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# How populist are populist parties in France? Understanding parties' strategies within a systemic approach

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## ABSTRACT

The Front National is the prime example of anti-systemic and populist party in France. But in the 2000s, La France Insoumise on the far left also developed a rhetoric that could fall into this category yet without sharing the ideology of far-right party. Reinvestigating previous studies, we may ask if the populist concept make sense to understand populism in France? Thus following a systemic field analysis, we study variations in the discourse of these two parties during campaigning and routine periods by analyzing the Facebook posts of their two leaders. They do not use the same strategies and, variations between the two periods highlight two different uses of populist rhetoric in addition to their two opposed ideologies. This paper discusses the relevance of the notion by stressing the need to think about populism within a systemic approach in the French political field that partly explains its spread to almost all parties.

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## Introduction

French academic debate about populism is somewhat paradoxical. Based on the international literature, French researchers have debated on the definition of populism and whether it can be considered essentially as an ideology, relying on Mudde's definition of populism 'that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people' (Mudde, 2004, p. 543; See also Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017a; Taggart, 2000). Or they are considering it as a communication

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style when ‘messages expressing populist ideology are [...] associated with the use of a characteristic set of presentational style elements’ (de Vreese, Esser, Aalberg, Reinemann, & Stanyer, 2018, p. 3; see also: Aalberg, Esser, Reinemann, Strömbäck, & de Vreese, 2017; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Moffitt, 2016), or as a political strategy (Roberts, 1995; Weyland, 2001). Populism is neither *only* a matter of ideology nor of the leader’s charisma. It is a ‘thin ideology’ when it is a ‘political communication style of political actors that refers to the people’ (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007, p. 322; see also: Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017a), but also a useful tool in representative democracies to win elections (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018, p. 73). In other words, populism as an ideology can only ‘be studied through discourse, which is, itself, a very central element of political style’ (Ostiguy & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 73).

The expression has been used more and more by French political scientists, while also often being criticised when used as a concept (Collovald, 2019; Hubé & Truan, 2017 and Tarragoni, 2019). Moreover, populism has usually been linked with right-wing parties. This framing of the problem stems from French history (Rovira Kaltwasser, Taggart, Ochoa Espejo, & Ostiguy, 2017) and the existence of at least three previous major populist movements, *Boulangism*, *Cesaro-Bonapartism* and *Poujadism*<sup>1</sup>, and a major extreme-right party (the Front National - FN) which has structured partisan competition since the mid-1980s (Dezé, 2012). While there is a consensus in the literature in referring to the FN as ‘populist’, other actors from different families are also often described in the same way: the center-right and former President Jacques Chirac during the electoral campaign of 1995; the center-left Bernard Tapie in the 1990s (Surel, 2002), and the conservative President Nicolas Sarkozy between 2007 and 2012 (Haegel, 2011). But scholars have stressed how thin the populist ideology is (Stanley, 2008), and that it needs a complementary and more structuring ideology to be combined (Surel, 2019). Moreover, the emergence of a new left-wing populist party in 2008 has added vagueness to the analysis of populism in France. Since then, the concept has been characterised by its diffusion, beyond the extreme right, to the point of questioning its relevance.

Following this line, our proposition is to consider that populist political discourse is performative and is a positioning strategy of one political party in the general symbolic economy of competitive political discourses. Populist discourse can be performed by parties that do not primary share populist ideology (Tarragoni, 2019).

Hence, this paper aims to investigate the way two French parties labelled as populist address their electorate: the Front National/Rassemblement national (FN/RN), the ‘prototypical populist’ and oldest institutionalised extreme-right party in Europe; and the new left-populist Front de Gauche/France Insoumise (FdG/LFI), created during the ‘new momentum for left-wing populism’ of the Euro crisis (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, pp. 34, 37). Both parties contributed to the ‘electoral earthquake’ (Cole, 2019) in the French party system during the last presidential elections. Four parties concentrated 84.9% of the votes during the first round. Emmanuel Macron ended up 2.7% ahead (with 24.01%) of Marine Le Pen (21.3%). The difference between the second position and the fourth position, held by Jean-Luc Mélenchon (19.6%), was only 618,540 votes among the 31,381,603 French voters (see Table 1). But the FN and the LFI have not always enjoyed electoral success. After Jean-Marie Le Pen’s qualification for the second round of the Presidential election in 2002 (16.86%), the FN only managed fourth position in 2007 (10.44%), losing voters to Nicolas Sarkozy, and the decade was not a successful one. However, since the 2012 Presidential election (17.9%, third position), the party has maintained a high share of the vote, winning both the 2015 regional and 2019 European elections. Here lies the main difference with the FdG and LFI, whose only success – for the moment – was in the most recent Presidential election, after which it lost more than 5.6 million voters within two years, between 2017 and 2019.<sup>2</sup>

