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# Framing populism in France through the 2017 presidential election speeches by the leading candidates

*El encuadre del populismo en Francia  
a través de los discursos de los principales candidatos  
en las elecciones presidenciales francesas de 2017*

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## **Abstract**

Populism has become a defining feature of European and world politics. During the last decade, major drastic changes in the political landscape have occurred, with France appearing as a singular example: none of the two candidates who made it to the second round of the presidential elections were from the traditionally dominant center-left and center-right parties. This paper analyzes the presence of populism in the political narratives by the main political contenders in the French presidential elections held in 2017. It does so through a discourse analysis of some of their most widely seen political speeches around the campaign, providing an overview of the different framing techniques used by each candidate and their degree and type of populism.

*Keywords:* populism, discourse analysis, France, elections, framing.

## **Resumen**

El populismo se ha convertido en un rasgo definitorio de la política europea y mundial. Durante la última década, el escenario político ha sufrido cambios drásticos, donde Francia sirve de ejemplo singular: ninguno de los dos candidatos de la segunda ronda de las elecciones presidenciales

provenía de los tradicionales partidos de centroizquierda y centroderecha. Este artículo analiza la presencia de populismo en los discursos políticos de los principales candidatos en las elecciones presidenciales francesas de 2017. Para ello, se analizan algunos de los discursos de la campaña con más repercusión, mostrando una visión general de las diferentes técnicas de encuadre usadas por cada candidato y su grado y tipo de populismo.

*Palabras clave:* populismo, análisis del discurso, Francia, elecciones, encuadre.

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## INTRODUCTION

The idea of populism has gained ground in the political sphere over the years, often described as a discourse “technique” used by political leaders and parties alike to gather support from different social stratum. From Trump in the United States and Bolsonaro in Brazil, to current governments or relevant parties across the EU, populism is an ever-present element of their approach to politics. However, this idea is also often used as a proxy for demagoguery or as a political insult (Müller, 2016), grouping different political options and thus blurring the picture, instead of clarifying the analysis. And it is also generally used to describe political opponents (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008). The French presidential elections were no exception to this, with two outsiders reaching the second round of the elections, with Macron’s pro-European victory seen in the rest of the continent as a relief, in what felt as a near-miss for one of the core EU countries, which could have come under the rule of the far-right National Front. Populism had been a defining factor during the electoral process (Lazhortes, 2017; Ivaldi, 2018).

This article focuses on the rise of populist presidential contenders and the presence of populist discourses and strategies in certain political leaders’ speeches during the 2017 presidential election, given its special significance for the French political life (Kubicek, 2017). In addition, the article classifies the candidates in terms of the populist items and ideological frames that are attached to their positions. Therefore, the main question we seek to answer is twofold: first, which candidates are using populism and to what degree; and second, what is the dominant kind of populism. The analysis is based on the narratives employed in the political speeches delivered by the party leaders during the presidential run.

For this purpose, the article is structured as follows: section two addresses the theoretical background including an extensive literature review on the topic, together with the definition of frames used for the classification of populism. The methodology and case selection are explained next; followed by the discourse analysis itself in the fourth section. The discussion of the results and the conclusions are presented in the fifth section, where we answer the research questions.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### *Populism*

Populism, from the Latin word *populus* (people), has been analyzed for decades in its current form, but in modern political analysis, it appears in the United States with the Populist Party and the so-called *Narodniki* in Russia in the nineteenth century, both agrarian-based movements (Mudde y Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012). Academic research has departed from a plurality of perspectives to understand the contemporary use of the word —see, for instance, Havlík and Pinková (2012); Weyland (2017); Ostiguy (2017) and Mudde (2017). Some of them understand it either as a communication approach, a particular hierarchical structure, or a thin-centered ideology. However, in the first case the normative dimension of populism is missing, and in the second this structure might not be present (Pauwels, 2014). The third proposal, the ideational one (Mudde, 2017) is used in this paper, and it approaches populism as a thin-centered ideology: one where only certain items of the cosmology are present, but that requires one or more additional ideological points of view to complete the puzzle and offer a coherent vision, such as nationalism or socialism (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012; Pauwels, 2011, 2014), in which the *context* of the political arena is *framed* in a certain manner by populist politicians (Hawkins *et al.*, 2019).

To analyze the populist dimension in the parties, this paper draws from the Ideational Approach used by Hawkins *et al.* (2019), taking onboard the 4-item scheme used by Pawels (2011) from Mudde (2004, 2017) comprehending both communication and reality-shaping (normative) traits for populism: the existence of two homogeneous units (people and elite), the antagonism between the two, the centrality of the general will or pure sovereignty of the people, and the characterization of the people (the “common man”) as inherently good and the elite as inherently bad, a scheme widely used in academic literature (Stanley, 2008; Mudde, 2007; Muddle and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013; Pauwels 2011; Hawkins *et al.*, 2019; Kriesi y Pappas 2015). This provides a clear-cut set of items to operationalize, finding which parties use populism and to what degree, as more practical breakdown of Laclau’s (2005) classical definition of populism. In this sense, it is important to consider that “the political discourse is by definition demagogic” (Charaudeau, 2005) and, thus, a certain degree of populism is to be expected in any political discourse.

### *Populism in France*

There is extensive literature analyzing the phenomenon of populism in France from a variety of points of view —see, for instance, Dieckhoff (2018). A significant part of authors analyze the demand side (the voters) and are generally focused on the position of the National Front (Mayer, 2005; Mazzoleni *et al.*, 2003; Fieschi, 2004; Albertazzi y McDonnell, 2008), paired with the recurring topic of the change in the

composition of the electorate (Oesch, 2008). Examples of more contemporary analyses include the work of Ivaldi *et al.* (2017) and Birnbaum (2017) on the European scale; and Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2012) and Kriesi and Pappas (2015) from a comparative perspective in which France is one of the cases. Specifically focused on the French elections of 2017 is the analysis of Ivaldi (2018) and Birnbaum (2017). These studies, in general, either depart from or conclude that the National Front (currently *Rassemblement Nationale*) is a far-right populist party, and some include Mélenchon's party, *La France Insoumise*, as a far-left or social populist party as well. However, these studies assume the populist nature of these two parties from the start, therefore leaving a research gap as to which can be truly considered and why.

