

France Insoumise versus the Front National - The Differences Between Far-Right and Left-wing Populism

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The electoral cycle of 2017 is a turning point in France's political landscape; the presidential and legislative elections were a major rupture which upset the political field. Historically, French politics were structured by a dividing line opposing two poles along the left/right cleavage, even though the composition of the two poles evolved over time, thus reflecting the socio-economic transformations of French society and the changes in the balance of political forces. Since the 1980s, despite some ups and downs, the social democrats were the leading force in the left camp, while the liberal- conservatives dominated the right-wing pole. The first round of the 2017 presidential election ended this structure of the political arena once and for all: the social democrats arrived in fifth position while the conservatives were, for the first time since the establishment of the Fifth Republic, eliminated in the first round. A centrist neoliberal candidate, supported by a party created a year before the election, arrived in first position while, among the left and the right, the two main parties were outpaced by their historical challengers. Indeed, for the first time since the 1970s, the radical left, incarnated by Mélenchon, surpassed the Parti Socialiste (PS) while the far right's candidate, Marine Le Pen, defeated François Fillon and made it to the second round.

The second round of the election and the legislative elections sanctioned Macron's victory through a triumphal result in the second round (Macron garnered more than 66% of the votes, a score unequalled since Chirac's 2002 victory - 82% - over Jean-Marie Le Pen) and the election of an absolute majority in the Assemblée Nationale. 350 candidates supporting Macron's policy were elected as members of Parliament, among which 313 are members of Macron's La République En Marche party, the rest belonging to allied groups which are part of the governing coalition. The legislative election also confirmed the end of the bipolarisation and fragmentation of the political field as the PS received less votes than Mélenchon's movement, France Insoumise.

In what follows we will use a rigorous and thorough analysis of Mélenchon's and Le Pen's electorates to test the hypothesis of an electoral and ideological porosity between right-wing and left-wing populism. With a comparative perspective, in light of the empirical material provided by the polls and surveys, we will discuss the existence or otherwise of an ideological and social border distinguishing right and left wing populism.

Polarisation of the working classes: a division between the radical left and the far right

A central aspect of the amalgam between right-wing and left-wing populism is the similarity of their social and electoral strategy: the antagonistic interpretation of society and the anti-system discourse are aimed at bringing together the 'real' people against the elites, depicted as the ruling classes (or

the 1%) by left-wing populism, and as the cosmopolitan establishment by right-wing populism. The people, as a political subject, is seen as composed of the social groups that have been victimised by the policies implemented by the elites and more generally the social rejects of the existing socio-economic and political order. Traditionally, these social groups are the lower social classes (employees, workers), the youth, those outside the labour market, and the losers of globalisation in all its dimensions.

The distribution of the votes of those social groups making up the working class unquestionably tilted in favour of the two populist candidates. According to the survey conducted by Ifop, [1] 54% of the employees who voted in the first round voted for one of these two candidates (24% voted for Mélenchon and 30% for Le Pen), while 64% of workers who voted chose either the Mélenchon or the Le Pen ticket (25% voted for Mélenchon and 39% for Le Pen). Among all votes cast, the sum of Le Pen's and Mélenchon's results only reaches 40.88%. Le Pen scored first among workers' and employees' and Mélenchon second while in the overall election Le Pen arrived second and Mélenchon fourth. The distribution of the votes of the intermediate professions (lower middle class) shows an underrepresentation of Le Pen who got only 17% while Mélenchon reached 26% and had first place in this category.

The vote distribution according to voters' income levels confirms the behaviour of the socio-professional categories: the lower the incomes, the higher the vote for Le Pen or Mélenchon. This trend is the opposite of Fillon's and Macron's, as their vote percentage rises as income rises. According to the IPSOS survey, [2] the sum of the votes for Mélenchon and Le Pen represents more than 50% of people earning less than €2000 a month. Among voters earning less than €1250, Mélenchon got 25% and Le Pen 32%, while among the voters earning from €1250 to €2000 Mélenchon and Le Pen reached respectively 23% and 29%. In these two categories Le Pen was first and Mélenchon second, sharply outdistancing Macron and Fillon. Among voters earning more than €2000, both Mélenchon and Le Pen are underrepresented in relation to their results among the whole voting population. In the lower social categories making up the working class, the observations confirm a strong polarisation of the electorate between right-wing and left-wing populism, especially among workers and employees.