In this political context, populist phrasing is a way to make the ideology of the party acceptable (Copsey, 1997; Ellinas, 2010; Fieschi, 2004) and gain support. This populist appeal may be considered ‘simply [as] a way in which a politician or a political party attempts, usually voluntarily, to woo supporters’ (Ostiguy & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 74). But should we speak in the case of these two parties of populist parties based on their ideological roots and/or used as a performative discourse in their strategic positioning towards competing parties? The ‘new Front-National’ (renamed Rassemblement national (RN) – National Rally since

**Table 1.** Parties’ results during the most recent French elections (2012–2019) – as a %.

	Presid. 2012	Legisl. 2012	European 2014	Regional 2015	Presid. 2017	Legisl. 2017	European 2019
FN/RN	17.9	13.6	24.9	27.7	21.3	13.2	23.3
FdG/ LFI	11.1	6.9	6.3	2.5	19.6	11.0	6.3
Turn- out	79.5	57.2	42.4	49.9	77.8	48.7	50.1

Sources: French Ministry of the Interior. All results are those of the first electoral round

2018) led by Jean-Marie Le Pen's daughter, Marine Le Pen, remains an extreme-right party (Almeida, 2019; Crépon, Dézé, & Mayer, 2015; Surel, 2019). For Collovald (2019), it is a 'misinterpretation' to call the FN populist, as the term legitimises the party's strategy, making it look milder and 'only' populist. One example among others: the party's leaders have always attacked people who label the party 'far rightist', from Jean-Marie Le Pen's first use of his media right of reply in 1996 to the latest Marine Le Pen 2018 radio RTL interview in which she stated that the use of this concept was a lie (RTL, 2018). The use of green or republican symbols (like the French secularism policy: *laïcité*) or lookalikes should also be understood as a clever de-radicalization strategy by the party's leaders to soften its exclusive ideology (Almeida, 2017). Therefore, by cataloguing the party only as populist, the word acts as a veil.

Conversely, only few studies have been published on 'left-wing populist parties' in France, in comparison to Podemos in Spain or Syriza in Greece (Font, Graziano, & Tsakatika, 2021; Mudde, 2017b; Seguin, 2017). Until the advent of the new Left Front (Front de Gauche – FdG) led by Jean-Luc Mélenchon in the 2010s, neither the French Communist Party nor any other leftist party had been labelled as populist during the fifth Republic (established in 1958). Reacting to Maurice Duverger's theory (1954), Georges Lavau analyzed the French communist party as an answer to the advocacy needs of its working-class electorate, noting the 'tribune function' of the party leader (1953 and 1981). With his book *Qu'ils s'en aillent tous* [Throw them all out] published in 2010, Jean-Luc Mélenchon not only offered a new discourse within the French political party system but also assumed that he was a populist: 'I do not want to forbid myself from being a populist. This is an elite repulsion. [...] Am I Populist? I'm fine with that' (*L'Express*, 2010). The party's strategy is directly inspired by the theory of Mouffe (2005, 2018) who supported the candidate during the Presidential campaign in 2017. Populism seems to be part of the core party ideology (Tarragoni, 2019), but also of the leader's strategy to provoke debate in the public sphere. Scholars are not convinced that his populist discourse is mainly ideological. It could be a strategy for winning elections, whereas the ideology of the party is typically leftist (Castaño, 2018; Premat, 2019). At least it is an inclusive populism, radically different from the exclusive ideology of the Front-National/Rassemblement national (Ivaldi, 2019).

Looking only at the historical roots of the two parties, it is obvious that both parties do not belong to the same political family. But seen from the

viewpoint of the leader's strategy, both use a typical pattern of populism constructed around the leader (Weyland, 2001, 2017) as the saviour of polity. The LFI is also the product of a political enterprise in which Jean-Luc Mélenchon plays the central role. However, this question of the 'leader' is not specific to these parties. The Fifth French Republic, characterised by its hyper-presidentialism and a solitary exercise of power, has been marked since General de Gaulle by the figure of the 'providential man' (or woman). This is true of all parties, including those who propose a more parliamentary Sixth Republic, such as the LFI. French political media coverage shows that France has one of the highest levels of personalisation in the Western world (Van Aelst, Sheaffer, Hubé, & Papathanassopoulos, 2017).