### *Classification of populism*

Populism revolves around the idea of people. However, the construction of the “people” within the discourse can adopt several forms, depending on who is included and who is excluded (and who is the elite against whom the people is defined). This can be seen in Reungoat (2010), Mudde (2007) and Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2013), and is also included in the idea of “people” as an empty significant (Laclau, 1977). There are, in France, two cleavages upon which populism builds around: the social cleavage (including both the vertical division of social classes and the horizontal dimension of territorial division) and the collective identity one, where issues such as national identity or globalization can be found (Dieckhoff, 2018). How these cleavages are framed in the political discourse leads to a classification of the kind of ideology attached to populism (Hawkins *et al.*, 2019): concerning the construction of “people”, the academic literature has often pointed to a distinction between inclusive and exclusive populism (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013; McKean, 2016). This broadly refers to either a social or an ethnic idea of the people: in the case of inclusive populism, everyone who does not belong to the elite is part of people. In the case of exclusive populism, certain subgroups are excluded from the main group, namely immigrants.

Framing, according to Entman (1993), “can be defined as a process in which some aspects of reality are selected, and given greater emphasis or importance, so that the problem is defined, its causes are diagnosed, moral judgments are suggested and appropriate solutions and actions are proposed” (cited in Ardèvol-Abreu, 2015: 424). As Hawkins *et al.* (2019) explain, populist leaders frame the political context and turn it into a populist landscape, by activating and making salient latent populist attitudes in the public. For this purpose, the political arena and the larger context is reshaped with the mobilization of in and out-group identities, the dispositional attribution of blame, and the heavy use of emotional triggers. Political leaders, use these frames or narrative in their political discourse, supplying an interpretation of reality that helps us understand in what way he or she interacts with the electorate and what elements make up his or her political message.

### *Methodology and case selection*

In order to identify the four relevant items of populism according to the ideational perspective, as well as inclusive/exclusive items, the leaders' speeches are studied using discourse analysis. While some of the dimensions of populism (particularly the references to the people and the elite) can be traced using more quantitative methods—see, for instance, Pauwels (2011) for content analysis—the centrality of the general will, and, in particular, the moral distinction of the dichotomy is more complex to grasp. In particular, because mention to certain issues is often veiled and indirect (Wodak, 2015) and also because these items can be framed by many other resources than mere word repetition. Candidates are analyzed case by case in their speeches, exploring their main narratives, cleavages, and presence of the items of populism and inclusive or exclusive traits. For a clearer analytical view, in the final chapter a table displays the different items in a comparative fashion.

### *Discourse analysis*

Discourse here is contemplated as data that can be analyzed, that is, text in context, part of the process and action, and wider than text (Titscher *et al.*, 2000). Political discourse can be considered as part of the political process and as a form of political action: discourse has performative power over reality (van Dijk, 1997); it is both a frame in Goffman and Lakoff's terms. The phenomenon of populism is assumed in this paper from an entirely discursive reality, as the root of the populist concept (Mudde 2004; Laclau 1977). Therefore, the actual analysis of what political speeches say, identified as political discourse (van Dijk, 1997), is the most reasonable approach to carry out the discursive exercise per se, as can also be seen in the work of Wodak (2015) for the case of Populist Radical Right Parties.

In discourse analysis, the four defining items of populism have been traced, together with inclusive/exclusive traits, as well as the framing of reality within the discourse, to properly characterize the framing of the political context these leaders use, beyond their stated ideology. In this case, discourse analysis allows not only to find which topics are relevant—which can be obtained with other methods of content analysis (see, for instance, Rooduijn (2009)—but also how they are treated or discussed politically. This is a fundamental aspect to understand the ideological background of these parties and to detect the confrontational narrative that singles out populism. The analysis below displays, case by case, the particular approach to each item of the ideational approach, alongside the inclusive/exclusive traits and an overview of the general narrative structure. In particular, mentions of the people and elite as separate (and opposite) interests is analyzed, paying special attention to the dichotomic nature of the distinction, as well as of the presence of the moral consideration. The centrality of the general will and pure sovereignty is also mapped in the role

the people must play, as well as the presence or absence of “dangerous others” in the speeches, of cultural threats (such as Islam) or human groups (such as migrants).

### *Case selection*

This paper focuses around the presidential run of 2017 and it analyzes political speeches by party leaders during this period. The choice of selecting public speeches over written works is solely based on the nature of the material: written speech is fertile in rhetoric figures and use of language, and it provides an insight into how political parties and speakers frame political life and society (Wodak, 2015). These materials are widely used in academic research for this purpose, including similar theoretical background for countries such as Germany, Netherlands, and Belgium (Pauwels, 2011), and France for different purposes, such as the work of Sini (2016) and Birnbaum (2017)

Eleven candidates obtained the necessary 500 or more signatures from elected officials to announce their candidacy. For reasons of relevance, the candidates analyzed are limited to five among those eleven: Marine Le Pen, Emmanuel Macron, François Fillon, Benoît Hamon, and Jean-Luc Mélenchon. They were the only ones present in each debate, were consistently viewed as the “most convincing candidates” in all polls (Europe1, 2017; ELABE, 2017; Micheau, 2017; Levy *et al.*, 2017; IFOP-Fiducial, 2017), the leading candidates in all polls

TABLE 1.  
MATERIALS USED FOR ANALYSIS

Candidate	Political Party	Speech	Date
<b>Marine Le Pen</b>	Front National	Kitzheim	24/02/2018
		Lyon	01/06/2018
		Hénin-Beaumont	23/04/2017
<b>Emmanuel Macron</b>	La République en Marche	Paris	19/01/2017
		Porte de Versailles	10/12/2016
		Pavillon Gabriel	02/03/2017
<b>Jean-Luc Mélenchon</b>	La France Insoumise	Paris	24/04/2017
		Toulouse	16/04/2017
		Lille	29/03/2017
<b>François Fillon</b>	Les Républicaines	La Villette	29/01/2017
		Paris	01/03/2017
<b>Benoît Hamon</b>	Parti Socialiste	Bercy	19/03/2017
		Paris	29/01/2017

Source: Own elaboration.