The relation to globalisation is a key element in the identification of anti-system tendencies, and this variable also confirms the similarity between Mélenchon's and Le Pen's votes. 56% [3] of Mélenchon's voters define themselves as losers and victims of globalisation, and 68% of Le Pen's voters use the same self-definition; only 42% of the whole voting population defines itself this way, showing clear overrepresentation in the case of Mélenchon and Le Pen. The distribution of the voters self-definition as losers and victims of globalisation goes in the same direction, as 25% of them voted for Mélenchon and 34% voted for Le Pen. More than half of the people who subjectively define themselves as losers and victims of globalisation voted for a populist candidate, while among those who consider themselves winners, the sum of the populist candidates' scores reached only 24%. In addition, according to Viavoice, [4] the combined result for Le Pen and Mélenchon among people who see globalisation as a threat is 54% (23% for Mélenchon, 31% for Le Pen).

The distribution of votes according to educational level also validates the idea of an overrepresentation of Mélenchon and Le Pen among those with a very low level of qualification. 20% of voters with an education below A level voted for Mélenchon and 31% of them voted for Le Pen; when it comes to those with only an A level 22% voted for Mélenchon and 25% for Le Pen. Among the voters with higher-education degrees, the votes for Mélenchon and Le Pen are underrepresented in relation to the whole voting population that cast a ballot. Finally, the anti-system vote is often considered more important among the youth and as particularly low among senior citizens, since young people would be more inclined to contest the socio-economic order while older persons prefer stability and therefore vote to conserve the existing order. Mélenchon and Le Pen are slightly

overrepresented among voters under 35 (26% for Mélenchon, 23% for Le Pen [5]) but distinctly underrepresented among the over-65 voters (12% for Mélenchon and 14% for Le Pen). Both candidates attract young people more than Macron does and most importantly more than Fillon who reaches 39% of the over-65 voters. The crossing of the gender and age variables also brings out similarities between Le Pen's and Mélenchon's constituencies: among those under 35, the scores are higher for women than men whereas it is the opposite for people from 35 to 64 (beyond 65 there is no significant change). [6]

The high scores of Mélenchon and Le Pen among the lower social classes, among people with low incomes and low educational levels, seem to validate the mainstream analysis of populism. The indicators commonly used to identify the social groups tempted by populist and anti-system thinking show an overrepresentation of the votes for Mélenchon and Le Pen.

Two populisms, two different social bases

However, these indicators mask the heterogeneity of fragmented social groups, and the partial conclusion built upon them tends to reify the working classes by not considering the complexity of the social structure. In a rigorous analysis, [7] the political scientist Luc Rouban crossed the diploma and wealth variables in order to gain an in-depth view of the composition of the lower social classes who voted for Mélenchon and Le Pen. Mélenchon's and Le Pen's electorates share the same level of wealth (measured as the addition of property and assets), and this level is much lower than that of Fillon's and Macron's voters and still lower than Hamon's. Nevertheless, with a similar level of wealth, Mélenchon's voters are much more qualified (almost as qualified as Fillon's electorate) while Hamon's and Macron's electorates are the most qualified. Voters with a level of qualification below A level represent 45.5% of Le Pen's electorate and only 30.7% of Mélenchon's, while voters with a higher-education degree represent 39% of Mélenchon's electorate and 24.9% of Le Pen's. [8] Rouban also crossed the income variable with the diploma variable and revealed that, at a similar level of education, it is Mélenchon's constituency that has the lowest income. His hypothesis is a social downgrading of Mélenchon's electorate relative to its diplomas and qualifications, thus explaining the vote for Mélenchon as a mobilisation against this relative frustration. [9] The vote for Le Pen would then be the consequence of an absolute frustration generated by the combination of low income and the absence of any qualification.