In both cases, the term *populism* blurs the boundaries between parties which are opposite in almost every respect, and in doing so, weakens the concept itself, making it, in our opinion, too simplistic to offer an understanding of the way the French partisan field is structured. In this context where several parties are labelled as populist, several issues emerge; 'who are the populists in France?' and 'how populist are they'? To answer these questions, we advocate the heuristic benefits of a socio-cultural approach to the analysis of parties (Ostiguy & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017).

Going back to a field theory, we consider the way parties position themselves in the national competition within a systemic approach: parties are collections of individuals, groups and coalitions with divergent views and interests, seeking representation and talking in the name of specific social groups (Bourdieu, 1991). The political field is the arena of competition for power where parties strive for this monopoly in speaking on behalf of the lay people (Bourdieu, 2018; Fligstein & McAdam, 2012). The structure of the political field reflects thus the balance of power between the different participants. The periodic occurrence of new movements indicates a struggle against the monopolisation by political professionals of the definition of legitimate political issues. Ideology and strategy, which are closely related, cannot be considered as independent factors, even in explaining the electoral success of the Front National (FN) (Birenbaum & Villa, 2003; Ellinas, 2010; Mammone, 2009). In politics, paraphrasing Austin, 'to say is to do', i.e. to make people believe that one can do what one says, and in particular to make new principles of division in the social world known and recognised (Bourdieu, 1983). The populist strategy must be understood as such. Moreover, the more successful the rhetoric seems to be, i.e. supported by electoral successes, the more this rhetoric becomes *mainstream* and shared by all.

Therefore, we have to consider the way parties position themselves in the *national* competition in opposition with other competitors' political discourses and proposals. Parties evolve their ideologies according to their political opponents, without necessarily interacting directly with each other. Populism has to be considered as a classification tool that allows parties to distinguish themselves: it cannot be understood *alone*, either as an ideology or as a strategic tool (Ostiguy & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). In other words, a political party does not only aim at reiterating fixed political attitudes, but also seeks to propose a general set of what Mosca (1939) once described as 'political formulas' that narrowly depend on the institutional, ideological and political context in which they are stated. Moreover, the existing literature tends to describe populism using only a static approach. As a politico-strategic tool, populism needs to be understood not only from the political elite angle, but also from that of the media and the citizens. 'Populist political communication can be understood as a process that is embedded in structural and situational macro-level factors' (Reinemann, Aalberg, Esser, Ström-bäck, & de Vreese, 2017, p. 21), which includes the national political culture and structures, but also the characteristics of each media (and the uses of social media) and political system (Maurer et al., 2019).

## Main questions and hypothesis

This paper is a first explorative analysis mobilising this extensive programme. In order to analyse how populism is applied in France, we analyzed the digital strategies of LFI and RN on Facebook in order to measure how this political communication stance is embodied. Based on the definitions of populism already listed, which do not really distinguish the specificities of extreme right and left organisations, how does the term apply in the French case? Do the two parties' online communication strategies reveal something about the nature of populism in France and the relevance of the concept? (RQ1). The apparent convergence of parties' communication around a populist strategy should be particularly visible during electoral campaign periods (Gerstlé & Nai, 2019; Weyland, 2017) (H1), when parties seek to broaden their electorate. This process is reinforced by the fact that populism is becoming mainstream (Conti, 2018). At the same time, if the populist trend and appeal is as strong as expected, their communication will converge around the appeal of the people (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017a; Stanley, 2008) and/or around the leader's charisma (Weyland, 2001,

2017) (H2a). But at the same time, in the light of the comparative history of these two parties, we can expect their ideological roots to be deeply anchored, and not to lead to a populist and ideological convergence (H2b). Finally (RQ2), a comparison of campaign and non-campaign periods makes it possible to establish what is contextual and what is constant. This last question could provide us with initial insights into how political communication and partisan ideology should be distinguished in the study of populism. Ultimately, populism remains solely an ‘adverbial-ideology’ (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017a) and needs a ‘more traditionnal’ ideology apart from the people’s claim.

Our paper argues that populism has shifted from right-wing organisations to far-left-wing parties in its main political rhetoric. But at the same time, we want to emphasise that the positioning of both Jean-Luc Mélenchon and Marine Le Pen should be understood in relation to the general changes in France’s party system, in which anti-elitism and media criticism have been used by all political competitors, from the 2007 Sarkozy presidency to the current French President Emmanuel Macron (Cole, 2019; Gougou & Persico, 2017). We therefore propose an exploratory reflection on the transformations of the French political field and the diffusion of a populist style that questions the relevance of the term in the French context.

