

Presidential elections (France): Marine Le Pen's Populist Image Is an Iron Fist in a Velvet Glove

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For years, Marine Le Pen has sought to break out of the far-right ghetto by pursuing a “populist popular front” beyond Left and Right. Today, her chosen reactionary themes have become mainstream — and she stands closer than ever to winning the presidency.

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At first glance, France's presidential election looks rather like a rerun of the 2017 contest. Most polls suggest that incumbent Emmanuel Macron will top Sunday's first-round vote before facing, and defeating, Marine Le Pen in the April 24 runoff. In other words, 2022 will be the return leg of the previous electoral matchup between liberalism and nationalism. But beyond this superficial resemblance, the political landscape has profoundly changed since 2017.

Chief among these structural differences is that, as the mainstream has steadily shifted to the Right, the far right is stronger than ever. Before the first round, Le Pen is polling at similar levels to 2017, at around 20 percent. Yet, she fares much better in second-round polls. While she only took 33 percent in the 2017 runoff against Macron, her predicted score if she makes it this time is roughly 45 percent.

Furthermore, the major event that shook the 2022 campaign was the meteoric rise of another far-right candidate: Éric Zemmour. While Le Pen has managed to maintain a lead over him, he initially threatened her chances, bringing her down from her hitherto comfortable place alongside Macron and far above all other candidates. Indeed, beyond its current divisions — the latest iteration of an older divide between traditionalists and modernists, which I will explore in this and following articles — the far right as a whole is showing remarkable electoral strength. Tellingly — and somewhat chillingly — regardless of their relative strength throughout the campaign, the combined voting intentions for Le Pen and Zemmour have remained steadily over 30 percent.

Looking Back at 2017

To better understand this situation, let's turn back to the political landscape in 2017, a tight election and unique moment in French political history. The traditional “*alternance*,” or exchange of power,

between center-right and center-left, which had shaped France for the last three decades, seemed like a relic of the past, threatened by a rising tide of new political challengers.

On the Left, the discredit of the Socialist Party (PS) after François Hollande's presidency opened an unlikely path for Jean-Luc Mélenchon and the radical-left France Insoumise (LFI). On the Right, the conservative Les Républicains (LR) chose in François Fillon a hardliner who was weakened by a [political-financial scandal](#) involving his wife. Benefitting from the defeat and discredit of centrist candidates within these mainstream parties, former finance minister Macron filled the vacuum in the center by building a personalistic movement, *En Marche*, which promised renewal through a liberal politics "[beyond left and right](#)."

Meanwhile, the Front National (FN) was progressively losing its pariah status. Since its founder Jean-Marie Le Pen, infamous for his [politically incorrect and overtly antisemitic quips](#), left his place as party leader to his daughter in 2011, its communication had changed drastically. Indeed, Marine Le Pen placed the strategy of "[dédiabolisation](#)" (de-demonization) at the heart of her leadership. To normalize the party's image, she sought to distance the FN from its association with racism and antisemitism.

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In practice, this meant adapting its discourse to make it more acceptable [without fundamentally changing its program](#), and also excluding problematic party members who did not follow that new line. Burdened by her father's embarrassing legacy in her first 2012 campaign, three years later she [evicted him from the party he created](#) after yet another revisionist declaration on the Holocaust. While Le Pen père and his most faithful supporters cried betrayal, this exclusion was framed by the new FN leader as the ultimate proof of her commitment to "[dédiabolisation](#)."

Simultaneously, Le Pen emphasized the personalistic dimension of her leadership, distancing herself even from her father's divisive surname. Instead, she played along to the sexist trope of female politicians being defined by their first name, encouraging references to herself as simply "[Marine](#)." This was most visible in her 2012 bid to coalesce smaller far-right candidates around her "Rassemblement Bleu Marine" (Navy-Blue Rally) playing on the polysemy of her first name, which also stands for "navy" blue. While this was [criticized internally](#) as a sign that the FN was becoming a dynastic party, Le Pen emphasized her femininity and ordinariness, to humanize her and soften her image.