If this hypothesis seems relevant, it needs to be combined with the analysis of the impact of higher levels of education on political preferences in order to explain the different electoral options of the two kinds of frustration. In other words, academic formation results in an increase in political and cultural capitals and generally favours a more left-oriented vote and an overrepresentation of the radical left, thus explaining the difference in value systems and the vote for one or the other populism. [10]

In addition, we can observe significant differences between Le Pen's and Mélenchon's electorate in terms of geographical location, which is not a neutral parameter in a country structured by socio-economic spatial organisation. The territorial divide of France's electoral map indeed indicates a series of inequalities, and the lower social classes mainly live in the suburbs of big conurbations, in the suburban areas, or in rural areas. The more densely populated the place of residence, the lower Le Pen's score: she received 23% in rural areas, 25% in cities below 20,000 inhabitants, 24% in cities from 20,000 to 100,000, 21% in cities over 100,000 inhabitants, and only 14% in the urban area of Paris. [11] Significantly, a large part of the working classes lives in the suburbs of Paris in culturally mixed neighbourhoods with a high proportion of immigrants or descendants of immigrants, and Le Pen underperformed in these areas and therefore in these segments of the working classes. [12] The FN's working-class electorate is composed of workers and employees living mostly in suburban areas or small regional cities and in rural areas. On the other hand,

Mélenchon's vote is much more equally distributed according to the voter's place of residence (18% in rural areas, 19% in the Parisian urban area, and 21% in the other cities). Lastly, the FN's vote is slightly underrepresented among the unemployed (20% [13].), while Mélenchon's is clearly overrepresented with 32%. (The same can be said of Hamon who got 9% among the unemployed - as against his 6% total vote percentage - while Fillon is strongly underrepresented with 10% - as against his 19% total). These figures invalidate the presumed link between unemployment and the rise of the FN [14] and suggest a politicisation of the unemployed in line with the left-right cleavage mainly benefitting the radical left.

While the overrepresentation of Le Pen and Mélenchon among the lower social classes is masking differences among the working-class constituencies, the overall composition of the two electorates shows strong divergences between right-wing and left-wing populism. First of all, the lower social classes do not have the same weight in the two constituencies: workers and employees represent 33.1% of Mélenchon's voters (50% of working-age voters) while they make up 42.5% of Le Pen's (67.2%). [15] Among Mélenchon's working-age voters, 21.6% are workers and 28.4% are employees but 13.9% are in executive positions and in intellectual professions and 29.8% belong to the intermediate professions. Among Le Pen's only 8.1% are in executive positions and in intellectual professions and 18.4% are from intermediate professions, but 35% are employees and 32.3% are workers (**see Graph 2 on the right**).

Mélenchon's electorate is much more equally distributed than Le Pen's, and this equal distribution constitutes a major difference between the two. Le Pen's electorate distribution is the inverse of Macron's in terms of almost every indicator: Macron's results increase according to the size of the cities whereas Le Pen's decline; the higher the incomes are the higher Macron's results are and the lower Le Pen's are. In terms of socio-professional categories, Macron is overrepresented in the upper classes and also among people with a high level of education. This inverse trend between Macron and Le Pen is also valid for Fillon whose trends are identical to Macron's in these respects. On the other hand, when compared to the whole electorate, Mélenchon's results appear very evenly distributed among these indicators. This implies a major difference between the two populisms, which is the weight of the lower social classes in their result: for Mélenchon they represent an important share of his votes whereas the lower social classes are the vital and indispensable component of Le Pen's vote, the segment allowing her to make it to the second round.

The weight of the working classes in the total amount of votes garnered by Marine Le Pen (more than 40%) also explains the importance, for academics (sociologists, political scientists) but also for left and radical left activists, of identifying and analysing the reasons and motives behind the vote of these segments of the lower social classes for the FN. [16] This difference of structure in the electorates of the two populisms clearly indicates a difference between right-wing and left-wing populism: they do not attract the same segments of the anti-system and populist-friendly voters, and, moreover, their social base is different in terms of equilibrium among social groups in addition to divergent geographical location.

