and positions (Marks 2007). Integrating party manifestos, leaders' statements, and interviews in this way allows us to identify core features of the ideology of our two far-right cases (Pirro 2014: 611).



**Table 1. List of key speeches by Marine Le Pen and Éric Zemmour considered in the analysis**

*Marine Le Pen*

<i>Date</i>	<i>Speech</i>	<i>Reference</i>
12 SEPT 2021	Speech in Fréjus	#Fréjus
07 FEB 2022	Speech at the RN Presidential Convention in Reims	#Reims
07 APR 2022	Speech in Perpignan	#Perpignan

*Éric Zemmour*

<i>Date</i>	<i>Speech</i>	<i>Reference</i>
05 DEC 2021	Speech in Villepinte	#Villepinte
06 MAR 2022	Speech in Toulon	#Toulon
27 MAR 2022	Speech at Trocadéro (Paris)	#Trocadéro

While one should be careful not to reduce party ideology to the political views of the party leader, such conflation is less problematic in the case of Le Pen and Zemmour. Zemmour established *Reconquête!* in April 2021 primarily as a vehicle for his 2022 presidential campaign. Similarly, the RN has long been closely associated with the leadership of the Le Pen family (Ivaldi and Lanzone 2016). Both the RN and *Reconquête!* may be seen as exemplars of the “extremely centralized–personalized party” type, in which the views and policies of the party align with those of the leader who literally “owns” the party and dominates everything within it (Rahat 2022).

## Results

The analysis of the competition between Le Pen and Zemmour in the 2022 French elections suggests areas of convergence and dissimilarity across party ideology and electoral strategy alike. Table 2 summarizes these areas, which are used to guide the analysis.

**Table 2. Summary of areas of convergence and diversity between Le Pen and Zemmour in the 2022 French presidential election**

<b>Party positions</b>	<b>Marine Le Pen (RN)</b>	<b>Éric Zemmour (<i>Reconquête!</i>)</b>
<i>Cultural dimension</i>		
Nativism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Immigration as cultural and economic threat</li> <li>• Politicization of purported “Islamization” of society</li> <li>• Welfare chauvinism (i.e., national preference/priority)               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Referendum to limit immigration</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Making national legislation superior to EU law</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Traditional themes and policies of the extreme right, such as the “Great Replacement” and “remigration”</li> </ul>
Authoritarianism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Law and order, tough on crime</li> <li>• Deemphasize social, family, and gender issues</li> <li>• Co-optation of feminism against the threat of Islam</li> <li>• Femonationalism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vigilantism and call for self-defense</li> <li>• Reactionary right-wing frames and rhetoric</li> <li>• Sexism</li> </ul>
Populism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The people both an ethno-cultural entity and an economic underdog</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People centrism</li> <li>• People essentially defined as ethno-cultural entity</li> <li>• Illiberal attacks on judges, constitutional courts, and the media</li> </ul>
<i>Economic dimension</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Left leaning</li> <li>• Neo-Keynesian agenda</li> <li>• Social populism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Right wing</li> <li>• Market liberal agenda of tax cuts and welfare retrenchment</li> </ul>
<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Marine Le Pen (RN)</b>	<b>Éric Zemmour (<i>Reconquête!</i>)</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Union of Patriots</li> <li>• Populist coalition of voters across both left and right</li> <li>• De-demonization</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Union of the Right</li> <li>• Coalition of mainstream and far-right parties and voters</li> <li>• “Hardline” extreme right-wing strategy</li> </ul>

## A common far-right ideology

As anticipated, the analysis confirms that both candidates exhibit the distinctive nativist, authoritarian and populist ideology of the far right and that they generally share similar positions on the cultural dimension, however, with some nuances that are examined below.

Nativist policies are found in both Le Pen and Zemmour. The RN's 2022 manifesto continued to emphasize such policies, calling for a 'national priority' for the French in jobs, housing, and welfare and pledging that such principles 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, impose stricter criteria for entry and citizenship, and deport foreign criminals and delinquents. Zemmour's immigration policies shared strong similarities with Le Pen's. His manifesto echoed the welfare chauvinist principle of "national preference" in jobs, housing, and social benefits championed by the FN historically, together with calls to stop immigration, limit asylum, and end family reunification and the right to automatic citizenship for children born in France to immigrant parents (Zemmour 2022).