Le Pen, Populism, and Nationalism

Inspired by Donald Trump's unexpected breakthrough in 2016 and influenced by her then right-hand man, Florian Philippot, Le Pen fully embraced the [populist style](#) in her 2017 campaign. To be clear, here populism is not understood as inherently reactionary or grounded in any specific ideological content, like the [nationalism with which it is too often conflated](#). Rather, following the work of Ernesto Laclau and Benjamin Moffitt, I define populism as a political style — a way of articulating of one's discourse.

The populist repertoire is built around three clusters: (1) [framing politics as a conflict between “the people” and a specific elite](#) — although the exact content of what is meant by either depends on the ideological content that it shapes; (2) [transgressing political norms](#) to make oneself and one’s message appear more authentic and closer to “the people”; (3) [performing a crisis narrative](#) which requires urgent change. Stripped to its core, the populist style articulates a society in crisis where an elite is failing in its duty to represent and act on behalf of its people, and where radical change is embodied through the salutary intervention of a transgressive leader.

But the ideological content of Le Pen’s campaign had already changed compared to [her 2012 bid](#). Le Pen continued a trend that her father had begun in his [2007 campaign](#) by adding social edge to her “economic patriotism”; she notably promised tax rebates to the smallest companies as well as various benefits aimed at the poorest. Although it remained grounded in an ethnocentric nationalism that *de facto* excluded immigrants, Le Pen defended a form of welfare chauvinism aimed at convincing blue-collar workers.

On social issues, she also toned down the most conservative side of her program. She adopted a form of ambiguity on issues like the death penalty, abortion, and same-sex marriage by not taking an overt stance on them, which contrasted with her explicitly reactionary position in 2012. The flagship measure of abandoning the euro, which occupied a whole chapter in her 2012 program, was kept but rephrased less radically as a return to “monetary sovereignty.”

However, what most notably distinguished Le Pen’s 2017 bid from her previous campaign was its populist framing, with her nationalist agenda entirely recast as a struggle by the people against an unresponsive elite. From her campaign’s motto, “In the name of the people,” to the antiestablishment rhetoric in her [campaign advertisement](#), Le Pen’s campaign heavily played on this antagonism to develop the image of a relatable outsider that would defend the people by changing the status quo.

This was also accompanied by a shift away from her party and its tricolor flame logo. Unlike in previous campaigns, Le Pen chose not to use any of the symbols and imagery associated with her party. Instead, Le Pen made the transgressive choice of embracing a blue rose, itself representing the claim to go “[beyond left and right](#)”: blue is traditionally associated with conservatives in France, whereas the rose has historically been the emblem of the Socialist Party.

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Understood in this light, populism provided a way for her to cover her [exclusionary nationalism](#) with a new coat of paint. Fighting to close the French nation from foreign immigrants and influences sounds backward-looking, and implies an exclusionary vision of the nation. But framing this as a matter of defending the French people against a political and intellectual elite that benefits from immigration and enables terrorism made it seem much more legitimate to far more people.

This new line furthermore provided a way for the FN to reach beyond the traditional core of far-right supporters by appealing to the large pool of habitual nonvoters disappointed by the traditional parties. In a nutshell, the populist style — which she was far from the only candidate to mobilize in

that election — allowed her to modernize her ideology and close off room for accusations of xenophobia or racism — a natural fit with her “de-demonization” strategy.

Modernists and Traditionalists

So, what has changed for Le Pen and the far right more widely in 2022? The first part of this answer lies in a backlash against her personalistic and populist line from within her own political camp.

