

Hegemonic defeatism: The mainstreaming of far-right politics in France

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Another European election, another ‘earthquake’ in France. For the third time in a row, the far-right Rassemblement National has won and for the third time, the reaction from the mainstream elite only serves to further mainstream its politics. This could not be better exemplified than in Emmanuel Macron’s decision to call for a new legislative election and appoint a right-wing Prime Minister, despite the results. The aim of this article is to couch the French case in a different light to that which is usually applied to understanding the rise of the far right. To understand what is happening in France and the crisis it (and other democracies) is facing, we must take a longer-view approach. Instead of focussing on the far right itself, this article examines the past 50 years through a lens that focuses on power and those in a particularly privileged position to shape the agenda and public discourse. This demonstrates how a different, more critical approach to the rise of the far right, which accounts for the central role of mainstream elites, can help us not only better understand this rise, but offer alternatives beyond the current hegemonic defeatism.

Keywords: mainstreaming; France; far right; reactionary politics; Le Pen; Macron.

Another earthquake in the 2024 European Union elections, which saw the rise of populism across the EU and the triumph of such parties in Italy, Belgium, Austria, and Hungary. France was no outlier and Marine Le Pen’s Rassemblement National (RN), led by the young Jordan Bardella, pursued its rise and received a third of the vote, breaking a new record. This forced the hand of Emmanuel Macron who had no choice but to abide by the French people’s wishes and call a snap parliamentary

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election. Macron, who had successfully stood as a bulwark against the far right in the presidential elections of 2017 and 2022, was faced with another challenge and the need to call again on the Republican Front. Yet the first round confirmed the trend regarding the rise of populism both left and right, with the RN receiving 29.26% of the vote and the left alliance led by France Insoumise (FI) 28.06%. Macron's coalition was down to 20.04%. During the second-round campaign, the Republican Front reassembled to defeat the far right. Yet this was another worrying development in what appeared increasingly like an irresistible trend in French politics, one that sees Le Pen's party go from strength to strength as it appeals to an increasingly large section of the French people, and to the working class in particular. After widespread consultations, Macron appointed a 'consensual', experienced figure at the helm in Michel Barnier, the man who had faced down the populist Brexiteers on behalf of the EU (De Royer 2024). The Barnier government was chosen to respond to the 'legitimate grievances' of those disenchanted and 'left behind' who have found solace in populism, both left and right. The signals sent to the electorate were particularly strong with the appointment of a number of ministers with right-wing profiles, most symbolic being that of Bruno Retailleau as Minister of the Interior. Days after being appointed, he lamented that a referendum on immigration, a key RN policy, was not constitutionally possible.

This account of recent months in French politics is loosely built from mainstream media narratives. In fact, it could easily be transcribed to many other contexts which have seen the rise of the far right. It is also likely to be echoed in academic publications about this electoral cycle if we are to judge by some of the articles published after previous elections. I have included all of the greatest hits from the tale of the rise of the far right: countless references to populism, a false equivalence between the left and the far right, a nod to the centre as a bulwark (regardless of its actual actions), and an exaggerated focus on the so-called 'left behind' as core support for the far right. The conclusion is inescapable: turning further rightward is the only choice the democratic elite have. We have reached a stage of hegemonic defeatism where the rise of the far right is considered irresistible and our only choice is about who will implement its politics.

Yet what I argue in this article is that this understanding of the situation, which is broadly hegemonic in elite circles,¹ serves a political function and is built on a partial and partisan reading. Rather than simply debunking some of the myths and fantasies it is built on, I will demonstrate how political this particular reading is by showing that a very different narrative could have been created if only a different lens had been used. Crucially, this lens is widely available to elite actors. This matters as it points not towards sincere ignorance which could be addressed

¹The elite in this article is loosely built on Teun van Dijk's [work \(1993\)](#). It refers to those with a privileged access to shaping public discourse and thus the agenda.

through education, but towards epistemologies of ignorance at the very least (Mills 1997; Sullivan and Tuana 2007), or a conscious political choice.

