

# FRENCH PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS 2022: MIGRATION IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

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## 1. FRANCE'S POLITICAL LANDSCAPE AHEAD OF THE 2022 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

As France heads to the polls on April 10 for the first round of the presidential election, the possible re-election of Emmanuel Macron is seen by many as a foregone conclusion. This is despite the successive crises faced during his presidency, from the yellow vests movement to the Covid-19 pandemic. In fact, Macron's re-election chances seem to have been boosted by yet another crisis, i.e. the ongoing war in Ukraine. Polls indicated a surge in support following the Russian invasion, from 25% prior to war's onset to 30% in mid-March, though this effect has started melting away in recent polls, which now place him at 27% in the first round, 7 points ahead of Marine Le Pen, the president of the *Rassemblement National* (former *Front National*) (Politico 2022).

This is in a scenario where the war in Ukraine – together with its various implications on issues like prices, energy security, and foreign policy – have unexpectedly come to dominate the campaign, overshadowing other issues. The initial expectation that the far right would set the tone of the campaign ended up not fully materializing. On the one hand, this has benefited Macron, whose role as Europe's diplomat in chief appear to have reinforced his 'statesman' image<sup>1</sup> (though he has also been criticized for using the Ukraine crisis to dodge the campaign). On the other hand, growing concerns with inflation and purchasing power might end up hurting the incumbent president, in light of Macron's neo-liberal credentials and Le Pen's more left-leaning stances on economic and social policy (which she has done much

to emphasize during the campaign). Though dissatisfaction with Macron has decreased as of recently, the percentage of unsatisfied respondents continues to be superior (37%) to the one who are satisfied (30%), (IPSOS/ Sopra Steria 2022a).

Whereas one year ago polls suggested a neck-and-neck first round between Macron and Le Pen, the president of the *Rassemblement National* saw her bid complicated by the appearance of a new far right competitor, Éric Zemmour, who has been polling between 10 and 14%, therefore splitting the far right vote. However, what is a hindrance in the first round might well turn out to be asset in second one, not least because Zemmour has done much to enlarge the scope of political acceptability and, in the process, helped soften the image of Marine Le Pen, who was already making an effort to look moderate.

Also on the race for a spot in the second round are Jean-Luc Mélenchon – often described as a radical left agitator and the only left-wing candidate who does not seem doomed to irrelevance – and the conservative Valérie Pécresse, the nominee of *Les Républicains* (the party of former President Nicolas Sarkozy). Both have been disputing with Zemmour the third place in voting intentions, but none is pooling close to Marine Le Pen (Le Pen appears 5% ahead of Mélenchon in the latest polls). A repetition of the 2017 second-round dual between Macron and Le Pen appears therefore to be the most likely scenario. But while Macron won by a large margin in 2017 (66% to 34%), all polls indicate that Le Pen is going to significantly close this gap, with one of the latest surveys giving her as much as 47% (IPSOS/ Sopra Steria 2022b).

<sup>1</sup> Opinion polls show that 65% of the French approve of Macron's diplomatic efforts, with very few thinking other candidate could have done better (IPSOS/ Sopra Steria 2022a).

Fig. 1: List of candidates for the 2022 Presidential Election

## Presidential Election

Candidate	Party	Ideology
Emmanuel Macron	<i>La République en Marche!</i>	Liberal
Marine Le Pen	<i>Rassemblement National</i>	Nationalism
Jean-Luc Mélenchon	<i>La France Insoumise</i>	Radical Left
Éric Zemmour	<i>Reconquête!</i>	Nationalism
Valérie Pécresse	<i>Les Républicains</i>	Conservatism
Yannick Jadot	<i>Europe Écologie Les Verts</i>	Green
Fabien Roussel	<i>Parti Communist Français</i>	Communism
Anne Hidalgo	<i>Parti Socialiste</i>	Social Democracy
Jean Lassalle	<i>Résistons!</i>	Agrarianism
Nicolas Dupont-Aignan	<i>Debout la France</i>	Nationalism
Nathalie Arthaud	<i>Lutte Ouvrière</i>	Trotskyism
Philippe Potou	<i>Nouveau Parti anticapitaliste</i>	Communism