Although Le Pen’s 2017 results were a record performance for her party, the end of her campaign was tainted by [her catastrophic performance](#) in the debate with Macron during the runoff. Although Le Pen had developed a reputation as a combative debater, in this case she reached a new level of aggression. Furthermore, since Macron extended the first part of the debate on economic issues as long as he could, Le Pen ended up looking unprepared and out of her depth. She did partly recover in the latter half of the debate on security, but never regained the upper ground — with commentators widely framing her abundant use of irony as flippant. In a rare candid admission of error, Le Pen later acknowledged that this was a “[failed rendez-vous with the French people](#),”

Inside her own camp, Le Pen’s performance was seen as the embodiment of two things. Firstly, on a personal level, it was framed as a demonstration that Le Pen lacked the professionalism and stature to be a credible contender for the presidency — a criticism especially damning as it was even leveled by her [own father](#). Secondly, her crushing defeat by Macron highlighted the limits of a strategy reliant on populism and “de-demonization.” Some in the party insisted that Le Pen had diluted her message so much that her campaign lacked ideological spine and lost part of its radical appeal — or even [accused her](#) of having become too “leftist” because of her choice to include social measures and incorporate criticism of *laissez-faire* into her anti-elite rhetoric. For them, courting voters disappointed by left-wing politicians was a fool’s errand which could never lead to victory.

Proponents of this line argued that the only path to success was to explode the “republican dam” between mainstream conservatives and the far right. In other words, rather than the populist promise to go beyond Left and Right, the FN should pursue “the union of the right wings” by reconciling the mainstream-conservative LR with the FN to create a united family of “patriots.” During the 2017 campaign, Le Pen described such an aspiration as a “[fantasy](#),” but her disappointing second-round performance merely fueled her critics’ argument.

This conflict between a traditionalist wing calling for a return to the ideological fundamentals of the Right and a modernist wing seeking mainstream acceptance is nearly as old as the far right in France. In one of the major historic disputes within the FN, Bruno Mégret — a key figure responsible for modernizing the party’s ideological doctrine — openly clashed with Jean-Marie Le Pen in the late 1990s, claiming that his transgressive posturing would never lead to victory. Le Pen *père*’s refusal to change and his exclusion of Mégret led many high-ranking members to leave the FN with him, including Marine Le Pen’s eldest sister, [Marie-Caroline Le Pen](#).

Indeed, the Tours congress in 2011, which determined who would succeed the founding leader, saw a re-emergence of this divide. Although Marine Le Pen garnered more than two-thirds of the votes with her promise to “modernize” the party, she confronted her father’s heir apparent, [Bruno Gollnisch](#), who defended a much more conservative program.

De-Demonization at All Costs

After her defeat in 2017, Le Pen made some concessions to her critics from the conservative wing, [pushing advisor Florian Philippot to leave the FN](#) in September 2017. Having the man most closely associated with the FN's [populist turn](#) quit its ranks could be seen as an attempt at “re-centering” her party. Yet, this was also a perfect opportunity for Le Pen to get rid of a polarizing rival who had become increasingly central to the party — and also made him the scapegoat for the campaign's various missteps.



Marine Le Pen's campaign poster for the 2022 elections . (@MLP_officiel / Twitter)

Moreover, it further solidified her existing iron grip over the party, slowly isolating those who disagreed too openly and surrounding herself with faithful lieutenants like [Jordan Bardella](#), a twenty-six-year-old whose meteoric rise in the party was entirely owed to Marine Le Pen herself. His youth, polished rhetoric, and ease in TV appearances, made him the ideal face of a de-demonized party. After a successful trial run as head of the 2019 European election campaign, Bardella was even made temporary party leader while Le Pen was campaigning for president — a sign of trust demonstrating his solidified place within her innermost circle.

Indeed, Philippot's departure would remain the only major change in Le Pen's strategy as she set her focus on 2022. She persevered in her attempts at softening and normalizing both her party's and her own image. The most visible illustration of this was the [name change](#) in June 2018, as the party abandoned the divisive and combative connotations of “Front” to become “Rassemblement National” (National Rally, RN), a word which was associated with an idea of inclusive gathering while being the continuation of the aforementioned “*Rassemblement Bleu Marine*.”

For her 2022 campaign, Le Pen even abandoned the blue color, which was not only associated with her name but also semiotically attached to the Right. Instead, she chose a vivid green to serve as a natural backdrop for an optimistic pose that could have been lifted straight out of a green party's campaign. Le Pen added more focus on her personal life, as could be seen in her increasingly frequent mentions to her [passion for cat breeding](#).