Instead of focussing on the far right itself, my aim is to read the past 50 years through a lens that focuses on power and those in a particularly privileged position to shape the agenda and public discourse. To understand what is happening in France and the crisis it (and other democracies) is facing, we must take a longer-view approach. I will do so by first putting the rise of the Front National (FN)/RN into perspective through a focus on elections, but also on the wider political events which have taken place over the years and helped normalize some of its discourse (Krzyżanowski and Ekström, 2022). I will then turn towards how a different, more critical approach to the rise of the far right, which accounts for the central role of mainstream elites, can help us not only better understand this rise, but offer alternatives beyond what I term hegemonic defeatism. Beyond providing a different analysis to the French situation, this article also illuminates the necessity for such a holistic approach when too often research in the field takes a narrow methodological approach in search of elusive scientific validity. In turn, this fruitless endeavour leads to partial analysis and the potential to legitimize far-right and reactionary politics further by ignoring wider power structures and struggles.

Before going any further, it is worth clarifying some of the terminology I use in this article so as to ensure that the politics I discuss are not subject to misinterpretation. The terms far and extreme right are used based on the typology I developed with Aaron Winter (Mondon and Winter 2020). The extreme right refers to the more extreme groups and parties, generally associated with violence and denounced by all actors. The far right refers to the parties and actors who have sought to gain legitimacy by distancing themselves discursively from their extreme counterparts. Crucially, the borders between those and the mainstream are fuzzy and can be crossed (Brown et al. 2021; Brown 2024). This focus therefore challenges the so-called *dédiabolisation* (de-demonization) process Marine Le Pen is thought to have led when she took over the party in 2011. As others have shown (Alduy and Wahnich 2015; Crépon et al. 2015; Palheta 2024), the discourse and image might have changed but the politics remain in line with her father's, Jean-Marie Le Pen, and very much anchored in the far right. Finally, care has been taken not to overuse the term 'populism' which has long helped legitimise and mainstream the party (Collovald 2004).

1. Fifty years of FN/RN: an irresistible rise or one enabled by the mainstream?

As my opening paragraph suggests, the rise of the FN/RN or the far right in general has often been discussed not only as something 'irresistible' (Palheta 2024), but as something that finds its source in the actions of the far right itself. We are

told it is their leaders' ability to tap into legitimate grievances which renders them popular and thus electorally successful. Indeed, it is common to hear in the media, political sphere, and even academia that far-right politics must be taken seriously and their demands addressed as this is what 'the people' want and this is what democracy is all about after all.

This is not new and the legitimization of far-right discourse as popular discourse has a long history: In 1984, then Socialist Prime Minister Laurent Fabius remarked that Jean-Marie Le Pen 'asks the right questions but provides the wrong answers'. In 2007, Nicolas Sarkozy vowed to win over FN voters 'one by one' (Tévanian 2007; Veronis and Calvet 2008; Mondon 2013; Lamour 2024). In 2022, left France Insoumise leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon reached out to 'those angry but not too fascist' and even, in a revealing slip, 'to the fascists who are not too angry'. While political and media elites often proudly claim to oppose these policies and discourse in principle, they simultaneously assert that they have no choice but to surrender to 'the people'. Given that popular sovereignty underpins the very concepts of democracy and republicanism, if 'the people' turn reactionary, then what choice is there but to follow suit?

Beyond more complicated issues of democracy, agenda-setting and mediation to which we will turn later, this argument does not even match basic electoral data, or at least their critical analysis. Some of the key narratives which have become hegemonic in not only explaining the rise of the FN/RN over the years, but even basically describing it, are indeed based on a clearly selective reading of the situation. For example, the widespread ignorance of turnout in the reporting of electoral results has played a significant role in hyping the FN/RN and concealing other trends which could have offered more fruitful avenues of discussion as to the future of French democracy. This should be obvious as, as is well known and yet widely ignored in analysis, turnout varies based on the type of elections, the electoral climate but also the socio-economic background of the voters (Fig. 1).