Le Pen's message on immigration did not vary substantially 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 of the French losing their identity (#Reims). Like Le Pen, Zemmour embraced ethno-cultural nationalism, warning that France is being "submerged" by non-European immigration and in danger of "losing its identity" (Zemmour 2022).

Both Le Pen and Zemmour's interpretation of nativism primarily equates immigration with "Islamization," framing Islam as the most serious threat to the national culture and the French Republic while pointing to the danger of *communautarisme* (identitarian closure). 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 sparked controversy by calling for a ban on traditional Muslim names such as Muhammad, a pledge that was incorporated into his presidential platform, polemics notwithstanding (Zemmour 2022, 10). Le Pen pledged to make *communautarisme* among immigrant communities illegal (Le Pen 2022). She vowed to 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 symbol but also the uniform of a totalitarian ideology," Le Pen said, affirming, "I want to ban it from our territory."<sup>1</sup>

Beyond such commonalities, there were nuances in the two candidates' policies and rhetoric, reflecting divergent agency strategies. First, there were differences in the extent to which extreme right-wing themes were adopted, such as the so-called "great replacement" conspiracy theory that alleges a plot by political elites to replace native-born citizens with non-European immigrants from Muslim and African countries designed to undermine the political power and culture of the French. Zemmour unambiguously endorsed this trope and 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). In March 2022, Zemmour also officially adopted the policy of "remigration," a traditional extreme right policy that was a centerpiece of FN policy under Jean-Marie Le Pen but jettisoned by Marine Le Pen. During the campaign, Zemmour proposed creating a Ministry of Remigration, with the objective of deporting no fewer than one million "undesirable foreigners" and all those who "do not assimilate" within five years.<sup>2</sup>

Le Pen, in contrast, was more careful in avoiding such rhetoric. Shunning the "great replacement" theme to avoid being associated with the extreme right, she nonetheless weaved its key ideas into her speeches during the campaign. For instance, she declared that "in wave after wave, out-of-control immigration is instilling lifestyles that are not our own," noting that "this is a population-swelling immigration that will [at some point] be irreversible (...). We will restore France's identity and pride. Let me say it clearly: the French will be masters in their own house again!" (#Reims).

Le Pen and Zemmour's nativism was associated with national sovereignty claims and the far right's traditional opposition to supranational institutions, most particularly the European Union. The opening chapter of Zemmour's 2022 presidential manifesto thus pledged to "reclaim our identity and our sovereignty" and to "restore to the French control over their destiny" (Zemmour 2022: 4/6).

Regarding the EU, both parties adopted what has been recently described as an "alt-European policy programme," namely, "a conservative, xenophobic intergovernmental vision of a European 'community of sovereign states,' 'strong nations' or 'fatherlands,' that abhors the EU's 'centralised' United States of Europe" (McMahon 2022, 10). Furthermore, both Le Pen and Zemmour promised to restore the precedence of national law over European treaties and international conventions, signaling their intention to curb the powers of the EU and, eventually, challenge its core principles.

Here, as well, there were nuances that reflected the candidates' different salience strategies. In his manifesto Zemmour signaled his Euroscepticism unambiguously to voters, indicating: "I want France to take back control." Furthermore, he wrote: "I will free our country from Brussels's straitjacket (...) I also wish to engage, alongside other European states, many of which share our convictions, in constructing a Europe of independent nations" (Zemmour 2022, 13). In contrast, Le Pen's 2022 manifesto adopted a more ambiguous position vis-à-vis the European project. Remarkably, it managed to avoid any explicit mention of the EU at all. This conspicuous omission suggests that the RN opted to strategically deemphasize Eurosceptic frames and policies, attesting further to the party's approach of downplaying issues of European integration in campaign strategy. Meanwhile, the party renounced its previous policy of "Frexit," which had been a cornerstone of Le Pen's manifesto in 2017 and most notably included a promise to hold a referendum on France leaving the EU (Ivaldi 2018).

