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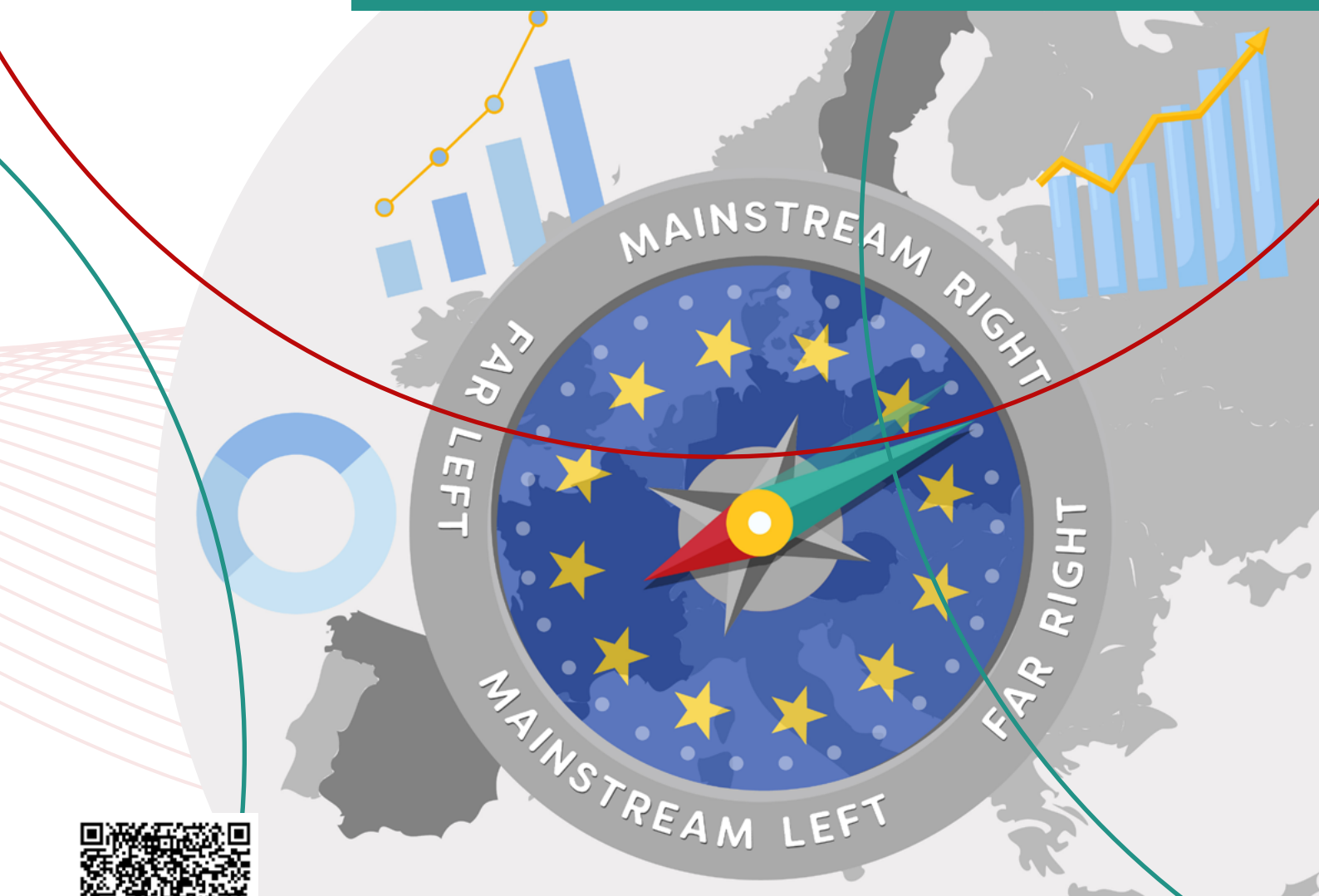
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THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE MAINSTREAM RIGHT AND ITS IMPACT ON (SOCIAL) DEMOCRACY

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5. THE POPULIST RADICAL-RIGHT TURN OF THE MAINSTREAM RIGHT IN FRANCE

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GILLES IVALDI

“What sets us apart from the National Rally is our ability to govern.”

Éric Ciotti, April 2021¹²¹

5.1 Introduction

In comparative terms, because of the very early arrival of the populist radical right in the mid-1980s, France provides a relevant case study for the analysis of the impact that the populist radical right may have on other political actors in the party system, and how such actors respond to the new competitive challenges emerging from the electoral and organisational consolidation of their populist radical-right challenger.

Therefore, the evolution of the mainstream and the populist radical right in France may be seen as a blueprint of recent developments elsewhere in Europe. The electoral rise of the *Front National* (FN) – now *Rassemblement National* (RN) – since the mid-1980s has presented a major challenge for parties of both the mainstream left and right in France. As Meguid argues, mainstream parties must decide whether to dismiss, accommodate or attack their new competitor.¹²² The empirical analysis by Abou-Chadi demonstrates that the electoral success of populist radical-right parties provides an incentive for established parties to shift their position toward a cultural protectionist profile and to emphasise the immigration issue.¹²³

In France, the established parties have adjusted their responses to the FN’s political challenges, in both discourse and policy. Because of its spatial proximity to the FN, the mainstream right has been more susceptible to competition for votes with the populist radical right.¹²⁴ In seeking to recapture the votes lost to the FN, the mainstream right has progressively moved towards more authoritarian and exclusionist positions on the cultural dimension of competition.¹²⁵ Over time, this shift has been most discernible in immigration, security and – more recently – European integration.

Taking France as a case study, this chapter looks at the extent to which the mainstream right has been undergoing a process of “radicalisation”. It examines the factors that have driven such transformation, and its impact on the political left and, more broadly, on liberal democracy in the country. As discussed, the radicalisation of the mainstream right in France must be seen as a long-term process, driven by both party competition and public opinion, and which has been mediated by organisational factors. These developments have not been monotonic, however. We see significant variation in voter demand, party supply and strategy across different periods of the mainstream right in France, depending on the electoral incentives produced by shifts in public opinion and electoral performances by the populist radical right.