As per Fig. 1, turnout is much lower for second-order elections such as European elections as they, rightly or wrongly, seem less relevant to voters and their day-to-day concerns. A low turnout risks amplifying the performance of a party should it not be taken into account. For example, the apparent result of the FN/RN can double depending on whether turnout is accounted for in the European elections (Fig. 2). Therefore, headlines simply stating a party has won second-order elections as if these results were as significant as national elections are misleading at best. *Le Monde* for example led with: '2024 European elections: above 30%, the RN wins a historic success' (9 June 2025). When turnout is accounted for, the RN 'only' received 16.5% of the vote, which is very concerning but far from a landslide. Yet this can help set the agenda as votes expressed in particular settings can then be translated onto others: for example, many voters feel freer to express more

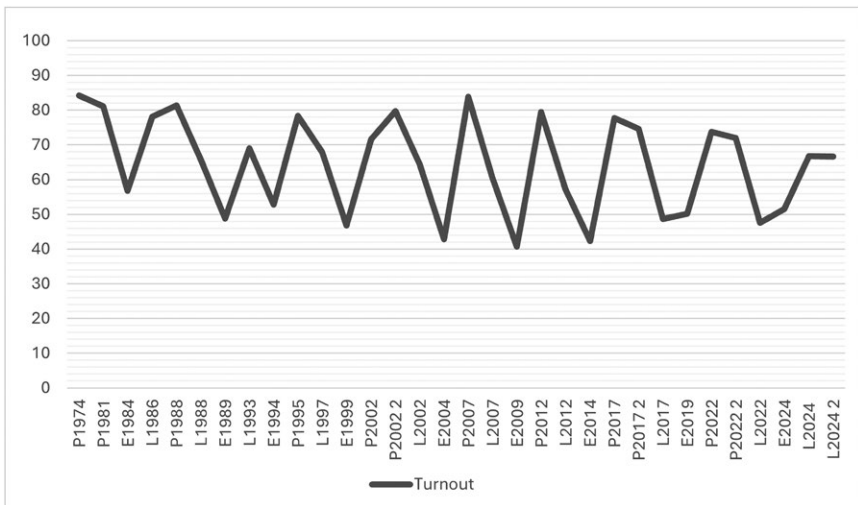


Figure 1 Turnout in the Presidential (P), Legislative (L), and European (E) elections since the creation of the FN. P2002 2 represents the second round of the election.

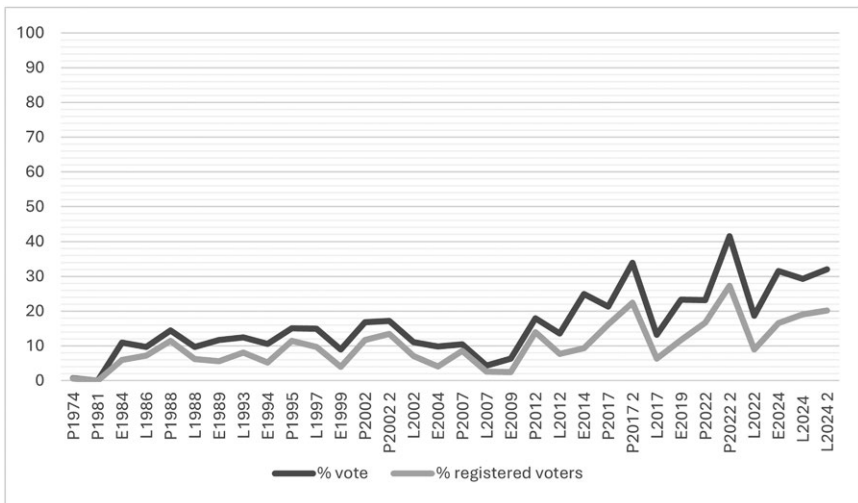


Figure 2 Share of the vote and registered vote for the FN/RN since its creation in the Presidential (P), Legislative (L), and European (E) elections. P2002 2 represents the second round of the election.

radical or protest views in second-order elections as these seem to matter less directly, as already mentioned.

Furthermore, far-right parties which generally espouse hard eurosceptic discourse can offer simple and clear messages during European elections. Conversely,

this is something mainstream parties struggle to do as they seek to offer complicated and often limited reform of poorly understood supranational institutions. The misreading of such electoral results and their impact could not be clearer than in the case of the UK where the victory of Ukip in 2014 precipitated the referendum on the 2016 European Union membership referendum. While euro-scepticism was rife in the parts of the Conservative party, Ukip was the only party at the time to compete on a platform demanding a departure from the EU and it received fewer than one out of ten votes when turnout is accounted for (Mondon and Winter 2020). While the impact has not been as dramatic in France (yet), the FN/RN results in the European elections have provided a significant boost for the image and legitimacy of the party despite a rather low appeal when all voters are considered. For example, the FN won its first major election in 2014 with 24.85% of the vote, allowing it to claim it received a quarter of the vote. When turnout is accounted for though, it only received 9.3% of the registered vote, which is hardly a landslide (Fig. 2). As with the 2024 results, the aim is not to argue that these are not significant or extremely concerning results, but that if placed in their context, different narratives could emerge.