Alongside nativism, Le Pen and Zemmour converged on authoritarianism, a core feature of the far right. Both candidates typically stressed the link between immigration and crime. As Le Pen explained during the campaign: "I have always said it, and you see it daily, there is a clear link between the explosion of insecurity and the waves of immigration we continue to experience" (#Reims). In Zemmour's rhetoric, crime was more specifically equated with Muslim immigration and terrorism: "For me, this is not simply delinquency, it is a jihad," Zemmour said. "It is a war that is being waged on us, a war of civilization, a war of pillage, a war of theft, a war of rape and of murder (...) While there are millions of Muslims who are thankfully not terrorists, it remains the case that all terrorists are Muslims."<sup>3</sup>

Both candidates adopted a tough stance on law and order, blaming French elites for decadence and civil disorder. As stated in Zemmour's manifesto, "My proposals have only one goal: to treat the evil at the root (...). I want peaceful streets, I want neighborhoods where order reigns (...). I want victims to leave the courts with the feeling that justice protects honest citizens and punishes criminals" (Zemmour 2022, 11). This was echoed in Le Pen's "tough-on-crime" rhetoric, as exemplified by her speech in Fréjus, where she pledged to "eradicate gangs, mafias and all those, Islamists and others, who want to impose rules and ways of life on us that are not our own (...) We will throw the book at criminals: French delinquents belong in prison, and foreign ones on a plane! (#Fréjus).

In policy terms, Le Pen and Zemmour's manifestos showed a great deal of commonality, both pledging harsher sentencing, more police and space in prisons, less power to judges, and the introduction of "genuine" life sentences for criminals. Both candidates

backed abolishing automatic reductions in sentencing and advocated the principle of “presumption of legitimate self-defense” for police officers deploying lethal force (Le Pen 2022; Zemmour 2022). Zemmour also put his weight behind vigilantism, 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 not only to be afraid of the police but also of you. I want you to enforce the law at home.”<sup>4</sup>

Finally, a populist appeal was central to both candidates’ campaigns, which featured the typical polarized view of the political community, predicated on the antagonism between the “virtuous” people and the “corrupt” elite, while endorsing the use of referenda as a means to express the people’s sovereignty (Le Pen 2022; Zemmour 2022). While sharing a common populist framework, Le Pen and Zemmour diverged in their interpretation of “the people.” In Zemmour’s ideology, “the people” was primarily constructed as an ethno-cultural community of “natives” threatened by non-European immigrants and Muslims, while for Le Pen, “the people” was defined more in socioeconomic terms as the “underdog” and the “invisible men and women” of French society. Her campaign emphasized a populist vision of the “little” people versus “big” interests. Le Pen declared, for instance, “Between Emmanuel Macron and us, it is a choice between the power of money for the few and more purchasing power for all.”<sup>5</sup>

Additionally, there were differences in the two candidates’ manipulation of illiberal rhetoric. Zemmour clearly showed more explicit illiberal tendencies: “We must give the power back to the people,” he declared, “and 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). Importantly, and unlike Le Pen, such rhetoric translated into substantial policy. For instance, Zemmour pledged to abolish the Act of 1 July 1972 outlawing racial discrimination and antisemitism, thus reiterating an old FN policy. Meanwhile, he attacked NGOs, declaring “the state should no longer finance associations that fight against it” and asserting that “militant and intolerant associations should no longer be able to use the law” to protect their interests (Zemmour 2022, 62).

## Areas of policy differentiation

Turning to the differences between Le Pen and Zemmour, the two candidates' took divergent positions on moral conservatism and socioeconomic policy. Zemmour adopted uncompromising reactionary rhetoric on social issues, promoting an essentialist vision of gender roles, slamming the "'feminization' of society," while denouncing the so-called "tyranny of minorities" (i.e., LGBTQ people and feminists) and claiming the time had come to break the power of progressive elites and "political correctness." During the election, Zemmour promised to go into battle against an array of imagined ills, including "globalism, the dubious theory that we can 'live together' harmoniously, mass immigration, gender theory, and Islamo-leftism, and all those infernal machinations with only one goal: to deconstruct our people, to destroy it" (#Villepinte).