Strong divergences in politicisation and political identity

The past electoral behaviour of Le Pen's and Mélenchon's voters indicate the strong loyalty of their electorates. 85% of people who voted for Le Pen in 2012 voted for her again in 2017, which is the highest rate for all the candidates of the 2017 presidential election. 81% of Mélenchon's 2012 voters voted for him again in 2017. [17] However, along with this similarity, the two electorates are radically different, and the boundary separating them is watertight. The transfer of voters between Le Pen and Mélenchon from the 2012 election to the 2017 election is very low: only 2% of Mélenchon's 2017 voters had voted Le Pen in 2012, and conversely only 2% of Le Pen's 2017 voters had cast a ballot for Mélenchon in 2012 (**see Graph 3 on the right**). [18] Le Pen expanded her

electorate with former right-wing voters (15% of her 2017 voters voted Sarkozy in 2012) and with people who had abstained or voted for a small candidate in 2012 or had since acquired the right to vote (13% of her 2017 voters). On the other hand, among 100 people who voted for Mélenchon in 2017, 34% had voted for him in 2012, 32% for Hollande, and 25% had either abstained or voted for a small candidate or had not been old enough to vote. The share of voters coming from the opposite camp is very small for both candidates, indicating the inexistence of electoral porosity between them.

The political self-positioning of the voters confirms this trend. According to ViaVoice, 70% of Mélenchon's voters position themselves as left-wing, 19% as neither left nor right, and only 3% as right-wing, while 63% of Le Pen's voters claim to be right-wing, 24% neither left nor right and only 2% position themselves as left-wing. The political-party sympathies expressed by the voters also confirm the lack of porosity: 68.4% [19] of Le Pen voters consider themselves close to the FN, 11.2% close to the right and only 5.2% as close to the left (14.1% of voters declaring no political party sympathy). On the other hand, 76.7% of Mélenchon's voters claim to be sympathetic to the left, 3.5% close to the right and only 1.3% as being close to the FN (16.4% of voters declaring no political-party sympathy). 84% [20] of voters considering themselves close to the Front de Gauche voted Mélenchon while 0% voted for Le Pen; 62% of sympathisers of the far left voted Mélenchon along with 38% of sympathisers of the Greens. Among the voters declaring sympathy for the FN, 87% voted Le Pen and only 2% voted Mélenchon.

These statistics refute the thesis that the Front National expanded by attracting voters from the left who were disappointed by the left's abandonment of traditional principles and its inability to concretely improve living standards. The existence of a *gaucho-lepénisme*, [21] the idea that left-wing voters moved electorally and ideologically to the far right, [22] has no empirical basis seeing as the surveys agree in confirming the idea of an electoral realignment of the right-wing electorate among the working classes, which explains the rise of the Front National. [23] Indeed, the decrease of the classical right's vote share among workers and employees coincided with the expansion of the FN in the lower social categories. [24] Le Pen expanded her electorate by attracting right-wing or non-politicised, not left or radical left, voters. [25] On the other hand, Mélenchon benefitted from the support of former PS voters and the rallying of voters from various leftist tendencies (social democrats, greens, and far left) and succeeded in attracting new voters or former abstainers.

The nonexistence of ideological porosity

The issues and proposals seen by voters as more or less important in determining their vote point to very divergent concerns between the two constituencies. The three most determining elements for Mélenchon's electorate are an improvement in wages and purchasing power, the struggle against unemployment, and the struggle against precariousness (healthcare comes fourth and the defence of public services fifth [26]). Environmental protection and education are also central issues for Mélenchon's voters (both considered crucial by 63%). For Le Pen's voters, the three main determinants are by far the struggle against terrorism (93% see it as decisive), the struggle against illegal immigration (92%), and the struggle against delinquency and insecurity (85%) (**see Graph 4 on the right**). For both candidates there are unifying determinants for their electorates in each case which are the expression of very ideologised principles: xenophobia and Islamophobia for the FN (which come from the classic, traditional far-right background), and social justice and redistribution for Mélenchon.

Although a few political commentators and scholars may argue that left-wing and right-wing populisms share similar approaches to politics because some of their strategic and discursive tools are similar, the substance of their political approaches is nevertheless radically different. An in-depth political survey on the first-round electorates, undertaken by IPSOS Sopra-Steria for the

Fondation Jean Jaurès, [27] reveals the extent of the ideological cleavage that separates Mélenchon's and Le Pen's electorate, identifying four main elements.

The first is the perception of the past and the future: most of Le Pen's voters are convinced that France is in decline while Mélenchon's voters strongly disapprove such a statement; Le Pen's voters are very attached to traditions and past values, unlike radical voters.