The same is true when it comes to the background of voters and how socio-demographic criteria impact turnout. After 2014, the FN further developed its narrative around the working-class support of the party following estimates which suggested that a third of working-class voters had voted for the FN in the European elections. Yet this was again misleading considering that working-class voters are far more likely to abstain than others. Therefore, while Le Pen received the votes of around a third of those who voted, estimates are closer to a tenth if we include all working-class voters, the majority of whom abstained (Mondon 2017).² And yet, the headlines and analyses have generally privileged results based on voters rather than registered voters. While the winners are decided by the percentage of the vote in the current system, there are no rules suggesting that we should not account for those who decide not to turn up in our wider conversation. As per Fig. 2, we see that when accounting for registered voters, the rise of the FN/RN can be nuanced compared to the mainstream narrative.

1.1 The 2002 ‘earthquake’

This partial reading of electoral results has not only amplified the results of the FN/RN, but obscured wider trends, including the deepening crisis of democracy in France. This could not be clearer than in 2002 when Jean-Marie Le Pen created a political ‘earthquake’ as he reached the second round of the Presidential

²And this is even without engaging with definitions of class or the fact that working-class voters are more likely to not be registered or unable to vote because of their immigrant background.

election. Words such as ‘shock’, ‘catastrophe’ and ‘nightmare’ were splashed across frontpages. Pleas emerged from across the spectrum to vote for right-wing Jacques Chirac ‘For the Republic’s Sake’ (*Libération*, 4 May 2002, p. 1), ‘for France, for the Republic, for Democracy’ (*L’Express*, 25 April 2002, p. 1), or for ‘the Republic being re-elected’ (*Le Monde* 2, May 2002, p. 1). All but one of the candidates defeated in the first round called their voters to vote for the deeply unpopular incumbent embroiled in various corruption scandals.³ French voters turned up in droves, first in the streets to demonstrate against Le Pen and then for the second round, many wearing gloves or pegs on their noses, to vote for Chirac who would be elected with more than 82% of the vote, 2 weeks after receiving the lowest registered vote in the first round for a future president.⁴

Certainly, the threat of the far right was growing electorally and a reality already for those at the sharp end of its politics. Yet I argue that what took place in 2002 was an over-reaction, or at least misguided one, which led to ignoring the real crisis of democracy France was facing at the time. Instead, it placed the focus on the far right and has allowed it to shape the agenda ever since. First, as demonstrated in Table 1, it was not Le Pen’s performance in and of itself which sent him to the second round. In fact, despite a context and media coverage conducive to his ideas (Crépon et al. 2015), the vote for the FN candidate had been stagnating since 1988. Although the Le Pen vote appears to increase by 2.5% between 1988 and 2002, when turnout is taken into account, his share increased only by 0.19%, or less than 500,000 votes. This is certainly not negligible, but far from the announced ‘tidal wave’.

Instead, it was the growing unpopularity of the status quo and the major governing parties which paved the way for the earthquake: the major centrist (Union for French Democracy [UDF]), centre-right (Rally for the Republic [RPR]), and centre-left (Parti Socialiste [PS]) parties together received fewer votes than the abstention rate. What should have been at the core of the analysis is the fact that no other candidate, apart from Chirac, could persuade more than 11.66% of registered voters. The collapse of the governing parties in 2002 was therefore not the result of a Machiavellian strategy by the FN leader or a rise in demand for more authoritarian politics. Rather, it was the consequence of an unprecedented level of abstention in such a major election, as well as the fragmentation of votes in favour of smaller parties, many of which were on the left. By way of comparison,

³Only Lutte Ouvrière’s Arlette Laguillier called for abstention.

⁴Furthermore, according to a poll, only 29% of the respondents who voted for Chirac did so for he was ‘a good candidate’ (Mayer 2002).