In his manifesto, Zemmour pledged that he would "protect women from an aggressive feminism that puts women and men against one another," stating: "[W]e must recognize what is unique to women, the fact of carrying life and having a bodily link with the child that no ideology can abolish" (Zemmour 2022). At a policy level, Zemmour called for a ban on "sexual transitions practiced on minors" and argued that "only the notion of sex and not 'gender' should be recognized in French law" (Zemmour 2022). While reaffirming his opposition to same-sex marriage, Zemmour indicated during the campaign that he would not repeal the 2013 law permitting it, adding that "he would not touch the (1974) law authorizing abortion"<sup>6</sup> in France, known as the Veil Law after its chief legislative sponsor, Simone Veil.

Such conventionalism was largely absent from Le Pen's campaign, which carefully avoided any reference to moral issues, continuing her previous efforts to show a more liberal profile on gender, LGBT, and family policies and to pragmatically adjust to changes in French society (Crépon 2015). In 2012, Le Pen abandoned her opposition to reimbursement for abortion procedures from public funds, which was central to the agenda of moral conservatism of the FN. More generally, Le Pen's approach to gender-related issues illustrates what has been deemed "femonationalism," that is, the exploitation and co-optation of feminist themes by anti-Islam and xenophobic campaigns (Farris 2017). As explained, for instance, by Le Pen during the election: "We will re-establish the freedom of women and girls to move around without being bothered or threatened (...) We will liberate young girls and women from the terrible yoke of religious dogma [i.e., the Muslim headscarf]. As for the Taliban that lurk within, we will send them back to where they come from!" (#Fréjus).

Second, the two diverged in terms of economic and welfare policies. Le Pen's campaign sought to balance cultural issues with economic ones: "I worry about making ends meet as much as the end of France," Le Pen said. "You know how important your purchasing power is to me (...) It is not inevitable that France will be impoverished, and, in two months, I will prove it to you," she explained (#Reims). In line with the social populist and economic nationalist agenda she has promoted since 2012 (Ivaldi 2015), Le Pen continued to make pocketbook issues like wages, pensions, healthcare, and public services the centerpiece of her campaign. In response to growing concerns over rising prices and the cost of living, 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).

Zemmour, on the other hand, endorsed a market 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 2022). Zemmour was scathing in his criticism of "welfare abuse" and "social assistance," pledging to address the concerns of "the France that goes to work every day." Zemmour insisted that "people of the middle and working class hate welfare," telling such voters: "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 liberal market approach was visible in proposals to reduce wealth and inheritance taxes, extend the retirement age to 64, exempt overtime working hours from taxation, redirect funds intended for urban and social cohesion policy, suspend family allowances for parents of "disruptive" or "truant" pupils, abolish the social housing law (SRU), and "fight against bureaucracy" (Zemmour 2022).

### **Electoral strategy and agency**

Such variance in rhetoric and policy may be accounted for by Le Pen and Zemmour's divergent competitive strategies and distinct positioning in the party system. During the 2022 campaign, Zemmour promoted a "broad union" of the French right, from mainstream conservatives to the extreme right, describing it as "an immense collective adventure (...) and the greatest promise of reconciling and uniting all families of the French right to defeat not only Emmanuel Macron but also political correctness and the normative left."<sup>7</sup>

In contrast, Le Pen continued with her plan to build a populist coalition—the so-called "Patriotic Union"—which would bring together activists and voters from both the left and right of the political spectrum. This strategy was in evidence as far back as 2012 and was



made explicit in the 2017 elections, where Le Pen called for a “patriotic revolution bringing together French citizens from both the right and the left, to revitalize national feelings” against the threat of “globalism.”<sup>8</sup>

Finally, divergent agency strategies were found across the campaigns. In the 2022 elections, Le Pen perpetuated and even amplified her strategy of “de-demonization” aimed at shedding the old FN’s extremist image and detoxifying her party’s reputation to broaden its electoral appeal (Crépon et al. 2015; Ivaldi 2016). Le Pen made a point of softening her rhetoric, adopting a less aggressive tone. Meanwhile, she continued to work on her personal profile in a bid to present herself as an “everyday person” and portray a more modest image in order to be more “tolerable” in the eyes of French voters.