The 2022 election is thus likely to consolidate what can be described as three major trends in French politics. The first is the **strengthening and mainstreaming of the far right**. With Marine Le Pen and Zemmour taking over an unprecedented 30% of the electorate for the far right, and with Pécresse clearly pandering to their section of the electorate too, many are right to ask how France has pivoted so much to the right. The reasons why this is so are multiple and too complex to be fully explored here. While many of them are surely not exclusive to France (e.g. a backlash against immigration, anxieties towards globalization, an increasingly visible cleavage between cities and the hinterland, growing precarity, etc.), others are more unique or, rather, more pronounced in France. This is particularly true for France's relationship to Islam. A string of deadly terrorist attacks by radical Islamists in recent years has put this relationship under increasing strain, in a country that has grown more skeptical about the compatibility between Islam and the 'universal values' of the Republic.

A second (and interrelated) trend in French politics is the **state of the disarray of the historically strong left**. Recent efforts to form a united left-wing front have failed, reflecting the deep-rooted divisions between the various forces and leaving half a dozen different candidates competing for a shrinking share of the electorate. Taken together, they are not expected to represent more than one-quarter of the electorate. Among those is the *Parti Socialiste* of former presidents François Mitterrand and François Hollande, who is polling even lower than its already humiliating result of 2017, despite having as a frontrunner the mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo. This, in turn, relates to a third major trend: the **downfall of traditional mainstream parties and the success of new 'movement-parties'** casting themselves as 'outsiders'. There is perhaps no

other country where this trend has imposed itself so abruptly, with the success of Macron's *La République En Marche* as well as of Jean-Luc Mélenchon's *La France Insoumise* (who in 2017 gathered almost 20% of the vote). The 2017 contest also marked the first time that the traditional two pillars of French politics, the *Parti Socialiste* and what is today *Les Républicains*, failed to qualify for the second round. The 2022 election will likely cement their downfall even further.

## 2. PUBLIC OPINION IN FRANCE

The transformation of the French political space also reflects an increasingly polarization, judging at least by the strength of the far right and by the good results of Mélenchon in 2017. Surveys on the ideological positioning of the French electorate seem to corroborate this. As an example, a 2017 survey showed that only 36% of the French place themselves at the center of the ideological scale (in comparison to an EU average of 62%), while 14% declared to be extreme right (against an EU average of 4%) and 6% extreme left (EU average of 3%) (de Vries and Hoffmann 2017). The exact meaning of these labels is, however, less clear today than in the past, not least because the far right has managed to capture an important share of the working class vote.

The French are well known for being disillusioned with politics and pessimistic about their country. Their levels of distrust in political institutions and the media are rampant and well above the EU-28 average. When asked about how they view their country's situation, around 63% of French respondents judge it negatively, in comparison to an EU average of 51% (average of the period 2017-2021). Asked about their confidence in the future, 42% say they are not confident, against an EU average of 28% (Standard Eurobarometer).

rometer 2017-2021). Curiously, when inquired about their personal situation and their satisfaction with the life they lead, the French are overwhelmingly satisfied, and their responses do not differ significantly from the European average.