Table 1 Presidential elections since 1974 (first round only) (Constitutional Council)

	Vote	Vote (%)	Registered vote (%)	Rank	Abstention (%)
1974	190,921	0.75	0.62	7	15.77
1981	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	18.91
1988	4,376,742	14.38	11.47	4	18.62
1995	4,571,138	15	11.42	4	21.62
2002	4,804,713	16.86	11.66	2	28.4
2007	3,834,530	10.44	8.62	4	16.23
2012	6,421,426	17.9	13.95	3	20.52
2017	7,678,491	21.3	16.14	2	22.23
2022	8,133,828	23.15	16.68	2	26.31

right-wing François Fillon and left-wing Mélenchon obtained 15.2% and 14.8% of the registered vote respectively in 2017 and finished 3rd and 4th, despite the fact that both the right and left were beginning to collapse and/or reconstitute themselves (Mondon 2024a).

Accounting for turnout would also have put into perspective supposed defeats of the FN/RN such as Jean-Marie Le Pen’s performance in 2007, which many saw as the downfall of the party and the triumph of the Republic. The context should have made clear that Sarkozy had regained a significant portion of the far-right vote by openly positioning himself as direct competition and that Le Pen was running out of energy, as demonstrated by his exit soon after the election (Mayer 2007). More importantly, despite these elements, his share of the vote dropped by ‘only’ 3% of the registered vote—hardly enough to separate a shock victory from a terrible defeat. As Marine Le Pen, his campaign director, said on the night of the first round when asked how bad a defeat this was: ‘this is the victory of his ideas!’ (Canal Plus 2007). Accounting for turnout would have also helped nuance his daughter’s performance—despite being seen as the alternative to the Republican Front, she has struggled to receive more than 16% of the registered vote in 2017 and 2022, and again stagnating between these two elections. This is of course not insignificant, but it would paint a different picture than that which constructs her as going from strength to strength.

What this section shows is that the so-called ‘earthquake’ and the very partial reading of the results which privilege a focus on the far right ‘success’ over the deepening crisis of liberal democracy has set the scene for over 20 years of mainstreaming, where the FN/RN serves as a useful distraction away from wider issues which would give more space to the left.

2. The role of the mainstream in the mainstreaming of far-right politics in France

Having outlined the broad electoral trajectory which has moved French politics ever further to the (far) right, I turn to key political battlefields to demonstrate that rather than the irresistible rise of the FN/RN, what we have witnessed is the conscious enabling of far-right politics and discourse by the mainstream. As already touched upon, narrow analysis, whether in terms of timescale or approach (electoral analysis) can only tell us so much about the rise of the far right and even more so its mainstreaming (Brown et al. 2021). Seeking to analyse electoral results without an in-depth contextual and political understanding of a particular historical moment as is too often the case (in the Political Sciences in particular) is simply inadequate to help us uncover more sophisticated processes of mediation and discursive formation and sedimentation. This does not mean that empirical studies on precise case studies are not useful, but they must be attuned to wider contexts and power struggles to offer a useful contribution not simply to knowledge, but towards the defence of democracy (Vaughan et al. 2024). The recent work of early career and critical scholars on French politics, both in France and beyond, offer particularly good examples of the necessity of this wider approach (Schir and Laruelle 2022; Dahani et al. 2023; Fauray 2024; Palheta 2024; Rajaonarivony 2024). This not only necessitates an in-depth contextual and historical knowledge, but a necessary curiosity and will to challenge academic dogmas and gatekeeping. For example, the careful use of terminology in these works as well as the engagement with other disciplines and fields have produced a far more sophisticated analysis than that based solely on new raw data which simply parrots tired narratives built on epistemologies of ignorance (Mills 1997; Mondon 2022a,b). This willingness to challenge established beliefs in the field is particularly well exemplified in Vincent Tiberj's recent book (2024) which demonstrates that the widely accepted narrative around the bottom-up roots of the right-wing shift rests in fact on a very partial reading of the situation (and data). We could push this further and, based on the work on epistemologies of ignorance, argue that this is not based simply on an inaccurate or partial account, but a politicised one (Mills 1997; Sullivan and Tuana 2007; Mondon 2022b). The active process of not knowing for the elite which benefits from a system is a useful excuse not to act.

In this section, I therefore focus on wider trajectories in French politics to uncover the role of the mainstream elite in the mainstreaming of far-right politics. This is achieved through the analysis of three key political battlefields in this hegemonic struggle. This is not an exhaustive list and each theme would deserve far more depth to uncover all intricacies, and references should help readers seeking to know more about them. The aim here is to develop a framework to understand this wider trajectory and demonstrate that narrower approaches cannot provide

an accurate analysis of the process of mainstreaming of far-right politics, and can in fact end up supporting damaging trends.