## Data and method

For several years now, RN and LFI have engaged in digital political campaign strategies to gain visibility on social networks (Greffet, 2013; Ville-neuve, 2020). A significant proportion of the communication of these organisations goes online, via Facebook and Twitter. Social networks are seen as a perfect tool to address the people directly and to bypass certain intermediaries (Gerbaudo, 2018; Kriesi, 2015). Social media are places where populist parties and leaders defend their ideological proposals more readily and try to talk directly to ‘the people’. An ‘elective affinity’ between populism and social media has been diagnosed (Gerbaudo, 2018, p. 745). Scholars have recently demonstrated that politicians from extremist parties include more populist ideas in their messages, especially on Facebook (Ernst, Engesser, Büchel, Blassnig, & Esser, 2017, 2019; Stockemer, 2019). This is the first reason why Facebook has been chosen for this analysis. But looking in detail at populists’ social media discourse in comparison with that of non-populist candidates, we may be more nuanced: populists are not always only populists



and/or do not defend the same ideology (Maurer & Diehl, 2020). We have therefore chosen to focus on analyzing Facebook posts rather than Twitter for two other reasons. Facebook is more popular and socially mixed (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2015) and allows more interactions (Trieu, Bayer, Ellison, Schoenebeck, & Falk, 2019) than Twitter. In France, 74% of internet users also use Facebook but only 28% of them used Twitter in the second half of 2018 (Global Web Index, 2019). Finally, unlike Twitter, Facebook does not have a character limitation, allowing users to develop longer arguments and affording more space to an extended populist discourse (Ernst et al., 2017). As shown in the table below, the very high degree of personalisation of French political life where leaders have more followers than their party encourages us to focus on these elected officials rather than on their organisation. It should also be noted that the RN is the most followed French party on Facebook, ahead of the party of the President of the Republic, Emmanuel Macron, La République en Marche (see Table 2).

In order to measure populism, we chose to study the discourse of these leaders over two periods, during the campaign phase (between 05/11/2019 and 05/24/2019) and out of campaign (07/02/2019 until 07/30/2019). In doing so, we neutralised, to some extent, the context effects by studying ideological continuities. In order to cover comparable periods, we selected the month of May 2019, during which the European election campaign took place, and posts written during the month of July 2019, once the campaign was over. A total of 233 posts were analysed in details, divided as shown in Table 3. The first interesting result is that both candidates posted much more during the campaign than in the routine period, confirming **RQ2**. Populist leaders do use social media in a highly selective and strategic way: to gain new voters and to overload the political electoral agenda with these posts. Marine Le Pen used Facebook in an intensively strategic way during the campaign, posting more than 8 posts a day (115 posts during the period), but conversely, was very sparing in her online presence during this routine period, with only one message a day (28 messages). Jean-Luc Mélenchon was more consistent.

**Table 2.** Number of followers on Facebook among the main French politicians and their party.

	Individual	Party
Jean-Luc Mélenchon (LFI)	1 156 370	203 755
Marine Le Pen (FN/RN)	1 580 937	439 550
Emmanuel Macron (LREM)	3 187 606	251 428

Data collected from Facebook, June 15, 2020

**Table 3.** Data collection (number of Facebook posts).

	Campaign period (from 05/11/19 until 05/24/19)	Out of campaign period (from 07/02/19 until 07/30/19)
Marine Le Pen (RN)	115	28
Jean-Luc Mélenchon (LFI)	45	45
Total	160	73

He posted three messages a day during the campaign and every two days during the routine period (45 messages for both periods).

To empirically explore how media relay and present populist content to citizens and political actors, we first had to build a typology of populist communication strategies based on the following three components of populism highlighted in the abovementioned literature (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007): *people-centrism* – ‘the people’ defined as the population of a country in contrast to those who govern them; *elite-centrism* – ‘the elite’, referring to those who own the greatest power due to their economic, political, media, or cultural influence and resources; and *exclusion of specific out-groups* – ‘the others’, opposed to the people from whom they are excluded for ethnic, religious, criminal or sexual reasons. These three dimensions are often associated to the populist political communication style and are contributing to the definition of an *empty* – i.e. a minimalist use of the people’ word for strategic purposes – or a *complete populism* ideology, when combining all three dimensions (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), allowing us to catalogue how each leader fulfils the three dimensions of populism (see Table 4 and also Reinemann et al., 2017; Ernst, Blassnig, Engesser, Büchel, & Esser, 2019). These three categories were classified into 60 variables and sub-variables (for details, see Bennett et al., 2020), in order to find out whether posts referred to the people, the elite and out-groups,