Second, they are distinguished by their relationship to the 'other' and more specifically to immigration and Islam. 95% of Le Pen's electors think that 'there are too many foreigners in France' to only 30% of France Insoumise sympathisers; 58% of France Insoumise sympathisers feel that 'Islam is compatible with the values of French society' while only 9% of the FN sympathisers agree. This Islamophobia of the FN, and the contrast with the religious tolerance of radical left voters, explains the distribution of votes along lines of religious beliefs. 37% [28] of voters declaring themselves to be Muslims voted for Mélenchon who scored first among Muslim voters (only 5% of them voted for Le Pen). The overrepresentation of Mélenchon and the underrepresentation of Le Pen in this category illustrate the strong differences between both electorates in terms of values (tolerance and community life).

Third, in terms of socio-economic issues, Mélenchon's voters strongly disagree with the idea that 'unemployed people could easily find a job if they wanted to' and with the characterisation of dependent people aiming to live on welfare at the expense of working people. In addition, the two electorates are also distinguished in their perception of political and social principles of societal organisation. 98% of FN voters think that 'a true leader is needed in order to restore order'; Mélenchon's constituency does not agree with this perception that authoritarian rule is necessary to govern society. Similarly, Mélenchon's voters do not accept the possibility of a political regime other than democracy, while 55% of FN voters think that a system different from democracy could function just as well.

Last but not least, the two electorates are sharply differentiated by their perception of the relationship between regional and global issues; 88% of Mélenchon's voters defend the idea of France remaining within the Eurozone (to 44% of Le Pen's voters), 59% see the European Union as a 'positive thing' (to only 17% of Le Pen's voters), and 59% are in favour of France increasing its opening to the world. These results confirm the radical and substantial divergence of the values, opinions, and convictions of the electorates of right-wing and left-wing populism and the persistence of strong ideological and cultural boundaries between the radical left and the far right, despite the abandonment by both Le Pen and Mélenchon of the right-left cleavage as a relevant analytical grid.

Conclusion

The in-depth analysis of the composition of Mélenchon's and Le Pen's electorates based on empirical data absolutely refutes the hypothesis of an electoral or ideological porosity between France's right-wing and left-wing populisms. Despite some similarities (high results among the working classes and low-income and less educated voters), the two candidates attracted different segments of the anti-systemic voters in terms of values, electoral background, and socio-economic living conditions. The overrepresentation of the lower social categories, of youth, of globalisation's losers in both right-wing and left-wing populism is a sign that these social groups are moving away from the traditional ruling parties and opting for more radical platforms and candidates. However, this polarisation is occurring within a political field divided by cultural and ideological cleavages, and therefore political and electoral mobility is shaped by these structural socio-political determinants. A focus on the first round of the presidential election is very decisive for this conclusion as the first round is characterised by the lowest levels of abstention and the longest lasting and best followed political campaigns, in addition to the representation of every major political tendency by the various

candidates. However, the results of the second round also confirm some aspects of our analysis: the electoral transfers in the second round show the inaccuracy of the idea of an electoral porosity between right-wing and left-wing populism: only 7% of Mélenchon's voters voted Le Pen in the second round while 52% voted for Macron (the remainder abstained). By comparison, 20% of Fillon's voters chose Le Pen in the second round; the electoral transfer (in terms of share of the first-round voters) from Mélenchon to Le Pen is among the smallest.

The progress of both Le Pen and Mélenchon from 2012 to 2017 is the result of a political strategy that can be defined as populist in Laclau's sense. The narratives used by the two candidates to create a chain of equivalences and combine divergent social demands were successful, and the composition of their electorates is surprisingly different, disconcerting the traditional political commentators or editorial writers who mobilised the simplistic explanation of two converging populisms.

The values, electoral behaviour, opinions, and socio-economic status of the two electorates diverge, even though they share similar superficial anti-system characteristics. Both sides expanded their electorate through the attraction of former voters and non-voters but also through the attraction of disillusioned voters from the right and the left: Mélenchon succeeded in gathering large segments of the PS and Green electorate (and in capturing the far-left vote) while Le Pen attracted former Sarkozy voters. The absence of ideological convergences and the non-existence (at least in the 2017 electoral cycle) of electoral transfers from left-wing populism to right-wing populism should lead the radical left as a whole to reconsider its attempts to attract the core of the Front National's electorate. The watertightness of the ideological and electoral frontier between the two blocs makes electoral transfers very hypothetical and uncertain, whereas their political cost will certainly be very great. With regard to the strong anchoring of Mélenchon's electorate in left and even radical left values, beliefs, and identities, it seems obvious that such a constituency will not tolerate any downward sliding or ambiguities that try to attract FN voters by making concessions to their rhetoric. In the confrontation with the far right, what is really at stake is the ability of left-wing populism to mobilise and organise the electoral deployment of its own social and electoral base on a larger scale than that of the FN or Macron.