(Ipsos, 2017), and were the five most voted candidates during the first round of the elections by a large margin. In particular, the choice of the respective group of speeches has followed an extensive revision of the electoral campaign, to find examples which are long enough to allow for a valid analysis while allowing the comparison, as they occurred during similar moments of the campaign or are directly related to it. Given access problems to material from Front National's leader, Marine Le Pen, we have analyzed, together with a speech from the electoral campaign, two speeches delivered by her after the presidential elections but directly related to them. The speeches have been selected regarding both their relevance—since all of them were central acts of the political campaign, with big audiences and widely watched online—and their availability for analysis.

## ANALYSIS

The excerpts of speeches shown below include the source between brackets, which can be found in French in the Appendix, together with their online source addresses.

### *Marine Le Pen. Front National*

National Front or Front National (from now on, FN), renamed Rassemblement national or National Rally in June 2018, has become a leading political force in French politics, gathering much of the nationalist and conservative votes, and whose candidate, Marine Le Pen, successfully reached the second round of the 2017 presidential elections.

In terms of narratives, the most distinctive feature of FN is the explicit acknowledgment of the divide that lies at the very heart of the movement and serves as the basis of their political strategy: the nationalist/globalist dichotomy. As Ms. Le Pen stated in one of her speeches, referring to her own candidacy and that of Emmanuel Macron's, who appears as FN's ideological rival: "These two lists are the two poles of the second round of the presidential election; these are the two ideological alternatives offered by the new national / globalist divide that has imposed itself in French political life" (Kintzheim).

Later she adds, in relation to the would-be "natural rival" of FN, the center-right *Les Républicaines*, a political force that held presidential office on various occasions, "the truth is that the national / globalist divide is going through the LR party and is fracturing it" (Kintzheim).

FN's nationalistic approach to politics is not new. However, while setting the political stage around this *cleavage*, Ms. Le Pen aligns her party with other politicians or political parties that question, from the nationalist-populist trench, the current state of globalization, such as Donald Trump. Through this, she also defines a discursive framework that combines other identity-based cleavages FN has resorted to in the

past, establishing a kind of continuity between the old nationalistic and populist approach of the former FN leadership and the anti-globalization, nostalgic stance of Marine Le Pen. “The people”, according to Le Pen, is thus inseparable from the historically and culturally built ‘the nation’, bearer of all virtues: “To rule is, on the contrary, to know there is a story behind people; there are affections, there are preferences, there are passions, there is pride” (Kintzheim).

And linked to it: “[...] Behind the fight of the nation, you know it my friends, there is one way of life, an art of life, values; there is our conception of humankind and the world, there is a high vision [...]” (Lyon).

This nation needs to find its way, and is directly under threat: “Our fight is that of the nation, of a nation that is at the moment at the meeting point between its glorious past and a promising future, as long as we know how to give it a soul, a vision, a direction. Our fight is that of the nation, a nation that took fifteen centuries to build but which can disappear in a few decades” (Lyon).

Le Pen positions herself as the next in a great line of leaders of the French people, while appealing to a “pure” yet indeterminate form of popular sovereignty: “On August 8, 1943, General de Gaulle reminded him in Casablanca: ‘The greatness of a people comes only from its people’. It is this principle which, during the 1500 years of its history, has shaped the France we love. It is this principle that I will implement. The gathering of the French people to which everyone aspires can be done only through the love of France” [Hénin-Beaumont].

This nation undergoes a massive struggle and risks disappearing, against an elite that could be called the “globalist” elite: mainly, the European Union, as we see below, depicted as the embodiment of nations’ woes, against which Le Pen clearly exemplifies: “[...] our business, I have told you, it’s France, and only France” (Lyon).

The elite is far away from citizens, and here she introduces the main local-global struggle, “that’s why we are also the party of proximity, of the local against the global” (Kintzheim). This dichotomy serves to put the concept of France (the idea of France as a nation or as a living society) against the European Union. This, too, lies at the core of the French far-right movement.

France, as a member of the European Union, is shown as been subjected to an imposed foreign logic, which takes the shape, in a nationalistic way, of affronts against the very nature of France. For instance, the European Union, claims the FN’s leader, has imposed France a territorial model that has fundamentally condemned the country and its territories. As Le Pen herself states: “Our dear Alsace, like our beloved Lorraine, is right in not wanting to be drawn into the absurd logic of uprooted regions that the European Union has imposed on a vassalized France, a territorial model [...] that comes from elsewhere and which does not correspond to anything at home. The government does not ignore the malaise created here by this institutional aberration” (Kintzheim).

It starts from detached politicians, unknown by the people, and finishes focusing on the European Union:



Who knows the president of the community who drained [qui a vampirisé] the powers of your mayor, reduced to the role of mere administrator of civil affairs? Nobody. Who knows the European commissioners who decide for 500 million Europeans what we eat, and soon perhaps what time we eat and even how we will eat? Nobody. At all levels, there is a power without a face and without a name, a totalitarian power intertwined in everything. I say it, the European Union, as it is conceived, is a totalitarian power that rules, orders, regulates (Kitzheim).

Here, Le Pen opposes an idea of France based on the principles of proximity, locality and citizenship, as well as a preconceived notion of a French-self, to the distant—yet apparently overwhelming—power of the European institutions and elites. She further emphasizes the local-global narrative by reiterating her party's commitment to local institutions, which are part of French past, and by discrediting unknown institutions and politicians (namely from the EU) who want to impose a foreign model over France, effectively ruling the country from afar:

We are proud of who we are, what our parents left us and what we will pass on to our children. This is why we are also the party of proximity, of the local against the global. This principle of proximity is valid [...] also for our institutions. We refuse to let ourselves be imposed a system where we produce ten thousand kilometers away from home and recycle 4.000 kilometers away. In the same way we refuse distant institutions from leaders that no one knows: now, the institutional evolution tends to distance power from the citizens (Kintzheim).