Ideologically speaking, she further accentuated her “de-demonization” strategy by developing two complementary tactics: mainstreaming her program and accentuating the populist framing of her politics as a struggle for the people beyond the Left/Right cleavage. To do so, she first removed several of the most controversial measures in her 2017 program, most notably the [departure from the European Union](#), exiting the Schengen Area or returning to a national currency.

Instead, she continued the superficial hybridization of her nationalist and conservative agenda with

exogenous elements from apparently left-wing ideologies, a phenomenon that was already apparent in her 2017 campaign with the introduction of social undertones to her rhetoric. Among the newest additions for 2022, the concept of "[localism](#)," theorized by Hervé Juvin, provided a local counterpart to the notion of "national preference" while introducing a green twist to her program.

An Iron Fist in a Velvet Glove

Le Pen's strategic decision to double down on her normalizing strategy for the 2022 campaign unsurprisingly did little to satisfy party hardliners. Worse than that, her attempts at marginalizing the voices of her critics became increasingly obvious over the years leading to the next election. A major turning point happened in 2020 as Le Pen prevented many of the most prominent representatives of her internal opposition, including notably Gilbert Collard and Nicolas Bay, from being part of the "*commission nationale d'investiture*," the committee determining local candidates for future elections. The event, which some described as a "[purge](#)," pushed Marion Maréchal, Le Pen's niece and the rising star of the conservative wing of the party, to [take a stand in the media](#) against her aunt.

Maréchal, who used to go by Maréchal-Le Pen until 2018, had made history as the youngest member of parliament in 2012. She then "retired" from electoral politics after the 2017 campaign to launch a private political science school with the purpose of training up cadres "[from the right, from all the strands of the right](#)." As against the aim of electing Le Pen through what Bardella called a "*front populaire populiste*" opposed to liberal elites, Maréchal became the most vehement advocate for a return to the strategy of "the union of the right wings." This would mark a clear return to the left/right cleavage, with the RN contesting the leadership of the declining LR, the conservative party weakened by Macron's hostile takeover of the center-right. However, despite her protests against the marginalization of her allies within the RN, Maréchal had chosen to bide her time and build her networks outside of party politics. Acknowledging the dominance of her aunt's strategy within the RN, it seemed that Maréchal was betting on Le Pen's defeat in 2022, so that she could herself make a bid in [2027](#).

As internal challenges to Le Pen seemed doomed to fail, the perspective of a successful comeback from the traditionalist line unsurprisingly came from an outsider.

Indeed, although she asserted her control of her party in a less openly authoritarian manner than her father did, Marine Le Pen managed to quell most internal dissent without appearing overly rigid or controlling. In a remarkable parallel with her overall success in crafting a smoother image for her party without compromising on its nationalist radicalism, Le Pen's strict leadership did not seem to affect the "relatable" persona she had constructed in the public eye. In both party and personal matters, Le Pen thus perfectly embodied an iron fist in a velvet glove.

However, the image of a party cohesively united behind the leader, which Le Pen had worked so hard to mold for the RN's presidential campaign, soon showed cracks — with the causes of discord only temporarily silenced. Indeed, as internal challenges to Le Pen seemed doomed to fail, the perspective of a successful comeback from the traditionalist line unsurprisingly came from an

outsider: Éric Zemmour. A conservative pundit in the media eye, Zemmour's voice in the far right mattered — and he has always been a critic of Le Pen, both strategically and personally.

A few days after Le Pen's defeat in the 2017 runoff, Zemmour targeted [scathing criticisms](#) toward her, describing her campaign as a "complete debacle" and comparing her to a "reverse Midas" that "turned into lead all the gold she was touching." Today, the longtime journalist is challenging her hegemony over the far-right camp in France, as he mounts his own bid for the presidency. In a second article, I will discuss what the rise of Zemmour represents — exploring its consequences for the future of the far right and of French politics more generally.

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P.S.

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