2.1 The Republican Front and the key role of the mainstream elite in the mainstreaming of far-right politics

The aim of this section is not to provide an exhaustive list of the conscious actions of mainstream actors in facilitating and enabling the mainstreaming of the far right in France, but to illustrate the essential need to account for it. As is well documented, the mainstreaming of discourse can be traced much further back than 2002 (Fysh and Wolfreys 2003, Mondon 2013, 2024a; Crépon et al. 2015). This is exemplified by the role played by the Socialist Mitterrand government in the first phase of the reconstruction of the far right in France (Faux et al. 1994). Mitterrand was elected in 1981 on a radical platform. However, he quickly turned to austerity to respond to the developing financial crisis. This saw his approval ratings tumble and to stem the resurgence of the right, Mitterrand actively and consciously used Jean-Marie Le Pen's then struggling party in order to split the vote on the right. This was done through the legitimization of his ideas, their platforming and perhaps most cynically, a change of electoral system to a proportional one. This was in the hope that the FN would get enough candidates elected to prevent the right from forming a majority, as a coalition with the far right was beyond the pale at the time. This attempt failed and Mitterrand was forced into a period of 'cohabitation' with Chirac, while the FN was able to send thirty-five MPs to the Assemblée on 7.19% of the registered vote (9.65% of the vote). This provided the party with financial benefits, visibility and legitimacy. Contrary to Prime Minister Fabius's claims at the time, it was not so much that Le Pen was asking the right questions, but that the French elite already thought he was the right diversion.

This proved clear again in 2002. As I have demonstrated in the previous section, the results led to a misleading, partial narrative, and yet the impact cannot be underestimated. This misreading acted as an accelerant in the process of mainstreaming. Rather than a focus on the failure of mainstream parties, what we saw was a sharp right turn occurring under the Chirac presidency, exemplified by his focus on insecurity which further accelerated when Sarkozy entered the presidential palace of the Elysée in 2007. While his ability to deliver on his promises was limited considered their extreme nature, he nonetheless played a key role in legitimizing and normalizing much of the discourse of the far right (see Mondon 2013). While Sarkozy was convincingly rejected in favour of the Socialist Party in 2012, this did not mark a departure from the toxic discourse on issues which primarily benefit the far right (immigration, law and order, etc.). Again, this could be witnessed in the appointment of Manuel Valls as Minister of the Interior and then Prime Minister. Valls was known as a hardliner who did not shy away from

incendiary comments and polemics on key far-right issues. It is telling he would later be flirting with the Spanish far right in an attempt to rekindle his political career south of the Pyrenees.

Macron's election on a seemingly more progressive discourse with regard to some of the issues which had plagued France and normalized far-right politics and Islamophobia in particular, appeared as a potential departure from this trend. Yet this was short-lived and any signal sent to the left or racialized communities in his campaign soon disappeared. Space was again given to hardliners to lead on key issues. In 2020, Gérald Darmanin became Minister of the Interior and eventually accused Marine Le Pen of 'being too soft on Islam'. This marked a new level of mainstreaming where the mainstream is no longer content to mimic Le Pen but feels the need to outdo the far right. Things took a further turn to the right in 2024 with the nomination of Bruno Retailleau in the Barnier government (Ramdani 2024).

The appointment of hardline Ministers of the Interior has thus become a norm. This could not make clearer the active enabling of far-right politics by mainstream actors as nothing forced Chirac, Hollande, or Macron to appoint ministers who would have been a more natural fit in a far-right government. Claims that a tough Minister of the Interior is necessary to counter the far right have been disproven by the very simple observation that decades of such appointments have done nothing to stem the tide. This is something which has been witnessed in other contexts, where the idea that moving to the far right on its key issues will steal its momentum has only proven successful at best in the very short term.