The nationalist-globalist divide takes the form of the contradiction between France and the EU or between France and the world. And in all cases, France is portrayed as a country whose sovereignty is questioned or that has fallen under foreign rule. The European Union is seen, then as a totalitarian regime, the incarnation of the globalist elite, depicted in the worst possible terms. The second item, the antagonist relationship between the two units, also appears in most speeches; as it is exemplified in this one, where the “peoples” of Europe are opposed to the European Union:

The EU is an organization without foundations, a space open to all migrations, a construction that has a universal vocation and does not take offense to see adherence of Asian countries, such as Turkey, or tomorrow Maghreb, like Morocco. Europe is the diversity of nations. The EU is levelling the peoples and cultures that make up Europe; it's their planned disappearance. Europe is a living and joyous reality. The EU is an artificial ideological creation, cold and hopeless. Europe is the values inherited from our Hellenic-Roman civilization and our Judeo-Christian culture. The EU is a trading area where money and the values of globalization of the market rule (Kintzheim).

In this fragment, the nations of Europe, the people, is once again depicted in a positive light against the elite, as a historical and cultural reality and as a community threatened by a globalist organization (the European Union) ruled by economic

interests, where migration is considered a part of a deliberate attempt to level all peoples and wipe out their culture. This antagonism is also reinforced by the constant use of language “us” (the people, the nation) against “them” (the EU, the globalists), for instance:

The European Union is not made by the people, but by the banks; it is not because one wears a grey suit and a tie that one acts with good intentions. The European Union does not defend our interests they are not builders, but speculators. Mr. Macron, a former banker, is comfortable in this world. He even proposes to save a Europeanist boat that has waterways on all sides from sinking (Kitzheim).

Last, the unmediated leadership and pure sovereignty of the people against the elites is seen in several forms, particularly during her last speeches of the election run, such as: “[...] it is time to free the French people from arrogant elites who want to dictate its conduct. Because yes, I am the candidate of the people. I appeal to all sincere patriots, wherever they come from, regardless of their background, regardless of their origins, and their vote in the first round, to join me” [Hénin-Beaumont].

All four items of a populist discourse are found throughout her speeches, with a clear moral distinction between people and elite in all references to them, and lead eventually to a fundamental question posed to the nation, born from this fundamental antagonism that already exists, in the midst of the presidential elections and the immigration and national security debates:

The French must seize this historic opportunity that rises. Because the big question in this election is a fierce globalization that endangers our civilization. The French have a very simple choice: we either continue on the path of total deregulation, without borders, and without protection, and therefore with relocations, unfair international competition, mass immigration, free movement of terrorists. This reign is that of money [roi argent]; Or we either choose France, with borders that protect our jobs, our purchasing power, our security, our national identity. You have the choice for change. The real one (Hénin-Beaumont).

*Emmanuel Macron. La République en Marche!*

Macron’s discourse is not based on the division between people and elite. It is rather a general proposal of collaboration among a diversity of people, beyond the common ‘honest working man’ simplification: “The renewal: these elections will allow the emergence of committed and talented personalities, elected locally, engaged, associated, retired people, students, civil servants, employees, entrepreneurs, liberal professions, farmers and self-employed. Diversity will be taken into account” (Paris).

And while he does suggest addressing the French without differentiation: “But no matter where we come from, because we know where we want to go together. The fight we want to lead, which is important for us. What we want is not to bring together

the left, it is not to bring together the right, it is to bring together the French! This is our project!" (Versailles).

He also acknowledges plurality, not only within the people as listed above, but also in levels of government, contradicting ideas of "pure sovereignty" and reinforcing the need for institutions that characterize liberal representative systems: "The Republic must be plural. We need the departments, these city-centers, we need these municipalities, public services [...]" (Versailles).

Instead of focusing on clear, dichotomic and moral divisions between us and them (people and elite), Emmanuel Macron proposes a political approach based on challenges. Like FN, Macron depicts France as a country that struggles in many fields, yet he shuns the divisions that, in FN's view, have rendered France in that situation. In this regard, Macron, confident in France's apparent exceptionalism, lists a series of issues that must be tackled in order to modernize the country: "[...] in a large country of the European Union which, for thirty-five years, has failed to solve the problem of mass unemployment. We are the only major European country in this situation. And at the same time, we are faced with new challenges: the digital revolution, the ecological and environmental transition, the terrorist threat, which are nowadays changing our daily life" (Pavillon Gabriel).

These transformations, as Macron himself states, are not the neoliberal British reforms of the eighties, but instead a contract with French citizens through which bring about radical change. Such an agreement would consist mainly on six *chantiers* or projects: education and culture, work society, economic modernization, security, democratic reform and the international agenda.

Throughout his explanation, Macron refers to them as challenge and insists on carrying them out with responsibility. The idea of a neatly defined political or social contract is a key feature in Macron's discourse. He proposes the voter new faces in politics and tries to distance himself and his movement from traditional parties. There is also a commitment to eliminating the many conflicts of interest that have tarnished the French political life: "First —this is what we announced during the last days and weeks— a real strategy of moralization of public life. [...]. The project of moralization of public life that we will carry is, first of all, to eradicate the conflicts of interests which today, sometimes, too often, exist" (Pavillon Gabriel).

Political renovation is the main driver in Macron's narrative, rather than nationalism or the ideological divide. This standpoint depicts a centrist, liberal approach to politics, where practicality is considered a political guideline. This is also seen with respect to the European Union. Macron sees the European Union not as a separate entity, but as part of the French national project and an essential component of his own political platform, *En Marche!* The European agenda is thus considered the cornerstone of Macron's proposals: without Europe, there can be no political renovation or any response to France's challenges: "Finally, it is obvious that Europe is at the heart of our project. As I said, many of the reforms that we propose in this project, and which I wish to carry out, are indispensable for France, but are expected at European level. We will not succeed in the world as it is today without a real European strategy

[...] to reconstitute the solidarity now lost within this area on the economic and social level” (Pavillon Gabriel).