Moreover, the radicalisation of the mainstream right should be placed in the historical context of the broader right-wing reactionary movement that has developed in France since the late 1970s.¹²⁶ From the early 2000s

onward, this right-wing reactionary movement has gained visibility and influence in public discourse and media debates in France. This has helped heighten the salience of FN issues in the mainstream political space and media, and it has had a strong influence on both elites and public opinion, thus somewhat facilitating the amalgamation of the mainstream and populist radical right.

Looking at the evolution of the mainstream right since the mid-1980s, this chapter argues that the recent reorientation of *Les Républicains* (LR) under the new leadership of Éric Ciotti and Laurent Wauquiez has been marked with a significant radical-right turn, which is taking LR closer than ever to the RN. Once the dominant party of the right pole of French politics, LR is now reduced to a minor flanking party. Such marginalisation casts doubt on the viability of the post-Gaullist right in the tripolar party system that has consolidated in the 2022 elections, and which is currently dominated by the radical left, Macron's Renaissance, and the RN.

Finally, we look at the extent to which such radicalisation has contaminated other political forces to the left and centre of French politics, and the impact it may have more broadly on liberal democracy in France. The radicalisation of the mainstream right participates in the erosion of democracy. LR's strategic repositioning in the political space may herald a significant reconfiguration of the right pole of French politics in the future, with an increasingly normalised RN as its dominant force.

5.2 The mainstream and populist radical right in France

Since the mid-1980s, the French right has been split into the mainstream and the populist radical right. Historically, the mainstream right in France has been divided into two main families, namely, the conservative Gaullists and non-Gaullist liberal centrists. These two strands of the right are characterised by different trajectories and ideologies, as well as internal ideological heterogeneity.¹²⁷

5.2.1 The two strands of the mainstream right

The Gaullists represent the conservative pole of the mainstream right in France. They have traditionally been defenders of national independence and national sovereignty and, therefore, more sceptical of European integration. They are proponents of strong leadership and keepers of the institutions of the Fifth Republic as the legacy of De Gaulle. In contrast, centrists have traditionally supported more progressive and culturally liberal policies, and they have been more supportive of federalism and a more integrated EU. They also have historically been more open to institutional reform and modernisation.

The bulk of the Gaullists is now found in LR, which is the successor party of the *Union pour un mouvement populaire* (UMP) that was formed as an electoral umbrella for the French right in the early 2000s. The centrist component remained relatively marginal throughout the 2000s, and it was embodied in the *Union pour la Démocratie Française* (UDF) led by François Bayrou. In 2017, Emmanuel Macron's newly formed LREM took over this "independent" political centre, winning moderate voters from both left and right.¹²⁸ Since 2017, Macron has moved towards the right of French politics, both in policy terms and by accommodating former conservative right elites, such as Edouard Philippe, Bruno Lemaire and Gérald Darmanin. Such a move has presented a significant challenge for LR: in the 2022 presidential election, a substantial share of previous LR voters – nearly four in ten – defected to Macron.¹²⁹ As Jaffré demonstrates, there has been a significant shift to the right among Macron voters: in 2017, 27% placed themselves to the right compared with 45% in 2022.¹²⁹

5.2.2 The populist radical right

Turning to the populist radical right, it is currently represented by two parties in France, Marine Le Pen's RN (previously FN) and Éric Zemmour's *Reconquête!*. The FN, under the leadership of Jean-Marie Le Pen, made its first electoral breakthrough in the 1980s, politicising cultural issues of immigration and law and order. Since her accession in 2011, Marine Le Pen has set a new trajectory for her party, seeking to shed its extremist profile to gain legitimacy and maximise electoral support. While keeping with the nativist, authoritarian and populist agenda of the old FN, Le Pen has taken her party to the economic left in response to the many economic anxieties produced by the succession of crises, namely, the 2008 financial crisis, Covid-19 pandemic and war in Ukraine.¹³⁰

Alongside the RN, the 2022 elections have witnessed the electoral rise of former newspaper columnist and media pundit Éric Zemmour. A political newcomer, Zemmour founded a new party, *Reconquête*, and he mounted a presidential campaign within only a few months. He won just over 7% of the first-round vote, splitting the populist radical right, while simultaneously winning a substantial number of former conservative right voters who had previously supported LR in 2017.¹³¹

Recent analysis confirms that Zemmour shares the core defining ideological features of the populist radical right, showing its typical nativist, authoritarian and populist ideology. Unlike Le Pen, however, Zemmour's radical-right ideology is combined with liberal market economics, and reactionary right-wing, anti-feminist and sexist positions. Finally, his campaign showed strong criticism of key liberal values, such as minority rights and the role of the judiciary, which placed Zemmour closer to the extreme right.¹³²

Zemmour's extremist profile contrasts with Le Pen's strategy of normalisation, which has essentially been to "detoxify" the party's far-right reputation since the early 2010s. Negative partisanship towards Le Pen has been declining in recent years, and electoral support for the RN has been steadily increasing: in the 2022 presidential runoff, Le Pen won a total 41.5% of the vote compared with 17.8% for her father in the 2002 election. According to the December 2023 Barometer of RN image, only 41% believed that the RN posed a danger to democracy, compared with 58% in 2017 and up to 70% twenty years earlier, reflecting its normalisation.¹³³