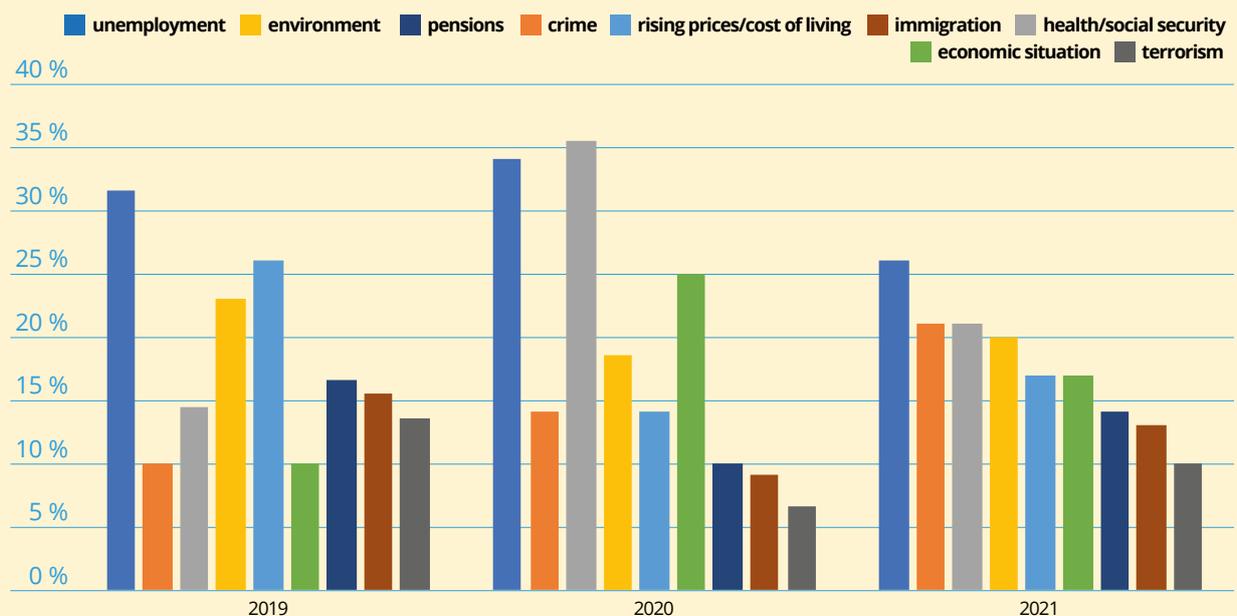
It has become a commonplace to speak of a ‘French *malaise*’, an ‘innate Gallic gloom’ or a ‘declinist zeitgeist’. Though this is far from a new phenomenon, it is nevertheless striking to observe how pervasive ‘declinism’ has become (the word ‘*déclinisme*’ itself was recently added to French dictionaries). This has been most obvious in top-selling books and intellectual debate – to the point that is no exaggeration to speak of a ‘booming decline industry’ (Donadio 2017) –, but it has also become ubiquitous in prime-talk TV shows. Among the foremost promoters of this *genre* is the presidential candidate *Éric Zemmour*, a prolific writer whose book *The French Suicide* sold more than half a million copies in 2014. A recent survey shows that ‘declinist’ sentiments are also pervasive among public opinion, with 75% of respondents agreeing that France is in decline and 69% assenting that “in France, it was better before” (Ipsos/ Sopra Steria 2021).<sup>2</sup>

There are naturally various dimensions to *decline* and various interpretations of what it actually means. When asked straightforwardly, many respondents speak primarily of *economic* and *political* decline, and only a minority mention *moral*, *cultural* and *international* decline (IFOP 2021). This is despite the fact that the

same survey shows that 24% of respondents consider ‘excessive immigration’ to be France’s main handicap (with 47% mentioning it as one of the top three handicaps). Indeed, other studies have shown that declinist and nostalgic attitudes are also associated with cultural values (Bristielle and Guerra 2021). This is unsurprising when considering that the political discourse on decline is primarily articulated in cultural and demographic terms, most often in a language that is openly hostile to immigrants and to Muslims in particular. Though this used to be the domain of far-right actors only, similar rhetoric has expanded far beyond the usual suspects.

When asked about their attitudes towards migration in general, the French tend to be invariably negative. A majority thinks there are too many migrants in France (64%) and say that they do not feel at home like they used to before (62%) (Ipsos/ Sopra Steria 2021). It is worth pointing out that, even though right-wing figures speak of a country that is being flooded by migrants, this image is not corroborated by official statistics. On the one hand, immigration flows to France have grown less in the last decade than the average of the EU and OECD countries (Auriol and Rapoport 2021). On the other hand, its stock of immigrants does not stand out as abnormally high – France’s foreign population is estimated at 5,2 million [i.e. 7,7% of the total population] and its total number of immigrants – including those who meanwhile acquired French nationality – at 7 million [i.e. 10,3% of the population] (INSEE 2022).