**Table 4.** Dimension of Populism.

Dimension	Populist key message	Underlying ideology
Anti-Elitism	Discrediting the elite	Elites are corrupt
	Blaming the elite	Elites are harmful
	Detaching the elite from the people	Elites do not represent the people
	Denying elite sovereignty	The elites deprive the people of their sovereignty
People centrism	Stressing the people’s virtues	The people are virtuous
	Praising the people’s achievements	The people are beneficial
	Stating a monolithic people	The people are homogenous
	Approaching the people	The populist represents the people
The ‘Others’	Demanding popular sovereignty	The people are the ultimate sovereign
	Discrediting specific groups (the others)	Some groups are dangerous
	Excluding the others	Some groups aren’t part of the people

Source: Ernst et al. (2019, p. 3)

and how the people, the types of elites (national, international, economic) and out-groups (foreigners, migrants, etc.) were represented. But in order to understand whether populist parties were merely protest parties, radicalising the debate from the fringe, we looked at their proposals (if any).

### Political context matters: The uses of social media

First of all, the study of Facebook posts surprisingly reveals that Marine Le Pen develops a more populist strategy during non-campaign periods than in election periods (see [Table 5](#)). Even more surprisingly, more than half of her posts (51.3% - 59 out of 115) during the campaign had no populist content. In contrast, Jean-Luc Mélenchon seems more consistent between the two periods. He used at least one populist strategy in approximately two thirds of his posts (25 out of 45) during the campaign and slightly less (26 out of 45) during the routine period. In other words, populist rhetoric is not as common as all that for these parties. And looking at these first results, Jean-Luc Mélenchon seems more populist than Marine Le Pen, without being fully so.

More precisely, another peculiarity of these French parties is that the complete populist strategy (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), combining anti-elite discourse with references to the people and excluding others, is only a minor position, used quasi-exclusively by the extreme-right every eighth post during the campaign (12.2%) and only every fourteenth post in routine periods (7.1%; 2 out of 28). Jean-Luc Mélenchon only used it twice during the campaign period. Last but not least, with regard to the debate around the ideological roots of populism (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017a; Stanley, 2008), these strategies contain a relatively small proportion of references to the people: one third during the campaign (54 out of 160 posts) and one fifth in the routine period (15 posts out of 73) (see [Table 6](#)).

**Table 5.** Use of populist strategies.

	N= (%)	No Strategy	One Strategy	Two Strategies	Three Strategies
Election period	Marine Le Pen (n=115)	59 (51.3)	27 (23.5)	15 (13)	14 (12.2)
	Jean-Luc Mélenchon (n=45)	16 (35.5)	13 (28.9)	14 (31.1)	2 (4.4)
	Total (n=160)	75 (46.9)	40 (25)	29 (18.1)	16 (10)
Routine period	Marine Le Pen (n=28)	11 (39.3)	6 (21.4)	9 (32.1)	2 (7.1)
	Jean-Luc Mélenchon (n=45)	19 (42.2)	17 (37.8)	9 (20)	-
	Total (n=73)	30 (41.1)	23 (31.5)	18 (24.7)	2 (2.7)

The two candidates referred to the people in very similar proportions during the election period (every three posts for both of them). Jean-Luc Mélenchon referred less to the ‘people’ in the non-campaign period (6 out of 45 posts), while Marine Le Pen continued to refer to them in similar proportions (9 out of 38). Looking at this argument, both parties converged during the campaign in their ‘appeal to the people’ discourse (**H2a**). But such references seem to be the minimal requirement in terms of ‘empty populist strategy’, and should be compared with the nature of the discourse used by other mainstream parties during an election.

In fact, this ‘people’ argument is an empty one. The two candidates say very little about what they mean by ‘people’. Very few posts develop a clearly defined vision of the people, and when they do, it is only during the campaign. Marine Le Pen addresses the people in rather general terms. For example: ‘Ultimately, CETA therefore raises the question of the model of society we want - a highly political question - and the freedom given to the people to decide whether or not to impose their own model of society’ (07/17/20). Jean-Luc Mélenchon also often refers to the ‘people’ without really defining them: ‘No to this way of bringing Europe and the people of Europe to disaster’, or ‘It is the people who make history’ (05/16/20). However, Marine Le Pen tries to define the people during the campaign, which she no longer does in the weeks following the election. She used the heartland argument four times, one that was never used by Mélenchon. In this case, not only does populism appear to be a very thin ideology (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007, p. 322; see also: Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017a), but the ‘people’ has no real content.