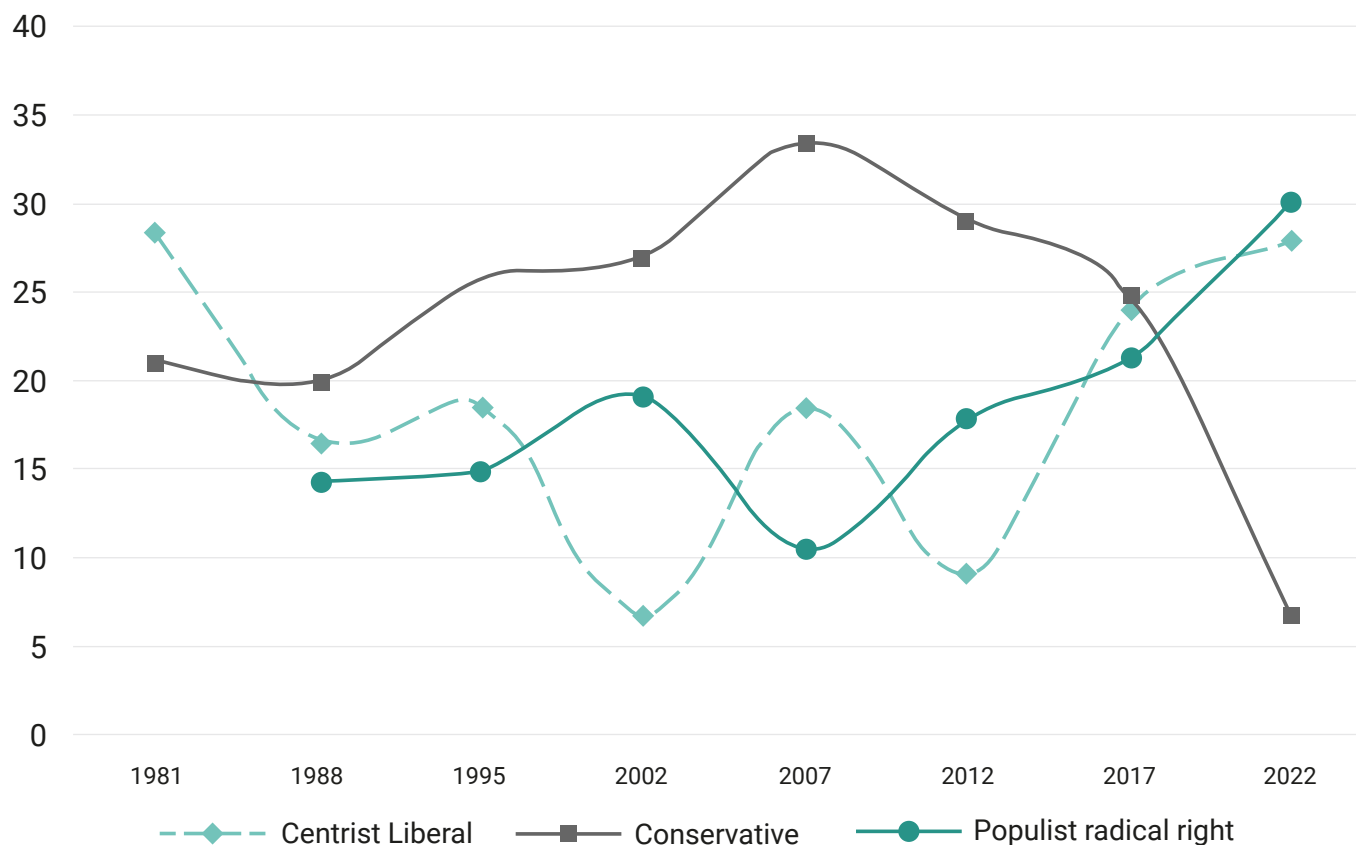
5.2.3 Electoral trends

Recent elections in France have attested to substantial changes in the balance of forces both across and within the main political blocs. One of the most significant reorientations has been the electoral collapse of LR since 2007 (see Figure 39). Once the dominant force in French politics – holding the presidency between 1965 and 1981, and again between 1995 and 2012 – the conservative right found itself at its historical low in the 2022 elections, with presidential candidate Valérie Pécresse winning just under 5% of the first-round vote, compared with an average of about 24.5% throughout the 2000-2010s. In the 2022 legislative elections, LR managed to secure only 62 seats, down from an average 260 over the past two decades.

Meanwhile, Emmanuel Macron has established a credible centre-right alternative, adopting a liberal market and pro-European agenda, winning two successive presidential elections in 2017 and 2022. Since 2017, Macron has significantly moved to the right both on the economy and on cultural issues, such as immigration, which increased his appeal to former conservative voters in the 2022 elections. His party, LREM, renamed *Renaissance*, failed to achieve an overall majority in the 2022 legislative elections, however,

essentially reflecting growing public discontent with his style of presidency and the economic fallout of the war in Ukraine.¹³⁴

Figure 39. Electoral results in presidential elections of right-wing parties in France since 1981.



Note: % of first-round valid votes cast in presidential elections;

Centrist Liberal: Valéry Giscard d'Estaing (1981); Raymond Barre (1988); Edouard Balladur (1995, UDF support to Gaullist candidate); François Bayrou (2002, 2007, 2012); Emmanuel Macron (2017, 2022)

Conservative: Jacques Chirac (1981, 1988, 1995, 2002); Nicolas Sarkozy (2007, 2012); François Fillon (2017); Valérie Pécresse (2022)

Populist Radical Right: Jean-Marie Le Pen (1988, 1995); Jean-Marie Le Pen + Bruno Mégret (2002); Marine Le Pen (2012, 2017); Marine Le Pen + Éric Zemmour (2022)

Finally, one important development has been the rise in support for the populist radical right, the diversification of its electoral base and its institutionalisation in the 2022 elections. Together, Le Pen and Zemmour won 30.2% of the first-round vote (see Figure 39). Le Pen herself captured 23.2% and progressed into the runoff against Emmanuel Macron, winning 41.5% of the vote and over 13 million votes, by far the highest level of support ever achieved by the RN/FN. In the legislative elections, the RN won an unexpected and historical 89 seats, making it the largest single opposition party in the National Assembly.