Fig. 2: Top concerns in France 2019-2021



Source: Standard Eurobarometer Surveys 91-95 / Own Elaboration

<sup>2</sup> Perhaps most staggering of all is the fact that a poll last year showed that a majority of the French endorsed a group of retired military officers who caused a fuss when writing an open letter (published in a right-wing magazine and later supported by Le Pen) warning of the country’s disintegration and threat of a civil war. The letter blamed anti-racism groups, Islamism, the ‘hordes’ of the banlieue, laxism and others, coming close to call for a coup d’état (Mallet 2021).

Nevertheless, France is the EU country with the second largest number of asylum applications (after Germany), registering more than 100,000 applications yearly in 2018 and 2019, a situation that has contributed to administrative backlogs, accommodation shortages, and a growing number of migrant camps (Ministère de l'Intérieur 2021).

It is also relevant to note that, despite the centrality of immigration in political discourse, immigration is not always among the issues that concern the French the most. A recent survey shows that, when asked about their three top concerns in regard to the country's situation, 53% mention purchasing power, 44% the war in Ukraine, and 26% the environment (IPSOS/ Sopra Steria 2022a). Immigration and the 'health system' are fourth on the list, both mentioned by 22%. Similarly, when looking at Eurobarometer surveys over the past three years (2019-2021), asking about the two top issues facing the country, immigration is not mentioned by more than 16% and sits well behind various other issues (Figure 2).

### 3. MIGRATION IN THE POLITICAL DEBATE

The reason why the abovementioned indicators are somewhat surprising is that, prior to the onset of the Ukraine crisis, immigration and identity issues – together with Islam and crime – seemed to overwhelmingly dominate the political debate. Various analysts concurred in this diagnosis, pointing out that “the election is being driven by an array of inflammatory culture war issues animating an emboldened far-right” (Stangler 2021), that “anyone tuning in to the early stages of the presidential campaign would think the country is pretty right-wing” (Momtaz 2021) or that the presidential race “has widened the boundaries of political acceptability in France” (Onishi 2022).

Part of this is a result of Zemmour's candidacy, a far-right ideologue who was already causing much of a media frenzy even before announcing his candidature, due to his frequent media appearances and incendiary views on immigration and Islam. His career as a TV pundit has helped him become a leading far-right figure, most notably his role as a primetime star of the news channel CNews, dubbed by critics as 'France's Fox News' (for championing rightwing causes and for the belligerent tone of debate, invariably focused on immigration, Islam, crime, and France's doom) (Aboud and Mallet 2021). Often accused of hate speech – for example, for describing unaccompanied migrant children as 'robbers', 'murderers' and 'rapists' –, Zemmour claims instead that he is the only to speak the truth (Amiel 2022). He often uses his background as a Jew from Algerian parents to shield himself from accusations of racism (Zemmour 2021). This, together with his veneer of intellectualism, has possibly helped him attract conservative voters who were previously embarrassed to vote Le Pen.

Zemmour is perhaps best known for being a fervent adherent of the 'great replacement' conspiracy theory, according to which native people – and western/Christian civilization by extension – are being deliberately replaced by nonwhite migrants, most notably Muslims. Accordingly, he has made the term a 'great replacement' a keystone of his campaign and has advocated for a 'zero immigration' policy (LCI 2022). His interventions are invariably enveloped in nationalistic and nostalgic references to a glorious and idyllic French past, which is in contrast to what he depicts as a tragic state of decadence or even near-apocalypse today. He thus presents himself as a savior on a mission of reconquest (*'Reconquête!'* is the name of his party), the only capable of saving French civilization from what he identifies as existential threats, most notably the 'colonization' of France by Muslims.

Differences between Zemmour and the leader of the *Rassemblement National*, Marine Le Pen, reside first and foremost in style. While Le Pen has visibly tried to 'detoxify' the image of her party and appear reasonable and competent (a strategy known as 'dédiabolisation'), Zemmour embraces the image of a provocateur. To be sure, Zemmour's conservative stances on socio-economic policy also distinguish him from Marine Le Pen. Perhaps more importantly, Le Pen has done a much greater effort than Zemmour to diversify her portfolio, focusing on other issues besides immigration. In line with the concerns of the French, she has put much emphasis on purchasing power issues during the campaign (somewhat breaking with her party's tradition of focusing heavily on immigration and security), which might help explain why she has been recovering in polls. Nevertheless, Zemmour and Le Pen share an ultranationalist outlook and have similar anti-immigration agendas. In their 1-minute introduction in the only TV emission that gathered all candidates, both chose to emphasize the theme: Le Pen said “I will give you back your country by protecting you from massive and anarchic immigration and from the insecurity that is turning into savagery” while Zemmour contrasts the peaceful France of the past, where immigrants wanted to assimilate, with the France of today, where “violence is everywhere and French identity is disappearing (...) we have to end immigration and reestablish order (...); this is about the destiny of our country and civilization” (TF1 2022).