And he devotes a large part of the discourses to this vision of Europe: “Europe is our best protection; it is our best shield in globalization. Europe is also our identity, what shapes us, our common dream” (Versailles).

Although centered on France, Macron provides a narrative more focused on solving political problems than defining a clear, identity-based political stance. The four items are clearly absent, with a narrative that is opposite to the dichotomic view of populism. Instead, an inclusive and encompassing vision of challenges to be solved collectively provides a rather different frame of the political context.

*Jean-Luc Mélenchon — La France Insoumise*

Mélenchon builds his discourses around political elements inherent to the political tradition of the Left. In general terms, Mélenchon’s speeches show a clear divide, one in which France and a combination of social movements stand together against economic and political elites, both national and European. He states, in this sense, that the Nation (which is used as a synonym with the people), the State and social rights —the backbone of the idea of France he wants to convey— are being attacked by neoliberal European policies and by the wealthy, especially the financial elite: “It’s not our people, it’s these programs. Here is [...] the universe under the leadership of finances and its relay in Europe, that is the European Commission. It is necessary to leave this treaty because it is them who impose this to you” (Lille).

Like Le Pen, Mélenchon finds in the European Union, and leaders like Angela Merkel, a liability for the future of France instead of an opportunity for national change (as opposed to Macron). This critique of the European Union is often followed or accompanied by a defense of France’s “militant” tradition, one shaped by left-leaning social struggles and resistance movements, both foreign and domestic. Moreover, this narrative usually emphasizes France’s rebellious past, the source of many social conquests: “Every people have their way of being and an accumulated collective culture. We, the French, built a State, this State was our strength in time [...]. It is around the State that we built our main collective victories, and which will make things better when leaving [sic], because things were in order. [...] It’s a chance for us to have the State secured for a long time” (Lille).

Mélenchon frames his speeches in the France-EU dichotomy, much like Le Pen, yet its content differs greatly from that of the nationalist political leader. Mélenchon uses the idea of France not as a form nationalistic affirmation opposed to the European project, but as a representation of the many political traditions that make up the French and international Left movements’ heritage. In this opposition, he builds the French people, akin to the nation, described as inherently good, in a clear messianic style of a “new dawn”: “We are the beautiful and generous France that begins each day under its motto: freedom, equality, fraternity! My beautiful country, my beautiful

homeland. And you, everyone, we can be proud of what we have undertaken and achieved. We are a conscious and enthusiastic force. [...] All of you, beloved homeland, you are a brand-new morning that is beginning to break” (Paris).

One of the key elements he points out in his speeches is the capitalist system, understood in a broad sense. Although he never actually defines capitalism in an analytical manner, he describes the changes it has gone through over the last few decades, especially in Europe. Mélenchon states that capitalism has developed in a way that is more prone to crises and leading to deeper social inequalities. Due to this, he criticizes the economic elite, who he claims demand greater sacrifices from the people: “These are the extremists of the market. The situation, they tell us, will recover if we save money. As we have been told for thirty years, there is a crisis and we must save money. [...] These people tell the people around them: we spend too much [...] France lives beyond its means” (Lille).

The political sphere, in Mélenchon’s worldview, has been influenced by the changes in the economy. The transition to neoliberalism has subjected public institutions to private entrepreneurial interests. It is also common to see Mélenchon describe the European Union as a tool that implements socially regressive policies. Furthermore, Mélenchon’s proposal of establishing the Sixth French Republic is shown as a form of breaking away from the capitalist power structure in France, calling for direct and “real” democracy: “The time has come for a government of ecological responsibility towards humanity, a government of social responsibility, a government of democratic responsibility, which gives the people the right to reconstitute itself through new institutions [...] it’s the Sixth Republic and her right to permanently control those who appointed her” (Toulouse).

He is addressing the people, the working France that wakes up every morning, linked to republican values, as he conceives them. This characterization of the people is reinforced through the speech, as can be seen below, when the opposition with the elites is drawn. The elite is outlined in a clear negative light, linked to the capitalist system commented above, complementing the antagonistic existence of the two units with their moral distinction: “Of course, by then, mediocrats and oligarchs are jubilant. Nothing is so beautiful for them as a second round between two candidates who approve and want to extend, both, the current institutions” (Paris).

And is fundamentally opposed to the interests of the people, as the benefits one group obtains are detrimental to the other: “If you have none of this, it’s because there are others who take advantage of it for you. Because these shameless people prefer to pay themselves dividends instead of investing, proof that they are stupid” (Toulouse).

Including the interaction with the public for this antagonism, where the elite is depicted as the “masters of the Earth”: “Where is the people’s freedom, who did not want this austere European treaty and into which you forced them? The important ones, the powerful ones, the masters of the earth, you have reasons to be nervous, listen to them!” (Toulouse).

Mélenchon directly questions the elite after the public screams *dégagez, dégagez* (go away). Nevertheless, during all these parts of his discourse, he does not use a classical

separation in social classes (despite some assimilation of working class and the poor), rather using in its place the populist empty signifier. Pure sovereignty of the people can be seen in extracts like this one, where an argument for direct democracy is made: “See how freedom, starting from the individual, is transformed into a program that protects it, then spreads into a system of institutions and political relations and crowns itself in the nation. There is no doubt about what is proposed. The program does not hide it: I am a separatist. I propose the sovereignty of the people to be fully restored in all areas” (Toulouse).

However, there are no particular traces of the unmediated leadership indicating a common trend in the left where monolithic or personalistic leadership is not particularly approved (or made explicit).