5.3 The radicalisation of the mainstream right

France is a relevant case to study the potential conversion of the mainstream right into an *Ersatzversion* of the populist radical right. Such a long-term process of adjustment and transformation has been amply documented in the literature, and it may be seen as a response to both party competition and public opinion, with regards to immigration and multiculturalism.¹³⁵

Historically, in France, debates about immigration have been linked to a wide array of socio-political issues, including Muslim integration into society – as illustrated by the many controversies over the Islamic veil, burqas and mosques – socio economic inequality, urban unrest and Islamic terrorism.¹³⁶ Over time, mainstream parties of the right have adjusted their political agenda to the rising salience of immigration issues. Such vote-seeking strategies were at play as early as in the 1970s, that is, prior to the electoral breakthrough of the FN. In 1973, the first oil shock and the economic recession that followed had already led the centre-right President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing to adopt more restrictive immigration policies, claiming to halt labour immigration to the country.¹³⁷

From the mid-1980s onwards, the electoral rise of the FN has represented a new competitive challenge for the mainstream right, however. The politicisation of immigration and crime by the FN has resulted in a new cultural dimension for party competition with which traditional parties of the right have had to realign themselves.¹³⁸ Restrictive and repressive policies introduced in the areas of immigration and law and order have been generally interpreted as a reaction by the moderate right to the electoral entrenchment of the FN within the party system.¹³⁹

These developments have not been monotonic, however, and they have also been dependent upon the balance of forces between different ideological factions within the French right at any specific point in time. Drawing from Evans and Ivaldi,¹⁴⁰ this section looks at the radicalisation of the mainstream right in France over five main periods since the early 1980s, which are characterised by significant variation in party supply and strategy (see Table 2).

Table 2. Main phases of the mainstream right in France since 1981.

Period	Leadership	Strategy	Cultural issues	Europe
The FN entry phase (1981-1991)	Chirac	Sporadic cooperation with the FN at the local level	Co-optation of FN cultural issues (immigration, law and order) Cultural conservatism continued from previous period	Gaullist move towards pro-EU positions
Exclusion of the FN (1992-2004)	Chirac, Juppé	Cordon sanitaire; Republican Front	Stability of right-wing cultural agenda and policies	Gaullist support of Maastricht
The Sarkozy period of national-identity politics (2005-2012)	Sarkozy	Cordon sanitaire; "neither the FN nor the left" strategy	Persistence of right-wing cultural agenda Co-optation of FN ethno-cultural agenda and identity politics	UMP support to the ECT and Lisbon Treaty Soft Eurosceptic narratives
Fillon and the social-conservative agenda (2013-2022)	Copé, Wauquiez, Jacob		LR shift towards social conservatism and reactionary right	Soft Euroscepticism
The radical-right turn (2023-)	Wauquiez, Ciotti	"Neither the RN nor the left" strategy	Nativist policies National sovereignty claims Culture war against "wokeism"	Euroscepticism

Source: Adapted and updated from Evans and Ivaldi (2021).

5.3.1 Competing with the FN during its entry phase

As early as the mid-1980s, the RPR/UDF coalition of centrists and Gaullists tried and adjusted their positions on immigration and crime to the expectations and concerns of those voters who were beginning to desert them and turn to the FN.¹⁴¹ This was evident, for instance, in the policies adopted by the RPR/UDF in 1986/88 and again in 1993/97, as well as in the controversial symbolics and narratives by right-wing party leaders, such as hardliner Minister of the Interior Charles Pasqua, to regain ground among FN voters.¹⁴²

Such process primarily concerned shifts towards more restrictive immigration and tougher law-and-order policies. Meanwhile, the mainstream right would essentially continue to operate within the liberal democratic

system and comply with international human rights conventions, such as the European Convention on Human Rights and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, with respect to areas such as migrant family reunion, for instance. Parties of the mainstream right would also retain the core principles of republican secularism, while preserving birthright (*jus soli*, right of soil) as the basis for French citizenship, and explicitly rejecting FN nativism.

5.3.2 The political exclusion of the FN

After sporadic episodes of local cooperation with the FN in the mid-1980s, the mainstream right, under the leadership of Chirac and Alain Juppé, moved towards moral condemnation and political exclusion of the populist radical right. Essentially the mainstream right adopted two strategies of exclusion with respect to the FN: (1) a *cordon sanitaire*, whereby parties of the right would refuse to ally with the FN; and (2) a *Front Républicain* (Republican Front) consisting of ad hoc alliances of parties across the spectrum wherever and whenever a populist radical-right candidate would be likely to win a decisive round in elections.¹⁴³

Throughout the 1990s, inter-party competition on immigration became progressively framed by the ethno-cultural agenda of the FN, however, as Le Pen's party was increasingly gaining visibility and electoral strength. As Schain explains, during that period, the definition of immigration issues made a transition from "a labour-market problem to an integration/incorporation problem, to a problem that touches on national identity, problems of education, housing, law and order, as well as the requirements for citizenship".¹⁴⁴ The post-9/11 international context and the 2005 urban riots in France further exacerbated cultural xenophobia, fuelling immigration fears and negative feelings towards Islam.¹⁴⁵ The 2002 presidential election reflected the growth in support for the populist radical right, as Le Pen progressed to the second-round runoff against Chirac, winning 17.8% of the vote.

5.3.3 Sarkozy's national-identity politics

A significant shift occurred during the period of Nicolas Sarkozy's leadership over the UMP right-wing coalition between 2005 and 2012. As Marthaler suggests, Sarkozy's discourse and action on immigration control and integration diverged in significant respects from earlier centre-right handling of these issues, changing the terms of the immigration debate in France, as a response to political competition with the populist radical right, and to growing concerns about immigration from the general public.¹⁴⁶

Under Sarkozy, the mainstream right co-opted the FN's ethno-cultural agenda, explicitly linking immigration with crime, welfare abuse and – most importantly – national identity.¹⁴⁷ This shift was reflected, for instance, in Sarkozy's account of the urban riots of 2005, whereby Sarkozy linked violence to problems of social disintegration allegedly inherent in the multiplication of polygamous families, thus turning to ethno-cultural narratives and racial categorisation.