In their electoral programs, Zemmour and Le Pen share a series of similar proposals on migration, including (a) an end to family reunification rights, (b) the expulsion of unemployed foreigners, (c) stricter limits on asylum rights (e.g. applications must be lodged abroad), (d) the criminalization of irregular stay, (e) the prohibition to regularize irregular migrants, (f) restrict non-contributory welfare benefits to French or EU nationals only, (g) national preference on social housing, (h) facilitate the expulsion of foreigners who commit crimes or who are signaled as a danger to public or-

der, (i) put an end to the *jus solis* (birthright) principle in the attribution of citizenship<sup>3</sup> and toughen naturalization requirements, among others (Zemmour 2022; Le Pen 2022). While it is Zemmour who has adopted the slogan ‘zero immigration’ policy, it is Le Pen who is more explicit in her electoral program about ending ‘settlement migration’ and granting priority to French nationals also on employment. Furthermore, in line with their targeting of Islam, they propose to prohibit religious symbols in public spaces. Zemmour goes further and defends a prohibition to construct ‘imposing’ minarets and mosques. His rhetoric in this regard is more radical than Marine Le Pen, as Zemmour mocks the distinction between ‘Islam’ (religion) and ‘Islamism’ (ideology), made by Le Pen, and defines Islam as a ‘totalitarian religion’ (LCI 2022).

Far-right actors like Zemmour or Marine Le Pen are not the only ones responsible for tilting the election’s agenda to such themes, though. Conservatives from *Les Républicains* have hardened their stances on security and migration too, putting these themes at the heart of their agenda. Pécresse has embraced the view of a country fundamentally threatened by migration, both from an identitarian/cultural point of view (migrants as a threat to ‘our values and ways of life’, in her words) but also in terms of the taken-for-granted impact of migration on crime (Pécresse 2021). Pécresse says it clearly: ‘there is a link between immigration, Islamism and terrorism as well as a link between immigration and insecurity’ (BFMTV 2021). She speaks repeatedly of migration flows that are out of control and that result in the creation of ‘no-France zones’ (Pécresse 2022a).<sup>4</sup> Statistics are manipulated to feed this narrative: on TV, Pécresse made the false claim that 40 million migrants had illegally entered the EU in 2021 (the number of illegal border crossings in 2021 is estimated to be under 200,000; in total, the EU has a population of 23 million non-EU citizens) (Caulcutt and Braun 2022; European Commission 2021).

Though with different shades of fatalism and radicalism, conservatives like Pécresse share with the far right an extremely pessimistic outlook on the state of France – invariably depicted as a fractured and ill-fated country, heading for disaster. Just like with the far right, migration and crime are the ones to blame. For Pécresse, the reduction of immigration is a necessary condition to “return to order” and to reestablish a “united and indivisible France” (Pécresse 2022a). Like Zemmour and Le Pen, Pécresse has pledged to hold a referendum on immigration policy (a means to avoid the intervention of the Constitutional Council). Her proposals to reduce the number of immigrants include: (a) the establishment of a quota system for entries, based on countries of origin and category; (b)

the end to automatic family reunification rights; (c) stricter limits on asylum rights (e.g. applications must be lodged abroad); (d) a prohibition to regularize irregular migrants; (e) make the entitlement to non-contributory welfare benefits conditional on a period of legal residency of five years; (f) facilitate the expulsion of foreigners who commit crimes or who are signaled as a danger to public order, among others. Furthermore, her pledges on the domain of citizenship attribution include (a) putting an end to the *jus soli* principle and (b) implementing a series of measures to better foster assimilation into French culture (Pécresse 2022b). In her own words, ‘faced with a nation that is silently cracking, I claim to want assimilation because I want to make ‘French of the heart’ and not ‘French of papers’ (Pécresse 2022a). *Les Républicains* also share with other forces a longstanding obsession with religious symbols and Islamic attire in particular. Pécresse wants to prohibit the use of the *burkini* and adopt further restrictions on the use of the headscarf in certain spaces.