[Le Lann & de Cabanes: Graphs 1-4](#)

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Footnotes

- [1] Ifop and Fiducial, 'Le profil des électeurs et les clefs du premier tour de l'élection présidentielle', 23 April 2017.
- [2] IPSOS and Sopria, '1er tour de la présidentielle de 2017: Comprendre le vote des Français', 19-22 April 2017.
- [3] Ifop, 'Le profil'.
- [4] Viavoice, 'Après le premier tour', 26 April 2017.
- [5] Ifop, 'Le profil'.
- [6] Ifop, 'Le profil'.
- [7] Luc Rouban, '[Le peuple qui vote Mélenchon est-il le peuple?](#)', *The Conversation*, October 2017.
- [8] Ifop, 'Le profil'.
- [9] See also Ted Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*, Princeton: University Press, 1970.
- [10] Luis Ramiro, 'Support for Radical Left Parties in Western Europe: Social Background, Ideology and Political Orientation', *European Political Science Review*, 8:1 (2016).
- [11] IPSOS and Sopria.
- [12] Jérôme Fourquet, *Karim vote à gauche et son voisin vote FN. Sociologie électorale de l'« immigration »*, éditions de l'Aube/Fondation Jean-Jaurès, January 2016.
- [13] Ifop, 'Le profil'
- [14] Jean-François Léger, 'Le chômage, terreau du vote Front national?', *Population & Avenir*, no. 723 (May-June 2015).
- [15] Ifop, 'Le profil'.
- [16] Gérard Mauger, Willy Pelletier, *Les classes populaires et le FN*, Vulaines sur Seine: Editions du Croquant, 2017; Nonna Mayer, *Ces français qui votent Le Pen*, Paris: Flammarion, 2002.
- [17] Viavoice, 'Après le premier tour'.
- [18] Harris Interactive, 'Le 1er tour de l'élection présidentielle 2017. Composition des différents électors, motivations et éléments de structuration du vote', 23 April 2017.
- [19] Ifop, 'Le profil'.
- [20] IPSOS and Sopria.

[21] This concept was developed by the political scientist Pascal Perrineau in order to describe the attraction, by the FN since the 1980s, of the votes of workers who previously voted for the left. The shift is said to be the consequence of the economic crisis and the neoliberal turn of the policies implemented by the PS.

[22] Pascal Perrineau, *La France au Front: essai sur l'avenir du Front National*, Paris: Fayard, 2014; Pascal Perrineau, 'La dynamique du vote Le Pen: le poids du "gaucholepénisme"', in Pascal Perrineau and Colette Ysmal Colette (eds), *Le Vote de crise: l'élection présidentielle de 1995*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 1995.

[23] Florent Gougou, 'Les ouvriers et le vote Front National. Les logiques d'un réalignement électoral', in Sylvain Crépon, Alexandre Dézé, and Nonna Mayer (eds), *Les Faux- Semblants du Front National. Sociologie d'un parti politique*, Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2015.

[24] Florent Gougou and Nonna Mayer, 'The class basis of extreme right voting in France: generational replacement and the rise of new cultural issues', in Jens Rydgren (ed.), *Class Politics and the Radical Right*, London & New York: Routledge, 2012.

[25] Joachim Bischoff, Elisabeth Gauthier, Bernhard Müller, *Droites Populistes en Europe: les raisons d'un succès*, Vulaines-sur-Seine: Editions du Croquant, 2015.

[26] Ifop, 'Le profil'.

[27] Gilles Finchelstein, *Teinturier Brice, Entre France Insoumise et Front National, de solides divergences*, Fondation Jean-Jaurès, July 2017.

[28] Ifop, 'Le vote des électors confessionnels au 1er tour de l'élection présidentielle', 23 April 2017.