Such politicisation of immigration was further illustrated in the controversial creation of the ministry of immigration and national identity in 2007; the launch of a nationwide debate on national identity in November 2009; Sarkozy's recognition of France having "Christian roots" and the inflammatory speech that he gave in Grenoble in July 2010, in which he declared a "war on crime", while announcing the deportation of Roma.

Until Sarkozy, parties of the right had been more cautious not to relate immigration issues to national identity because of the strong negative connotation inherited from the Vichy regime during World War II.¹⁴⁸

The national-identity turn reflected both changes in the immigration debate, from socio-economic to cultural terms, and the pervasiveness of the ethno-cultural differentialist agenda of the New Right, which had been brought to the FN by intellectuals such as Bruno Mégret, Jean-Yves Le Gallou and other members of the *Club de l'Horloge*.

Put into historical perspective, the reorientation of the mainstream right under Sarkozy more largely borrowed from the ideological corpus of the French New Right (*Nouvelle Droite*). Blistering attacks on the so-called hegemonic “egalitarian dogma” and “permissive” political philosophy of the left were key to Sarkozy’s electioneering, providing the basis for his tough stance on law and order, and his pledge to restore traditional social hierarchies and duties. Additionally, Sarkozy sought to portray himself as spokesman of the “silent majority” against the supposed “permissiveness” of cultural elites, which evokes a populist framing.

The early stage of Sarkozy’s leadership was marked with the electoral collapse of the FN. In the 2007 presidential election, Jean-Marie Le Pen polled a mere 10.4% of the votes cast, compared with his previous performance of 2002 (16.9%). In the subsequent legislative elections, the FN’s score dropped down to 4.3%, which plunged the party into a deep internal crisis over ideology, future strategy and leadership, not to mention critical financial losses entailed by the candidates’ poor showing in the polls. Electorally, the mainstream right-wing UMP was the main beneficiary of the electoral losses by the FN in 2007.¹⁴⁹

In terms of party strategy, the electoral debacle of the FN, which corresponded with the end of Jean-Marie Le Pen’s period of leadership, temporarily made the cordon sanitaire and Republican Front irrelevant to the mainstream right. By the end of the period, however, the electoral revitalisation of the FN under Marine Le Pen put the Republican Front strategy under greater strain, which led the mainstream right to adopt an ambiguous “neither/nor” stance in cases where the FN would compete locally against parties of the left.¹⁵⁰ Such a strategy was inaugurated in the 2011 cantonal elections, and it has been the rule in virtually all local and legislative elections since then.

5.3.4 Fillon and the social-conservative agenda

The mainstream right continued its rightward shift on the cultural dimension in the post-Sarkozy era, showing an ever-growing divide between centrist liberals, such as former Prime Minister Alain Juppé, and conservative hardliners within LR. During the 2010s, immigration issues regained salience in the context of the 2015 Paris and 2016 Nice terrorist attacks. Meanwhile, the 2015 refugee crisis fuelled immigration fears and electoral support for the FN.¹⁵¹

In 2017, the presidential candidacy of former Prime Minister François Fillon against Juppé attested to the persistence of LR factionalism. Moreover, Fillon came closer to right-wing reactionary social movements, such as by *Manif’ pour Tous* and *Sens Commun*, which had strongly campaigned against the same-sex marriage law passed by the socialist government in 2013, thus aligning his presidential bid with the preferences of core conservative voters.¹⁵² This essentially concerned gay rights, however, as Fillon was more careful not to endorse the far-right’s agenda on abortion or gender, which would go against a predominantly culturally liberal trend in French public opinion.¹⁵³

Such a social-conservative turn on moral issues, together with the perpetuation of Sarkozy’s hardline strategy on immigration and hard stance on law and order, represented yet another significant departure from the more moderate social conservatism of the past, opening a wider space for Macron at the centre-right of French politics. In the 2017 presidential election, Fillon failed to progress to the second round, coming in

third place behind Macron and Le Pen, at 20% of the vote. Such failure was partly linked to a political scandal after allegations that Fillon's wife had been paid for a fake job. More importantly, however, the outcome of the 2017 election suggested that, while Sarkozy's policy radicalisation had been a successful strategy in 2007, it had nevertheless eroded the mainstream right's capacity to develop a credible program to effectively compete against a renewed and progressively de-demonising the FN.

The leadership of Laurent Wauquiez between December 2017 and June 2019, and his choice of Catholic hardliner and *Sens Commun* activist, François-Xavier Bellamy, to lead LR's list in the 2019 European elections reflected such an ideological reconfiguration of the mainstream right, and the party's attempt to appeal to its increasingly ageing and bourgeois electorate. LR's European platform promoted a civilisationist vision of Europe, pledging, for instance, to enshrine Europe's "Judeo-Christian roots, Greco-Roman heritage, and the Enlightenment in European treaties".¹⁵⁴ Bellamy's list won a mere 8.5% of the vote in the 2019 European Parliament (EP) elections, which were dominated by the RN and Macron's LREM. Moreover, LR's electoral debacle in the 2019 EP elections showed deep internal divisions over ideology and strategy within the right, which opposed Macron-compatible centrist liberals, on one hand, and right-wing hardliners leaning towards the RN, on the other hand.

Internal fractionalisation was perpetuated in the 2022 elections. The December 2021 presidential primary opposed right-wing hardliner Éric Ciotti to Valérie Pécresse, head of the Paris region and former Minister under Chirac, who represented moderates within the party. While she won 61% of the primary vote, Pécresse would need to accommodate the radical sector of LR, adopting a tougher stance on immigration and law and order. During the presidential campaign, she promised a "good stiff dose of authority" and suggested "building walls at the external borders of the EU". She proposed "immigration quotas" as well as a "referendum on immigration, security and secularism", while alluding to extreme-right themes such as "the great replacement" – without formally endorsing it.