On the other hand, Zemmour made no bones about seeming uncompromising, adopting a “hardline” strategy that stood in stark contrast to Le Pen’s efforts to sanitize the RN. In recent years, Zemmour has become infamous for making controversial and incendiary statements about immigration, Islam, and women, notably earning him multiple court convictions for inciting hatred against immigrants. Moreover, like Jean-Marie Le Pen in his heyday, Zemmour has a penchant for historical revisionism that seeks to minimize the responsibility of the wartime Vichy regime for deporting Jews to death camps, as illustrated, for instance, in his false claim that the regime had “protected French Jews.”<sup>9</sup>

In 2022, Zemmour’s campaign focused almost exclusively on his more radical positions on immigration and identity, adopting a strategy of radical scare tactics predicated on toxic extremist rhetoric and ideas. Zemmour’s campaign was punctuated by myriad provocative statements and shocking comments. Notable among them were blaming the former socialist president François Hollande for the Bataclan terrorist attacks of 2015, saying that disabled children should go to “special schools,” criticizing French society for what he deemed was its “obsession with inclusion,” advocating reinstating the death penalty and giving the middle finger to a protester in Marseille.

More generally, it has been shown that *Reconquête!* maintains close ties to the extreme right-wing milieu in France (Roussel 2022). This scene includes violent far-right groups such as *Les Zouaves*, whose members were responsible for injuring protesters at Zemmour’s first public rally near Paris in December 2021, as well the extreme nationalist “identitarian” movement, which is notorious in France for its violence, anti-Islam stunts, and hate speech (Šima 2021).

## Discussion

Taking France as a case study, this paper has examined the competition between Marine Le Pen and Éric Zemmour in the 2022 presidential election, looking more specifically at the “supply side” to investigate areas of convergence and dissimilarity in their ideology and electoral strategies.

In line with the initial expectations, the paper has found that the candidates converged on the nativist and authoritarian features typical of the far right, albeit with some nuances. Both opted to foreground populist appeals while adopting similar stances on the EU and making similar claims of national sovereignty by promising to enshrine the precedence of national law over European law. Nevertheless, the analysis has found more variability in other aspects, most notably regarding their socioeconomic positions and issue salience, their resort to reactionary political themes and extreme right-wing rhetoric, as well as their electoral strategies.

Overall, the findings in this paper confirm that, in competing with one another, far-right actors are attuned to opportunities to adapt their supply of far-right politics to move into spaces left vacant by the other party. Le Pen’s social populist appeal to lower and working-class voters, combined with her co-optation of feminism, may have opened a space for a far-right challenger such as Zemmour to pitch free-market liberal policies embedded in a broader reactionary agenda aimed at the more socially conservative segment of France’s bourgeois electorate.

Such a logic in the field of competition is also reflected in the two parties’ agency. This paper has found divergent strategies across the two far-right candidates. Le Pen’s search for credibility and normalization may have created a specific competitive opportunity for Zemmour on the far right. Unlike Le Pen, for whom detoxifying the RN has been a foremost objective, Zemmour opted for a “hardline” strategy during the campaign. In so doing, he cemented the extremist reputation of his party while underlining his illiberal inclinations in rhetorical and policy terms, rejecting key liberal values such as minority rights and the role of the judiciary. As suggested by previous studies (Campus 2017), Le Pen’s “peopolisation” may on the other hand have helped her distance herself further from her father.