*François Fillon. Les Républicaines*

The conservative candidate’s discourse is fundamentally based on the idea of France and on French identity and values. It starts off from a common premise, often seen in other candidates: the apparent frailty of the country. Fillon develops a narrative in which the French people, considering the moral and social challenges the country faces, should commit to serving the country and thrive in such endeavor without expecting anything in return. As the candidate explains: “France does not ask anything from us. We owe her everything. To serve her, we will need courage, will and friendship, and none of this is missing. The challenges are immense. What do we see around us? [...] A country without a leader” (La Villette).

Facing the country, he positions himself as the personal leader of the French people, committing himself entirely to the cause: “To you, I swear to give all that a patriot can give to his country. I will give you everything: my determination, my courage, my will to win” (La Villette).

A further link is stressed during his March speech, when the first voices appear calling for him to be brought to justice, as he uses this duty and need to serve France as the reason to continue the political campaign: “France is greater than us. Greater than my mistakes. Greater than the biases of a large part of the press. Greater than the excitement of opinion itself. And it is because I am totally determined to serve France that I will oppose, with all my strength, that chance or calculation decide its fate and the future of the French amidst a decisive consultation” (Paris).

These people are described as a single entity, one with the leader, akin again to the nation. He describes the people as bearer of virtues and linked again to him, as he comes directly from it: “I am a candidate for the presidential election for France. I am not a marketing product, my word is not whispered by the microcosm, [...] I want to embody the pride of a nation that cannot be defeated. I speak to all French people. There are no right-wing against left-wing people. There is only one people” (La Villette).

And in another fragment, he delves deeper into the “honest working man” idea of the people, always connected to him: “I like France and the French. I came across faces [...]. I did not forget anything. I have not forgotten the courageous words of this

farmer who works 70 hours a week for 800 euros per month. I remember the testimony of this French officer, on a mission in the Sahel, who told me how his company had rebuilt a destroyed school in a village” (La Villette).

From the digital revolution to climate change and Trump’s presidency in the United States, France is portrayed as a country that must withstand a period of uncertainty in order to remain a strong, sovereign nation in an ever-changing world, with constant remarks to the centrality of the general will: “Our only room for maneuver lies in our ability to come together, to work more, to work together, to seize all the scientific and technological potentialities of which the French spirit is capable. Our room for maneuver is in our inflexible desire to be sovereign, listened to and respected around the world” (La Villette).

Fillon, in light of this, describes a series of reforms that aim to modernize France and, as he claims: “Free the activity of all sectors which have been blocked by fiscal and regulatory bludgeoning” (La Villette).

More specifically, his proposals are mainly centered around the economy, job conditions and public administration, areas that, according to Fillon, are governed by rigid, bureaucratic institutions.

In his speech, the elites are not necessarily opposed to the people, but as part of the same people and are expected to cooperate in this road to reform, whether rich and poor, workers and company-owners: “But I also know that we will need everyone, that I will have to serve everyone, and believe me, I am ready. I reject these unnecessary divisions that many of my competitors draw. Let us not oppose the rich to the poor, the entrepreneurs to the workers, the believers to the agnostics, those who have chosen France and those who have inherited it” (La Villette).

Meanwhile, the European Union is illustrated rather ambiguously, as an entity to be reformed and shaped according to France: “Europe must be for France an amplifier of sovereignty. I do not speak of technocratic Europe with its Byzantine norms. I am talking about the Europe of nations, [...] I want ‘Europe but with France at the front’, as Philippe Séguin said” (La Villette).

One final component of Fillon’s narrative is France’s identity, which in part becomes a projection of France in the world. Fillon sets out to reinforce national unity, because he understands France as a unitary entity with a single culture, as opposed to a mere sum of parts. This inner unity involves in this case assimilation for immigrants: “I name things. I name the problem we have with radical Islam [...]. I want to reduce immigration to a bare minimum, by organizing it by quotas, according to our economic needs and our integration capacities. Immigration without integration, without assimilation, must be stopped. In the French Republic, foreigners have duties before claiming all rights” (La Villette).

Adding to this, and in line with the general climate against the political class, he points out the “old politics”, a sort of elite, a political caste that lives out of the effort of the hardworking Frenchmen and women.

While Fillon does not define an essentially dichotomic political and social sphere between the people and the elite as such, he does characterize every other political

option as part of the same group, by calling them (from LFI to the FN) different shapes of the political left: “The first left-wing, the pure and hard left, red as the reds, we all know it. It’s Mélenchon, the Fidel Castro of YouTube. [...] The left n° 2, we also know it, it is the socialist left, [...]. The left n° 3, we know him less. It is Macron. He says he has a project; I’m waiting for him to show it! [...] And then there is the left n° 4 [...]. It’s the National Front. It is the program of the Communist Party of the 70s or of the Popular Front!” (La Villette).

This type of classification has a clear anti-establishment message (Pauwels, 2011), displaying the logic of the political campaign where differentiation is needed, but also a “populist displacement” of the discourse (Mudde, 2004). Fillon, despite the electoral campaign, displays a populist message, where he, as leader from and of the people (which includes what others might call elites) fights against the political class and the immigrants who challenge the essence of France. While not as populist as Le Pen, he clearly (with more strength on some points than others) adopted a populist approach to the elections.

#### *Benoît Hamon. Parti Socialiste*

The Parti Socialiste presidential candidate, Benoît Hamon, develops a discourse around three fundamental elements: French national identity, republicanism and the French socialist tradition. In Hamon’s case, French history is the discursive thread that ties together the candidate’s narrative, allowing him to create a frame where republican values are inseparable from democratic socialism. Particularly, socialism is shown as the continuation of the French republican tradition. This is clear when he states that the political Left will make a difference in the election, ultimately winning the political bout, as it is a force of progress that has been determinant in shaping modern France:

So we wanted this day to reflect the change we bring: fraternal, happy [...]. I came to tell you that the left can win, that it must win. Because what is at stake here is not the destiny of a single man. The left is the breath that comes from afar, from the heart of the struggles that shaped ourselves as French people, as Republicans, as socialists. I present myself before you accompanied by a long procession of struggles, ideals, heroes. I present myself before you with our dead and their message of life [Bercy].