This eventually resulted in significant swathes of moderate right-wing voters turning to Emmanuel Macron in the 2022 presidential election.¹⁵⁵ In the first round, support for Pécresse dramatically collapsed to just under 5% of the vote, the right's lowest performance ever since the beginning of the Fifth Republic. Pécresse's failure paved the way for hardliners Eric Ciotti and Laurent Wauquiez within LR's leadership.

5.3.5 A radical-right turn of the mainstream right

The more recent period of the mainstream right under the new leadership of Ciotti, since his winning the leadership with 53.7% of the membership vote at the party congress of December 2022, has been marked by a shift further to the right, which has taken LR closer to the RN, in both discourse and policy. This shift concerns four main areas: immigration; crime; European integration; and moral values.

The Ciotti leadership has been marked with a clear radical-right turn, adopting RN nativism. The nativist shift had already surfaced in the 2019 European election, when LR had proposed that "migrant boats should be systematically returned to African coasts", while pledging to put an end to "automatic access to social benefits for non-Europeans".¹⁵⁶ In the 2021 primary campaign, Ciotti endorsed the extreme-right conspiracy theory of the "great replacement", claiming that he was "the candidate of a people who refuse to disappear [...] proud to embody the heritage of our Judeo-Christian civilisation so that France remains France, particularly in the face of mass immigration and the rise of Islamist communitarianism (cultural separatism)".¹⁵⁷ Ciotti has also proposed a ban on wearing the Islamic veil for minors and users of public services, and that the "Judeo-Christian roots" of France should be enshrined in the constitution.¹⁵⁸

Meanwhile Ciotti has adopted RN nativist policy positions, such as the systematic deportation of criminal and delinquent foreigners, and that of “radicalised” foreigners turning to *jus sanguinis* for citizenship – against France’s long-established tradition of *jus soli* – putting an end to immigrant family reunion, as well as establishing national and European priority for jobs, social housing and social benefits. In the 2021 primary campaign, Ciotti explicitly linked crime to immigration, calling for a halt to “mass immigration”. During the riots of July 2023, LR’s plan to restore public order clearly accentuated such culturalisation of urban violence, by stating “the causes of these riots are multiple: hatred of France, uncontrolled migratory flows, juvenile delinquency, parental irresponsibility, insufficiently dissuasive penal response, and submission to the yoke of drug traffickers in France’s suburbs”.¹⁵⁹

Such reorientation was partly translated into the policy plan put forward by LR in June 2023 to “stop mass immigration”. As stated in the plan, “the objective is to affirm France’s national sovereignty [...] An immense effort is now necessary to put things back in order if we are to emerge from the migratory chaos, and to regain control”. The plan adopted the RN’s idea of cultural separatism, by claiming that “no one may become French unless they can prove assimilation into the French community”, adding “no one may take advantage of their origin or religion to evade the laws of the Republic and exempt themselves from complying with common rules”. Additionally, the plan called for facilitating deportations of undocumented migrants and foreign offenders. It also included drastic control of social and medical aid, in particular the emergency healthcare available to migrants (*Aide Médicale d’État-AME*) described as the “suction pumps” of immigration, again appropriating an old theme of the FN.¹⁶⁰ Reflecting, however, intra-party factionalism and the persistence of a more moderate group of elites within LR, the plan was limited to imposing new restrictions on *jus soli* by excluding children born from undocumented immigrants.

This nativist turn has been accompanied by national sovereignty claims that have taken LR further away from the more pro-EU stances under the Chirac and Sarkozy periods of leadership and closer to the Eurosceptic agenda of the RN. During the 1990s, the mainstream right had progressively moved towards more pro-EU positions, in contrast to the old Gaullist agenda of national sovereignty and independence during the 1970s. By 1992, the main parties of the right were supportive of European integration, campaigning in favour of “yes” in the Maastricht referendum.¹⁶¹

After the “no” vote of the French to the European Constitutional Treaty (ECT) in the 2005 referendum, Sarkozy adopted a soft Eurosceptic tone, castigating EU “bureaucracy”, while calling for the adoption of a “simplified treaty”, which somewhat helped him reconcile pro- and anti-EU voters of the right, particularly among working-class and lower-middle-class voters, who had turned to the “no” vote in the ECT referendum.¹⁶²

The recent Eurosceptic drift has been clear in the adoption by LR of the RN’s plan to hold a constitutional referendum to restore the primacy of French law over European directives in the areas of immigration and security. Such national sovereignty claims were translated into policy and formally incorporated into LR’s immigration plan in June 2023, which proposed an organic law that would “constitute a constitutional shield protecting national legislative provisions from the stipulations of international law”. This constitutional change would make it possible to enshrine in the constitution the possibility of derogating from the primacy of treaties and European law “in order to ensure respect for the constitutional identity of France or the safeguarding of the fundamental interests of the Nation”,¹⁶³ thus going against one of the founding principles of the EU and contradicting the obligations of EU membership.