Differences between the two candidates are obvious when one looks at the other two arguments (**H2b**): the elites and the others. It is in the first dimension (**Table 6**) that Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s populist style can be clearly observed. Even more than those of his far-right opponent, Mélenchon’s speeches are characterised by very frequent and critical references to the elites. More than half of his posts (51.1% during

**Table 6.** Populist indicator: references to the people, the elite and the others.

	N= (%)	Reference to the people	Reference to the elite	Reference to the others
Election period	Marine Le Pen (n = 115)	n = 38 (33)	n = 37 (32.2)	n = 24 (20.9)
	Jean-Luc Mélenchon (n = 45)	n = 16 (35.5)	n = 28 (62.2)	n=3 (6.7)
Routine period	Marine Le Pen (n = 28)	n = 9 (32.1)	n = 13 (46.4)	n = 8 (28.6)
	Jean-Luc Mélenchon (n = 45)	n = 6 (13.3)	n = 23 (51.1)	n=4 (8.9)

routine periods and more than 62.2% during the campaign period) disparage the elites. During the campaign period, Mélenchon made more than twice as many anti-elite statements as his opponent. It is part of the left-populist concept developed by the philosopher Mouffe (2005): a leftist discourse must fight against the oligarchy and the elites, switching from class opposition to a people vs elite one.

Unlike attitudes towards ‘the people’, the anti-elite discourse is much more elaborate and specific. The elites targeted by the two personalities are mainly national political elites, but there are also some specific features. Following a left-leaning stance, Jean-Luc Mélenchon is much more critical towards the media and the national economic elites (mainly the rich). Every sixth campaign post was about the national economic elites while Marine Le Pen used this argument only twice. In addition, Jean-Luc Mélenchon develops a strong international anti-elite rhetoric (44.4% - 20 posts out of 45) (mainly focused on the European institutions and their actors). Interestingly, this anti-economic and anti-international elites discourse characterising Mélenchon during the campaign is almost abandoned once the election is over [Table 7](#).

Jean-Luc Mélenchon defines the elites in very general terms, using a systemic and anti-domination discourse: ‘Those at the top are those who think they are authorised to think for the others’ (05/16/20), ‘the whole system is about preventing people from thinking’(21/05/2019). Conversely, Marine Le Pen focuses more on specific national elites by targeting and/or naming members of the government or the President of the Republic: ‘The government is putting all its energy into slandering and defaming us’(05/16/20), ‘It’s time to send a message to Emmanuel Macron, who pretends not to hear the suffering of a people’ (05/24/20). But her anti-elite discourse is not very elaborate or diverse. As a logical consequence of Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s anti-elite discourse, we observe

**Table 7.** Type of elite criticised.

	N= (%)	Elite in general	National elites	National Economic Elite	Media	Internat. elites
Election period	Marine Le Pen (n=115)	6 (5.2)	32 (27.8)	2 (1.4)	4 (3.5)	20 (17.4)
	Jean-Luc Mélenchon (n=45)	14 (31.1)	24 (53.3)	8 (17.8)	8 (17.8)	20 (44.4)
Routine period	Marine Le Pen (n=28)	3 (10.7)	9 (32.1)	-	2 (7.1)	2 (7.1)
	Jean-Luc Mélenchon (n = 45)	8 (17.8)	12 (26.7)	2 (4.4)	3 (6.7)	2 (4.4)

that he uses a strategy of ‘discrediting’ and ‘blaming’ more often than his opponent (Table 8): ‘Well, that’s the standard answer from the elites who despise people’ and ‘The European Union is a major support for these evils’ Mélenchon (05/19/20). On the other hand, this virulence and discrediting clearly eases off in the post-election period, while it increases for Marine Le Pen. So our assumption (RQ2) is founded: parties’ (populist) strategy is context-dependent (campaign or not) and not particularly structural. Second lesson: the anti-elite discourse characterises the leftist discourse of Jean-Luc Mélenchon during his campaign much more than it does Marine Le Pen (H2b).