The Left, as mentioned, is conceived in Hamon’s speech as a key component of France’s political history. Yet it is also a political identity of its own. He does not necessarily construct a single unit of “people” throughout the discourse, as it is mostly directed towards the “political leftists”. This can be seen in some excerpts where he proposes the need to return to the ground in a struggle for direct democracy against the right-wing: “We, the left, have given too much ground to the ‘declinists’, to the reactionaries, to the partisans of withdrawal and rejection. We did not know who we were anymore” [Bercy].



This way, Hamon defines the Left both as a political force and as a collective identity. These two ideas coexist throughout his speech and by combining them, the candidate tries to evoke a sense of pride and belonging to a greater political project.

As mentioned, the idea of the Left is shown as a general narrative or frame with significant political meaning, as it is linked with democratic values and to the republican institutions of France, as well as to the Nation's history. However, this traditional approach to the political left combines with the more encompassing concept of "citizens", who should overtake the political elite and replace it, fighting in the process for direct democracy, and highlighting the centrality of the general will and pure sovereignty of the people, another common feature of social populism: "To the citizens, the Republic will say: 'act!' You, citizens, are often more loyal to the spirit of the Republic than to your leaders, so become your own leaders, because that is the spirit of 'democracy with all its consequences' that we want. [...] Citizens, today you have the political class you deserve, so replace it, take power!" (Bercy).

In the lines above, however, he suggests a rather unusual idea when compared to other leaders and political speeches in general ("citizens, today you have the political class you deserve"), making the people co-responsible for the situation instead of being passive agents under the sway of an extractive elite.

Additionally, Hamon's republican Left allows him to define the Republic-enterprise divide, whereby he confronts this idea to that of a country controlled as if it were a private company. Concerning this, he criticizes the austerity policies implemented by both the French government and the European Union, which he deems favorable to corporate interests. Hamon outlines an elite composed largely of multinational companies, the rich, and traditional political parties, in a clear negative manner: "If I carry the torch of the left, it is to relight the flame of the Republic. I first want to say it solemnly: the party of money has too many candidates in this election. [...] Money has its grip on this election. It tells us, as Guizot did under the Restoration: 'enrich yourself!'. The others think: 'enrich us!'" (Bercy).

In this political landscape, the economic elite have their own candidates to the presidency, but they are all essentially the same people. Hamon then continues with a negative depiction, as he defines this elite in an antagonistic role vis-à-vis the people:

You know them, these well-informed people, noble, especially among themselves [...]. These sophists who explain to us that the answer to the social crisis is a little less Labour Code, the response to the ecological crisis is a little more nuclear, the response to the democratic crisis a little more cult of the providential man. [...] These people who sneer when we talk about a European budget treaty or a contribution to the added value of robots, and who are embarrassed when these ideas are supported by a world-renowned economist, Thomas Piketty, and a successful global entrepreneur, Bill Gates (Bercy).

Within this dichotomy, the States collides with "money" and the question rises as to each one's political allegiances, stating clearly that the two groups have conflicting,

incompatible interests: “No one can serve two masters, the Republic and money. The people and money. France and money. [...] I think only of the greatness of our country. They think only of power; I think only of my duty. They are the candidates to achieve their own destiny or secure their future. I will be President to prepare our future” (Bercy).

While a staunch defender of the republican system, Hamon acknowledges the Left’s historical commitment to reform. He, like Mélenchon, stands for the establishment of the Sixth French Republic, which should, in light of his description, serve as an example to the world: “Today I remembered we have an objective, from which nothing and no one will turn us away: a benevolent Republic, the first powerful social-ecological Republic, whose message will be heard again” (Bercy).

The new Republic that Hamon sketches gathers many a common principle of modern-day progressive movements; it is a system that would stand for justice, ecology and fraternity. This is a corollary to Hamon’s proposals, as his platform is founded on combating fatalism within the left political spectrum. In this sense, he explicitly rejects the idea of unmediated leadership, supporting instead a cooperative proposal for this endeavor: “I said it and I confirm it, I do not believe in the providential man. I do not pretend to hold the truth, I leave it to philosophers and people of faith. I always prefer the ‘we’ to the ‘I’” (Paris).

Hamon uses to some degree all four items of discursive populism, but the definition of people is ambiguous, at times encompassing the whole of French population (citizens) and at times referring to the political left, while acknowledging different classes and groups instead continuously addressing the people. More importantly, he addresses the people as co-responsible of the current situation, rather than just blaming the elites, which nonetheless are depicted as a collusion of rich companies and an established political class. This becomes a crucial opposition in his narrative, taking Hamon closer to the grounds of social populism. However, the position of the leader as the sole mediator is only partially used, as in some occasions he refers to notions of collective leadership, while nevertheless the centrality of the general will is consistently dominant. Notably, he does not include the European Union as part of the elite, just some of their austerity policies.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Table 2 in next page summarizes the findings of the analysis in a comparative way. These findings are discussed in detail below.

Using the degree of populism as a defining trait, the speeches display interesting variations through the traditional left-right divide. Mélenchon and Le Pen are, in theory, at opposite sides of the ideological spectrum. However, and leaving immigration aside, their discourses mirror each other beyond the high degree of populist narrative displayed by both candidates. Fillon and Hamon occupy intermediate positions, appearing a softer version of the previously mentioned candidates. The outsider, in

TABLE 2.  
COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF LEADERS' SPEECHES