Consistent with the previous social-conservative agenda of LR under Fillon, the Ciotti leadership has also continued with the defence of moral values, claiming that the French should be “freed from political correctness and the taboos dictated by the single mindset (*pensée unique*) of the left”. Reflecting a broader

movement in French media and politics,¹⁶⁴ LR has imported themes and ideas from the American culture war, most particularly with respect to fighting the so-called “wokeism”, that is, all “dogmas” that would supposedly be imposed on France by the political and cultural left. During the 2022 election, Pécresse had already denounced “wokeism” as “contrary to the [French] Republic”. In his primary campaign, Ciotti pledged to put an end to “wokeist madness” in French schools and universities.¹⁶⁵

Such a notion of wokeism has been tied to that of *Islamogauchisme* (Islam-leftism), namely, the idea of an alliance between leftist and Islamist political ideologies over issues such as race, decolonisation, feminism and LGBTQ+ rights. Ciotti has launched numerous attacks on LREM and left-wing politicians, such as Grenoble Mayor Éric Piolle, accusing them of being the “champions of Islamo-leftism”.¹⁶⁶ The political manipulation of the concept of “Islam-leftism” was further illustrated in the decision by Laurent Wauquiez, president of the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes regional council, in December 2021 to put an end to the €100,000 public subsidy to the Institut d’Etudes Politiques in Grenoble due to its alleged “ideological and communitarian drift”.¹⁶⁷

The adoption by LR of the ideas and themes of the American culture war has been progressively translating into policy. In November 2023, the LR parliamentary group in the Senate put forward a new bill to ban gender-inclusive writing (*écriture inclusive*) from official texts, thus going against a long-running battle by feminist movements to make the French language more inclusive.

As during previous periods of mainstream right radicalisation, such shifts must be seen as a response by LR to both party competition and public opinion. Polls show significant concerns over immigration among the French. According to a Fondapol survey conducted in the 2022 elections, 63% of voters think that “most immigrants do not share the values of our country and that this poses a challenge for coexistence”.¹⁶⁸ The “great replacement” conspiracy theory has permeated public opinion. Almost half of voters (47%) said they agreed that “populations of foreign origin will end up being the majority in France”. Such opinion was predominant among right-wing voters: 52% of Valérie Pécresse’s voters; 61% of Marine Le Pen’s voters; and 83% of Éric Zemmour’s voters .

In March 2023, no fewer than 59% of the French agreed that “Islam represents a threat to the Republic”, while another 61% called for “a good dose of authority and law-and-order instead of more rights”.¹⁶⁹ Recent polls indicate a hardening of attitudes towards the reception of migrants and refugees. In September 2023, 65% of the French population opposed the reception of migrants from Lampedusa, as opposed to 47% against the reception of Syrian refugees in September 2015 and 59% in January 2018.¹⁷⁰

5.4 A broader right-wing reactionary movement

Put into historical perspective, the radicalisation of the mainstream right should be placed in the context of the broader right-wing reactionary movement that has developed in France since the late 1970s and which has gained strength since the early 2000s.¹⁷¹ This movement initially emerged from the New Right (*Nouvelle Droite*) as an attempt to contest the “cultural hegemony” of the left, and it has been embodied in think tanks such as the *GRECE*, *Club de l’Horloge*, *AGRIF* and *Comités d’Action Républicaine*. The New Right’s national-liberal-authoritarian ideological synthesis has set the basis for structuring the “right-of-the-Right” pole of national politics in the late 1970s before reshaping the FN ideological agenda during the 1980s and the 1990s.

Such a movement is embodied by cultural elites, including journalists such as Yan Rioufol and Elisabeth Lévy, essayists such as Eric Zemmour and philosophers such as Alain Finkielkraut. These elites produce a

profusion of literature, public discourses and media debates, offering new interpretative frames for socio-economic and cultural issues, which tend to transgress the boundaries of legitimate political discourse.

Unlike the *Nouvelle Droite* in the 1970s and the 1980s, which had relatively little public visibility, the current conservative movement operates within the mainstream, with regular access to major media outlets, for example, TV channel C-News, radio station Europe 1, and newspapers and magazines such as *Paris Match* and *Le Journal du Dimanche*, all owned by right-wing conservative media mogul Vincent Bolloré. Such media presence is complemented with the development of online right-wing politics in France. The web is host to a vast array of right-wing conservative and extremist actors, providing a space for the diffusion of their critique of the progressive left and propagation of their counter-cultural discourses.¹⁷²

Since the early 2000s, this right-wing reactionary movement has gained increased visibility and influence in public discourse and media debates in France.¹⁷³ It has helped increase the salience of FN issues in the mainstream political space and media, and it has had a strong influence on both elites and public opinion, thus somewhat facilitating the amalgamation of the mainstream and populist radical right. In December 2023, one third of the French population said they subscribed to Le Pen's ideas, the highest level recorded since the mid-2010s, while another 43% said that the RN is now capable of governing, as opposed to 25% when Marine Le Pen took over the party in 2011.¹⁷⁴

5.5 Conclusion: Challenges to the left and liberal democracy

To conclude, we look at the impact that the radicalisation of the mainstream right has had on the social-democratic left and, more broadly, on liberal democracy in France.

5.5.1 Implications for the social-democratic left

Social democracy is in a state of deep crisis in France. Once the dominant party on the left, the Parti Socialiste (PS) received its worst results in the 2017 and 2022 presidential elections. On both occasions, voters delivered severe blows to socialist candidates, with Benoit Hamon and Anne Hidalgo polling a mere 6.4 and 1.8% of the first-round vote, respectively. Meanwhile, the elections have shown a rise in support for Mélenchon's populist radical left at 19.6 and 22% of the vote share in 2017 and 2022, respectively.

Such a structural collapse of social democracy is only partly related to the rise of the populist radical right. Historically, the mainstream left in France, like the right, has faced the growing electoral strength of the populist radical right, particularly among working-class voters previously attached to left-wing parties and who have defected in numbers to the FN/RN since the late 1980s.¹⁷⁵ In the 2022 presidential runoff election, Le Pen won no fewer than 67 and 57% of the votes among working-class and lower-middle-class white-collar workers, respectively¹⁷⁶.