There are, of course, limitations to these findings, most notably concerning the dynamic temporal exchange between the two candidates and how they responded to each other during the campaign. Moreover, the qualitative approach in this paper could usefully be complemented with a quantitative analysis of party manifestos and political texts to assess

more systematically the significance of the areas of similarity and diversity identified here. Such findings should also be put in comparative perspective to assess the extent to which they travel to other cases of far-right party competition, such as in the Netherlands and Italy.

Notwithstanding such limitations, the findings in this paper contribute to the broader comparative literature on the far right. In their original account of the rise of the new radical right in Europe, Kitschelt and McGann (1995, 18) insisted on the importance of reconstructing the strategies of new political entrepreneurs. The authors argued that “the success of NRR parties is contingent not only on (...) the general crowdedness of the party spectrum in different areas of the competitive space but also on the choices of the up-and-coming new rightist parties themselves.” The focus on Zemmour’s challenge to Le Pen in this paper illustrates how new far-right parties may adjust their positions, issue salience, and rhetoric to compete with their more established counterpart. Moreover, the French case illustrates how such parties may deploy their agency strategically to cultivate a “tolerable” public profile and reputation.

To conclude, the findings should be discussed in relation to voters’ concerns in the first round of the 2022 French presidential election. Although the approach in this paper is primarily descriptive, the analysis suggests that Le Pen had some success in positioning her party on the supply side to address growing voter anxiety about the rising cost of living in the 2022 elections. Economic fears dominated the campaign, as most French voters expressed concerns about the economic effects of Russia’s invasion (IPSOS 2022).

Given such economic fears, Le Pen’s social populist agenda likely resonated with at least some of those least able to cope with the economic fallout from the war and the rising cost of living (Perrineau 2022). Meanwhile, pursuing “de-demonization” may have enhanced Le Pen’s credibility. In addition, the RN’s decision to lay off the uncompromising Eurosceptic rhetoric of previous campaigns—widely seen as contributing to Le Pen’s failure in the 2017 presidential runoff (Perrineau 2017)—potentially increased her appeal to some moderate pro-EU voters. Le Pen likely had one eye on the prevailing pro-EU “polity mood” of the national electorate, which has crystallized in the wake of Brexit and the pandemic (Eurobarometer 2022). Moreover, despite her controversial links with the Kremlin, Le Pen managed to distance herself from Putin and evade accusations of sympathy for him during the campaign by focusing on the domestic economic impact of the war (Ivaldi 2023).

In contrast, the analysis of Zemmour’s supply of far-right politics suggests he was misaligned with voter demands in the 2022 elections. Zemmour focused his campaign on immigration and Islam, primarily seeking to mobilize cultural grievances, underplaying

voters' economic anxieties to some extent. Moreover, the candidate's liberal market and pro-business agenda, directed mainly at France's far-right bourgeois constituency, may have ignored the economic interests and increasing preference for redistribution among France's middle- and working-class voters (IPSOS 2022).

Finally, unlike a "de-demonizing" Le Pen, Zemmour advanced an uncompromising hardline strategy, which may have alienated moderate right-wing voters. Such differences were especially visible against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine (Ivaldi 2023). After the Russian invasion in February 2022, Zemmour asserted that NATO and the West were ultimately responsible for the conflict, lending implicit support to the Kremlin while refusing to welcome refugees from Ukraine.<sup>10</sup>

Pre-election polls suggested Le Pen enjoyed a significant edge over Zemmour on traits such as statesmanship, empathy, and embodying political change. Most importantly, negative evaluations dominated voter perceptions of Zemmour as a "threat" compared to Le Pen (Teinturier 2022). This was most perceptible among women, as revealed in the significant gender gap in Zemmour's electoral support (Jacquet-Vaillant 2022).

Despite failing to progress to the presidential runoff, Zemmour proved to be a major influence in the 2022 French presidential elections. Beyond the findings in this paper, the French case corroborates the mainstreaming of far-right politics. Mudde (2022) argues that far-right ideas have become normalized and are increasingly propagated by mainstream parties and media. Zemmour positioning himself at the political intersection between the mainstream and the far right confirms that the boundaries between the two have indeed become more porous over time, which may herald a more significant reshuffling of the party sub-system of the French right in the future.

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