The same time difference occurs (but in reverse) for the last argument. Their ways of talking about the ‘others’, those who are excluded from the people, are radically different. While Mélenchon is more critical of elites than his opponent, Le Pen refers about three times more often to ‘others’ than the president of the LFI. She criticised the ‘others’ every five posts during the campaign (20.4%). More surprisingly, Marine Le Pen seems to have hardened her anti-foreigner discourse after the election period. She used this discourse every four messages (8 out of 28) during this routine period. Five posts concerned migrants living in the country in both periods and four additional ones were about immigrants during the campaign. Conversely, Mélenchon *never* criticises foreigners living in or coming into the country. We can hypothesise that this strategy is intended not to frighten voters who are disappointed with Emmanuel Macron or who are on the right of the political spectrum.

The ‘others’ targeted by Marine Le Pen are almost exclusively foreigners, immigrants or migrants. Her speeches take up the traditional theme of the far right in France, for example when she states: ‘We understand why our leaders justify and support this trafficking of human beings and knowingly place our countries under the threat of massive and endless immigration’ (24/05/2019). They constitute a category of ‘others’ that Mélenchon never mentions at all. He very rarely refers to others and when he does so it is mainly to refer to political and ideological opponents. In other words, there is a clear difference between the discourses of the radical left and the radical right (H2b): the former is

**Table 8.** Types of criticism of the elite.

	N=(%)	Discrediting the elite	Blaming the elite
Election period	Marine Le Pen (n=115)	18 (15.6)	18 (15.6)
	Jean-Luc Mélenchon (n=45)	15 (33.3)	15 (33.3)
Routine period	Marine Le Pen (n=28)	2 (7.1)	6 (21.4)
	Jean-Luc Mélenchon (n = 45)	2 (4.4)	6 (13.3)

mainly fighting against the elite whereas extreme-right parties are discrediting both the elite and the ‘others’. These results are also reflected in a previous analysis of the manifestos during the 2012, 2017 and 2019 elections (Baloge & Hubé, 2019).

In order to confirm these observations, it would be necessary to consider not only the discursive supply but also its demand. This point would exceed the content of our article. However, looking at the online-networks of both leaders on Facebook during these periods in 2020, we find that pages shared by the two populist leaders are almost exclusively pages related to themselves, their party or other members of their organisation (Baloge & Hubé, 2021 forthcoming). Both networks faithfully reflected their ideological orientations, while excluding his/her opponent and confirming the impermeability of the two types of populism observable in France.

### **Discussion: What does it mean to be a populist in France now?**

In light of these elements, what does it mean to be a populist today in France? References to ‘the people’ did not allow us to distinguish or specify specific forms of populism. The two parties have to be understood in their current political and cultural field (Bourdieu, 1991, 2018; Ostiguy & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). The French political system is characterised by an increasing use of populist rhetoric, even within parties that are not identified as such. The spread of populist ideas to a multitude of parties seems to reveal the relational logics at the heart of the French partisan system. With regard to the systematic analysis based on Jagers and Walgrave’s categories (2007), populism is a broad tool of political communication in French politics, using the ‘the people’ without ideological construction. The rejection of the elites seems to be common to all parties, and can be considered as a sign of the ideological impact that both parties have had on the French party system. It is also to be found in editorials of French quality papers (Hubé & Ruffio, 2020). The anti-media-system discourse is now a commonplace in French politics, from the mainstream to the radical parties and to the Yellow Vest movement. Fillon’s 2017 and Sarkozy’s 2012 supporters insulted journalists and sometimes attacked them during meetings. Macron’s party organisation is also founded on the same ‘movement’ rhetoric. Macron’s *marcheurs* (walkers) were recruited like Mélenchon’s *insoumis*: from the distrusted old parties, on the internet, and with low turnout expectations (Greffet & Wojcik, 2018). But surprisingly, this argument is more a short-term campaigning argument in the everyday political game than a strong ideological one. If

the FN has long been the party that uses the populist style more than the others, all parties have used it (Reungoat, 2010). This is closely related to the strategy of ‘droitisation’ (shifting to the right side of the political field) assumed by Nicolas Sarkozy, which opened the populist box in 2007 (Haegel, 2011). During the 2017 presidential campaign, the rhetoric of Mélenchon spread across all parties. Emmanuel Macron said in a meeting, ‘We are the real populists, we are with the people every day’, then later in March of the same year, ‘If being a populist is talking to the people in an understandable way without using political parties, I am willing to be a populist. From this point of view, General de Gaulle was a populist. But we must not confuse this with demagoguery, which consists in flattering the people in the lowest way. So call me populist if you want’ [*Le Journal du Dimanche*, March the 19th]. This distinction made by Macron between *demagogic* and *non-demagogic* populists is based on normative and political arguments, rooted in French political history. Surprisingly, Emmanuel Macron stepped up the criticism of political elites and traditional parties before the second round: ‘On April 23, the French chose to exclude from responsibilities the two parties that have governed France for thirty years. [...] The challenge is to decide to break with the system that has been unable to respond to the problems of our country for thirty years’ [2017 Manifesto]. At the same time, Marine Le Pen softened her presentation. Her second manifesto wanted longer sought to bring back order, but only expected voters to ‘Choose France – Marine for President’. In a recent interview we conducted with a member of E. Macron’s Government, this former minister analyses the 2017 election campaign: ‘La République en Marche is not a populist party but [Emmanuel Macron] has clearly understood the reality. It is an intuition that he has had and that has been effective. He has understood the reality of the populist ground that exists in France and he has surfed on it even if the essence of his discourse is not populist’ (Interview with the authors, 9 June 2021).