The main factors for the decline of PS lie elsewhere, however. As argued by Chabal and Behrent, attitudes towards neoliberalism became a major line of fracture within the party during the 1990s, splitting the party between social-liberals and social-statists.¹⁷⁷ Such a division was accentuated during the Hollande socialist presidency between 2012 and 2017. The latter was characterised by significant policy shifts in both the cultural and economic dimensions of competition. Firstly, while preserving adversarial strategies with respect to the populist radical right, the Hollande presidency took a rightist turn on law and order in the wake of the Islamic terrorist attacks of 2015, which alienated the cultural left and the Greens.¹⁷⁸ Secondly, as Fulla

explains, the adoption by Hollande of social liberalism and supply-side economic policies alienated core socialist voters, also causing deep internal dissent within the PS.¹⁷⁹

Since 2017, the socialist left has grappled with the consolidation of both Macron and La France Insoumise (LFI). In the 2022 legislatives, despite ideological divergences, the PS entered an alliance with LFI, *de facto* accepting Mélenchon's leadership over the left. Meanwhile, Macron's party, as a central force in the national party system, intersecting between the left and the right, continues to mobilise among moderate centre-left and right voters, thus largely depriving the social-democratic left of the opportunity to recruit voters who may feel abandoned by the mainstream right due to its radicalisation.

As elsewhere in Europe, the future of social democracy in France lies in its ability to articulate a new vision and credible policy agenda, prioritising social justice and equality, tackling climate change, while also addressing identity and security issues that have become paramount in the eyes of French voters, particularly in the working and lower middle classes. In a context marked with rising rates of abstention, the PS needs to speak to disenfranchised voters and mobilise across marginalised sectors of society. Socialists still have a strong presence at the local and regional levels, which may serve as a basis for a comeback in national politics, while also providing a reservoir of new elites. Strategically, the PS also needs to distance itself from Mélenchon's LFI and to reposition itself to the centre-left of French politics.

Until recently, because of his role as a central force in the national party system, intersecting between the left and the right, Macron has been able to mobilise among moderate centre-left and right voters, thus largely depriving the social-democratic left of the opportunity to recruit voters who may feel abandoned by the mainstream right due to its radicalisation. The 2023 pension reform and controversial immigration bill have signalled a significant policy shift to the right by Macron, however, which may alienate his previous left-wing supporters. Macron's party itself was deeply divided over the new immigration law in December 2023, as a substantial number of Renaissance MPs – about one in four – particularly on the left side of the party, voted against the bill or abstained. As Macron will not seek re-election in 2027, the next presidential election may see a return to a more traditional bipolar competition, which may open a space for the PS to recapture the left-wing vote lost to Macron since 2017.

5.5.2 Challenges to liberal democracy

Finally, the radicalisation of the mainstream right increasingly represents a challenge to liberal democracy in France. The adoption by LR of a radical-right agenda is exerting significant pressure on Emmanuel Macron's centrist government. This was recently illustrated by the passing of the immigration bill in December 2023 with the support of both LR and the RN. The LR group proposed, among other things, the elimination of state medical aid and revoking birthright citizenship. Additionally, LR senators suggested tightening family reunification rules and reinstating the offense of illegal stay for undocumented immigrants. The final bill contained hardline measures such as reduced access to welfare benefits for foreigners, which allowed Le Pen to claim the new law as an "ideological victory" for her party's idea of "national preference".

The immigration bill has also seen LR adopting a populist rhetoric opposing core constitutional principles. The mainstream right has joined the RN in warning against an unfavourable decision by France's Constitutional Court regarding the conformity of the new law, suggesting it would then be a "politically motivated decision". LR leaders such as Wauquiez seized the opportunity to claim that, if the law were repelled, "the French people should have the final say through a referendum".¹⁸⁰ Such criticism was widely echoed by right-wing media of

the Bolloré group, which denounced a “government of judges”, while arguing that the rule of law ultimately constrains popular sovereignty.¹⁸¹

The nativist shift by LR also involves questioning fundamental principles outlined in international conventions on human rights and the role of international courts, especially the European Court of Human Rights, breaking with the attitude of the conservative right in previous periods. Ciotti has embraced illiberal views, claiming to “give back their voice to the people through the use of referendum”, while vowing to fight against the “taboos of political correctness” and to “free France from the yoke of the European Court of Human Rights”. In the 2021 primary campaign, Ciotti went as far as to propose a “French Guantánamo” to deal with terrorism.¹⁸²

Another significant indicator of this illiberal drift is LR’s stance towards extreme-right groups. Alongside the radicalisation of the conservative right in France, there has recently been a resurgence of political violence and street activism from extreme-right groups, such as *Les Natifs*, *Guignol Squad* or the *Division Martel*, with links to the hooligan movement, and roots in the identitarian movement. During extreme-right demonstrations and marches in November 2023, following the murder of a 16-year-old boy in the Drôme department, Ciotti initially refused to condemn the violent actions of extreme-right members in Romans-sur-Isère before retracting his statement. Meanwhile, he referred to the murder as yet another “consequence of mass immigration” and “anti-White racism”, which is an old FN idea.¹⁸³

Finally, in terms of party strategy, Ciotti’s leadership has been marked by the waning of the *cordon sanitaire*, as Ciotti further distanced himself from the political centre by announcing his intention to endorse Éric Zemmour in a possible presidential runoff against Macron. Unlike Pécresse and other moderates within LR, Ciotti crucially refused to endorse Macron in the 2022 presidential runoff against Le Pen, leaving the door open to supporting the radical-right candidate.

Overall, France illustrates the role of political elites in exploiting the chronic vulnerabilities of democracy. As recently suggested by Bartels, democracy essentially erodes from the “top”.¹⁸⁴ The ideological radicalisation of LR participates in such an erosion of democracy. The success of the populist radical right in France is not so much a reflection of growing nativist and authoritarian attitudes among voters, but a reflection of how populist entrepreneurs successfully politicise such issues and raise their salience.¹⁸⁵

Put into historical perspective, one lesson from the French case is that the policy radicalisation of the mainstream right may be a successful strategy in the short term – as illustrated by Sarkozy’s electoral success in the early 2000s – but it may significantly erode its capacity to develop a credible program in the long run. The strategic repositioning of the mainstream right may herald a significant reconfiguration of the right pole of French politics in the future, with an increasingly normalised RN as its dominant force.