Leader	People and Elite as composing elements of society	People-Elite Antagonism	Pure sovereignty of the people	Moral distinction (good v evil)	Inclusive v Exclusive	Degree of populism
<b>Le Pen</b>	<b>Yes,</b> the French people/nation —culturally homogeneous—and the globalist elites (French and foreign)	<b>Yes,</b> one is the natural enemy of the other	<b>Yes,</b> pure yet undefined form of people's direct rule.	<b>Yes,</b> the French nation as inherently virtuous and globalist elites as evil)	<b>Exclusive</b> (threat of migrants and Islam)	<b>High</b> (exclusive)
<b>Macron</b>	<b>No,</b> heterogeneous French people (that is, French people from different backgrounds)	<b>No,</b> cooperation among the different groups towards a common goal	<b>No</b> considers the importance of institutions, elites, and procedures	<b>No,</b> the discourse is not structured in good v evil	<b>Inclusive</b> (no 'cultural' or 'different' threat)	<b>None</b>
<b>Mélenchon</b>	<b>Yes,</b> French nation —republican—and globalist, capitalist elites	<b>Yes,</b> fundamental contradiction between the two	<b>Yes,</b> supports people's direct rule, 'reclaiming' their power	<b>Yes,</b> people, honest working people, against corrupted, exploitative elites	<b>Inclusive</b> (people v elite without cultural threats)	<b>High</b> (inclusive)
<b>Fillon</b>	<b>To some degree,</b> French people and the leader against the political class, but nevertheless the 'elite' is described as being part of different groups	<b>To some degree</b> the people and the political class face each other, with the former being led by the candidate himself. The elite are not necessarily opposed to the people	<b>Yes</b> the people, in a broad sense, along with the political leader are to work together to carry the reforms France needs	<b>To some degree</b> the people and the leader are virtuous, hardworking while the political establishment is deemed old and distant from the French people.	<b>Exclusive</b> French people (from different backgrounds) is considered the essence of France. The political class and immigrants do not represent the French national project	<b>Medium</b> (Exclusive populism with a strong people-leader link)
<b>Hamon</b>	<b>To some degree,</b> heterogeneous people, divided by ideological positions, but elite separated from the people	<b>To some degree,</b> the divide is from the Left, as a political force as well as a collective identity against political elite and economic powers	<b>Yes,</b> People should overtake the political elite through the process of direct democracy	<b>To some degree,</b> Left as a positive force v traditional parties and economic powers which are seen as negative, extractive forces.	<b>Inclusive</b> (Based on progressive and republican values)	<b>Low</b> (Cooperative more traditional leftist rhetoric)

Source: Own elaboration.

terms of the content of his discourse, is clearly Macron: the narrative built throughout his speeches barely displays any trait of populism, despite the heavy use of rhetorical figures. This is also seen from the ideational standpoint of how the context is framed: the use of cognitive tools such as blame attribution, emotional triggers and in- and out- group identity mobilization is clearly dominant in both Mélenchon and Le Pen. Nevertheless, a major difference arises here: the limits of what constitutes the people are much broader in Mélenchon's inclusive populism, while Le Pen clearly defines "dangerous others" that are excluded from the people-elite dichotomy.

Marine Le Pen's discourse combines an exclusive form of populism—one that confronts the people with the elite—with a nationalistic, radical republican, "right to be different" narrative. In her discursive approach to politics, Le Pen brings up key issues such as national sovereignty and immigration, which serve as the groundwork of her own political campaign. Mélenchon mirrors Le Pen's discourse in populist terms and shares similar considerations as to the collusion of the globalist elite and the European Union and the exceptionality of the French nation. However, he considers immigration as a positive aspect and does not include the "dangerous others". In addition, he pays attention to the capitalist economic system, as he considers it a source of social inequalities and democratic deficits. Le Pen and Mélenchon constitute the most populist candidates, and they respectively represent two clear forms of populism: namely, exclusive national-populism and inclusive social-populism. In spite of this, and as mentioned above, their narratives have many common elements; and their discourses are framed on similar terms, excluding the perspective on immigration.

Fillon, who relates a liberal-conservative speech, also creates a certain discursive division in which hard-working French people are crippled against a crooked political class (which includes every and each one of the other parties), while at the same time demand collaboration to the elites. The strongest populist item in his speech is the unmediated leadership; most probably following the Gaullist tradition. Interestingly enough, he also devotes a large part of the speech to immigration, Islam and the threat to French identity, portraying the European Union ambiguously as something to be reformed in order for it to serve French interests. As for Hamon, despite being from the same party of the then incumbent president François Hollande, he uses some degree of populism. However, populist elements are much less present than in Mélenchon's or Fillon's speeches. Instead, he has other striking parts, such as the call for the People's responsibility. Being a moderate version of Le Pen, Mélenchon and Fillon, Hamon fulfils the items to be a national-populist and exclusive leader, but they are not as dominant as in Le Pen's case. Hamon could thus be described as somewhat social-populistic, but like Fillon, the confrontational narrative is not the defining issue of his speeches.

Emmanuel Macron, as stated above, stands as the clear outsider of the populist *zeitgeist* of the elections. He builds his narrative around the different challenges that France faces, and while he addresses a political class and expects his grass-root movement to surpass it, he also expects the elites to cooperate with the people; and the European Union is seen as a positive actor and a key aspect of the discourse. The discourse, focusing on the mentioned challenges and around traditional liberal issues,

does not intend to create a dichotomic, contentious political space, but a mostly inclusive and in-group mobilization and the use of emotional triggers (which are otherwise common in campaign) as main populist framing markers.

In all candidates but Macron, populism is a common feature and present at a high level, including the two candidates from the traditionally dominant center-left and center-right. It is not clear if this might be due to the need of distancing themselves from Hollande government (in the case of Hamon), because there has been a general “populist displacement” of public discourse, or both. While Mudde (2004) argues that populism is contagious, a research by Rooduijn *et al.* (2014) points out the opposite, particularly in the case of France. Equally noticeable is Macron’s success, whose narrative differs fundamentally from the rest of leader’s, by being by far the least populist candidate. This contrasts with claims in the media of Macron being a representative of some sort of “mainstream populism” (see Muller, 2018).

As the research quoted here focused on electoral speeches, it would be interesting to test if there has been indeed a populist contagion of other parties in the last elections, how far back this trend can be found in parties that traditionally were not considered populist, and what other factors contributed to these high levels of confrontational, populist organization of political narrative across the French political spectrum.

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