Pécresse’s rhetoric and proposals underscore how much the French political scene has drifted to the right. Her party constitutes a prime example of what has been described as the ‘mainstreaming of the far right’ – understood as the ‘process by which actors, discourses and/or attitudes move from marginal positions on the political spectrum and public sphere to more central ones, shifting what is deemed to be acceptable or legitimate in political, media and public circles and contexts’ (Brown et al. 2021). To be sure, this is not a new trend. Mainstream French politicians have borrowed far right rhetoric at various points in the past, a trend that was quite evident in the case of Sarkozy (Mondon 2013). It is nevertheless striking how dominant and mainstream the far-right way of framing migration and other identity-related issues has become. A glance at French media is enough to reveal how much the debate has been taken over by calls to clamp down on migration, cut off foreigners’ access to the welfare state, or prevent public displays of Islam. It is therefore not far-fetched to speak of a new stage in the mainstreaming of far-right politics, where the borders between mainstream and far right are increasingly fuzzy (Mondon 2022).

Macron himself has been accused of shifting to the right on issues of identity, Islam, migration and security. Most controversial of all was the so-called anti-separatism law – officially named ‘Law reinforcing respect of the principles of the Republic’ –, meant to tackle religious fundamentalism. Though Islamism is not mentioned in the text of the law, its obvious target are Islamist groups said to impose ‘anti-republican views’ in communities across France. The bill touches upon a wide variety of issues. Among others, it in-

3 Though the right often speaks as if this was automatic, children born in France only become citizens at the age of 18, subject to certain residence conditions.

4 One of Pécresse’s most controversial proposals is the establishment of harsher penalties if a crime is committed in a high-crime zone.

cludes provisions to impose stricter controls on religious associations, curb online hate speech, punish doctors who provide ‘virginity certificates’, and clamp down on home-schooling. Framed by its supporters as a means to uphold France’s secular system, it has been criticized, among other things, for (a) impinging upon religious freedoms and freedom of association, (b) further stigmatizing Muslims, and (c) opening the doors to a ‘witch-hunt’ in which religious devotion is confounded with radicalism (Mallet 2020). This law was discussed amidst a mood of deep public consternation following a series of attacks, including the beheading of schoolteacher Samuel Paty in October 2020. It also coincided with the polemic move by the French government to launch an investigation into so-called ‘Islam-leftism’ in academic research.

Reforms to asylum and immigration regulations, most notably the 2018 bill for ‘controlled migration, an effective right of asylum and successful integration’ (the bill’s official name) have also not been without controversy. This is particularly true for modifications to asylum regulations, including (a) the reduction of application deadlines, (b) the extension of the duration of detention periods and (c) the impossibility to appeal against an asylum rejection for nationals of ‘safe countries’. Designed to accelerate asylum procedures, the bill has been criticized for limiting the scope of asylum cases and putting ‘children behind bars’ (France24 2018). Macron’s government has also limited access to non-urgent healthcare for asylum seekers, which is now subject to a three-month residency period. Additionally, in a bid to ‘take control of our immigration policy’, France’s Prime-Minister announced in 2019 that it would impose quotas for migrant workers, though the idea seems to have been abandoned since (Pineau and Lowe 2019). More recently, Macron’s government has taken measures to substantially reduce the number of visas granted to people from Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia as a retaliation for these countries not doing enough to take back their nationals expelled from France (Chrisafis 2021).