Almost all French parties seem to have now adopted this political style, at least in campaigning and, LFI and RN have succeeded in erasing the stigma of the populist expression. These statements show above all that the term populism is no longer considered politically repulsive in the French political field. There is therefore no methodological rigour allowing it to be used as an operational category to distinguish between the different types of populism. Populism, as we have done in this article, has to be considered as an indigenous word to identify the discourses of political parties making it performative within the political field.



A theoretical problem then emerges. If the main French parties seem to have adopted populist rhetoric, does the category still make sense? The use of a distinction between left-wing and right-wing populism does not remove the limits of the concept either, since, as we have seen, the populist core of the two parties does not cover the traditional dimensions of Mudde's populism in the same way. There are at least three ways to answer this question. Either all French parties are populist. Or none are. Or populism must be understood in terms of other partisan dimensions and within a systemic approach. Rather than focusing on the variable of 'the people' or 'opposition to the elites', it seems important to us to return to the ideological foundations of the parties studied. From this perspective, the RN differs from LFI in its defence of nationalist sovereignty, its opposition to immigration, and its social conservatism, while Jean-Luc Mélenchon's party emphasises its anti-capitalism, the defence of minorities, and eco-socialism. In other words, political sociologists should keep in mind that they are dealing with an extreme right-wing party and an extreme left-wing party, above all.

More generally, our study also reveals the need to think about the link between political communication and ideology in a contextual way. The differences observed during election campaigns and routine periods show that populism, if it exists, is a fine, malleable ideology which, for some political organisations, can be thought of as nothing more than a glaze, a political facade, making it possible to broaden an audience that the party's ideological core would be unable to seduce.

Rather than asking what populism is, a better question might be what populism is the symptom of. For years France has experienced real political mistrust symbolised by a high turnover (no president re-elected for a second term since Jacques Chirac in 2002), a very high abstention rate compared to historical trends (abstention in the 2021 regional elections was more than 66.7%), a drop in the memberships of the main parties and more generally a mistrust of the political elites.<sup>3</sup> Populists indeed 'perform this crisis' (Moffitt, 2015) by giving it a discursive reality. But more than an autonomous phenomenon or a political ideology, it can be stated that populism is above all a manifestation of the crisis of political institutions, whose spread to almost all parties testifies to the systemic dimension of this crisis. The upcoming presidential election of 2022 will certainly be characterised by a generalised use of a populist style within the French political spectrum, in different proportions. This homogenisation of French political field implies that the decisive factor explaining the successes or defeats of each party will be found beyond populist rhetoric. Further exploratory

work is therefore needed to measure the systemic diffusion of populism and its routinisation within the French political system.

## Notes

1. The first label comes from the end of the nineteenth century (1889–91), when General Boulanger succeeded in rallying nationalist voters seeking revenge against Germany and socialist voters (i.e., the ‘people’ versus the established parties). Then, more substantially, post–WWII academic discourse on French parties identifies a ‘bonapartist’ right-wing tradition in reference to Napoleon, combining conservatism and direct appeal to the people (e.g., via referendum). The third movement created by Pierre Poujade was characterised by its opposition to every type of tax and to parliamentary governmental practices, its anti-intellectualism, its xenophobia, and its anti-Semitism. It has been elected to the French parliament between 1954 and 1956. At that time, Jean-Marie Le Pen, was a young MP of the Poujade movement.
2. It should be noted, however, that the European elections mobilise voters far less than the presidential elections in France.
3. [https://www.sciencespo.fr/cevipof/sites/sciencespo.fr.cevipof/files/CEVIPOF\\_confiance\\_vague10-1.pdf](https://www.sciencespo.fr/cevipof/sites/sciencespo.fr.cevipof/files/CEVIPOF_confiance_vague10-1.pdf)

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