This is in line with Macron’s previous calls for a more efficient asylum and deportation system. When presenting his 2022 program, Macron spoke of an asylum system that is too ‘cumbersome’, defending a more efficient system and more effective deportation procedures (Macron 2022a). He has also advocated for a reinforcement of Schengen’s borders and the reinvestment in border protection forces in France. Nevertheless, it is fairly obvious that Macron has avoided spending much time discussing migration-related themes during the campaign, something that is also visible in his (short) electoral program, which devotes only a few lines to migration. It speaks of a ‘better control of migration’, proposing to create a border force and pledging to ‘continue to overhaul the organization of asylum and the right of residence’. His proposals on integration include (a) the expulsion of those who dis-

turb public order and (b) further restrictions on access to long-stay permits, conditional on professional and linguistic integration, though he also makes a point of fighting against discrimination (Macron 2022b).

Only the left has a distinctly liberal and humanist approach to migration, even though it can be criticized for being vague and ill-at-ease on the topic. Either because of a lack of capacity or lack of will, it has been incapable of imposing an alternative discourse in France’s public space, something that its critics tend to attribute to the fear of alienating the popular vote and/ or to the absence of an actual alternative project (Bréville 2017; Jacquemain 2018). Indeed, left-wing candidates do not have much time and space to migration-related issues. Candidates like Anne Hidalgo, Fabien Roussel, or Yannick Jadot do not dedicate more than half-a-page to the topic in their electoral programs. Hidalgo is particularly vague, saying for example that she ‘will fight against the irregular and deadly channels of illegal immigration’, but without specifying how (Hidalgo 2022). Mélenchon is the only to escape this trend, with a 17-page booklet to the topic. He has also attempted to give the far-right a ‘fight’ on its traditional terrain: in a televised confrontation with Zemmour he spoke of ‘*créolisation*’ as the future of humanity, a concept that suggests that the meeting of cultures creates something better (Mazoue 2022).

In terms of concrete proposals, left-wing candidates envisage a more ‘humanistic’ and ‘solidaristic’ version of the current system (only two far-left candidates from minor parties go as far as to speak of freedom of movement). In line with this, they are critical of the EU’s ‘securitarian’ and ‘militaristic’ approach towards migration and borders, denouncing the Dublin agreement and asking for a redefinition of Frontex. Roussel defends the ‘opening of legal and secure channels’ while Mélenchon proposes the creation of a European Civilian Sea Rescue Corps. Left-wing candidates are also critical of an asylum system that does not respect fundamental rights, defending (1) better reception and hosting conditions, (2) shared responsibilities within the EU, (3) the end of administrative detention for minors as well as (4) immediate access to work for asylum seekers. They also have proposals concerning the regularization of irregular migrants upon certain conditions (Mélenchon 2022; Jadot 2022; Roussel 2022). Mélenchon goes further and adds to this list other proposals such as (1) making the ten-years residence permit the standard permit, (2) facilitated access to citizenship, (3) voting rights in local and European elections, among others.

## OUTLOOK

Even if issues like inflation and foreign policy have unexpectedly dominated the campaign period, immigration remains a key issue in France’s political debate. It took a preponderant (some would say dispropor-

tionate) place during the fall of 2021, when Zemmour was rising in polls and when the main contenders in *Les Républicains'* presidential primary clearly 'danced to Zemmour's immigration tune' (Hall 2021). While Macron has been largely successful in avoiding the topic – in part because he has refused to take part in TV debates with rivals before the first round –, he will surely be confronted with it ahead of the second round if, as polls indicate, he is to face Marine Le Pen. While right-wing candidates are convinced that Macron's migration policy is one of his feeblest points – reproaching him, among other things, for being too weak and incapable of reducing flows –, Macron will likely con-

tinue to walk on a tightrope, torn between 'firmness' and 'humanity', to use his own words (Pascual 2022). Though he has hardened his stances throughout his presidency, Macron still appears as a staunch liberal next to the far-right. That he is the only one standing between non-illiberal positions and a right that has grown more reactionary with Zemmour – making Le Pen look moderate in the process – is illustrative of the current state of affairs in France, where the center of gravity seems to keep drifting towards the illiberal right. Though no opinion poll gives a victory to Le Pen in the second round, she seems set to break new records for the far right in France yet again.

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## PROFILE

The Mercator Forum for Migration and Democracy (MIDEM) examines about the impact of migration on democratic institutions, policies and cultures and looks into political decision making processes in the field of migration policies - in individual countries and in a comparative view of Europe. A spotlight is put on the relation between migration and populism.

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