Despite the trend being live for decades, no President has proven as zealous as Macron in his attempt to defeat the far right by absorbing its discourse, while claiming to be a bulwark against it. Whether it is in 2017, 2022, or 2024, Macron promised he would counter the far right if the Republican Front helped him defeat the RN. Yet it should have been clear early on that Macron's opposition to the far right did not come naturally. As Sébastien Fontenelle (2023) has thoroughly documented, even when he was still Minister of the Economy under Hollande, Macron felt close to some of the most reactionary public figures in France such as Philippe de Villiers, a former MP famous for his homophobia, Islamophobia and belief in the 'great replacement' theory. Early in his first presidency, in 2018, Macron became embroiled in various scandals around the rehabilitation of extreme right figures such as Charles Maurras or the Maréchal Pétain. In 2019, Macron gave Islamophobic and misogynist novelist Michel Houellebecq the Légion D'Honneur. Later that year, he gave an interview to the extreme right magazine *Valeurs Actuelles*. Seen through this lens, Macron's 2023 Immigration bill, which Le Pen called 'an ideological victory' for her party, is not so much a capitulation but a logical conclusion. When it comes to *laïcité*, to which I now turn, Macron has also proved willing to embrace the most reactionary understanding, whipping up moral panics around Islamo-leftism in particular.

Meanwhile, Le Pen has benefitted not only from the mainstream's pandering to her discourse and politics, but from the hype around Eric Zemmour during the campaign for the 2022 presidential election (Joly 2022; Schir and Laruelle 2022). The heightened attention devoted to Zemmour effectively obscured the genuine threat posed by Le Pen and her far-right ideology, which, by comparison, appeared almost moderate and reasonable.

2.2 The reactionary republic: *Laïcité* and Islamophobia

One of the clearest examples of the role played by the mainstream elite in the mainstreaming of far-right politics is the construction of Islamophobia as a central issue. In fact, the reactionary turn predates the rise of the FN when it comes to Islamophobia and the elitist construction of a racialized Muslim community (Deltombe 2005). Crucially, this points to the importance of a thorough contextual understanding, which electoral data and surveys cannot provide. While Islamophobia is widespread in various contexts, the French case demonstrates how political and historical peculiarities can influence the spread of these ideas and facilitate their mainstreaming. In France, the reactionary and restrictive conception of *laïcité*⁵ has played a key role in normalizing liberal articulations of racism (Mondon and Winter 2020). This has taken place through the subversion of a concept generally perceived as 'progressive' and 'inclusive' which was fundamental to the construction of republican identity. Reactionary elites have been particularly successful at transforming it into an instrument of widespread exclusion, notably through what Abdellali Hajjat and Marwan Mohammed (2013: 12–16) termed 'intellectual Islamophobia' (*Islamophobie de plume*).

The myth of *laïcité* as a progressive, fantasized ideal has been cemented in French politics since the Law of 1905 on the Separation of Church and State. Much like the conception of universalism, while it may appear progressive in comparison to the contemporary understanding of *laïcité* or its use by the mainstream elite, it remained a deeply exclusionary piece of legislation (Wolfreys 2018; Rajaonarivony 2024). While the right to practice religion was enshrined in a similar fashion to that of not having one and being free from institutional pressure, it was clear that the law only applied to some religions and freedom extended only to some people. This should not be surprising considering the context in which it was created, something which is commonly ignored or overlooked in contemporary discussions.

⁵*Laïcité* can be loosely translated as secularism, or the separation of Church and State. In France, this principle is often thought of as being enshrined in the Law of 1905 on the Separation of the Churches and State.

Still, for a period of time, the concept was used for more progressive struggles such as the right to abortion. It is in the 1980s that the use of *laïcité* took a particularly reactionary turn and became one of the lynchpins of the mainstreaming of Islamophobia in France (Scott 2007; Fernando 2014; Wolfreys 2018; Kiwan 2021). In particular, it has facilitated the process of racialization of Muslim communities (and anyone assumed to belong to them) (Garner and Selod 2015). From the 1980s, we have witnessed a top-down imposition of Islamophobic narratives in France through the construction of moral panics followed by the implementation of a number of laws that target and racialize Muslim communities (Geisser 2021). Liberticidal laws such as that of 2004 against the hijab, that of 2010 against the burqa, 2016 against the burkini or most recently in 2024 against the abaya⁶ have often been defended in terms of *laïcité* but also for the protection of women. The liberal-racist agenda behind the law was particularly clear, as the hijab was very much a non-issue at the time, since 'the number of headscarf-related disputes, according to the French Ministry of Education, fell from 300 in 1994 to 150 in 2003 [with] 146 of these incidents quickly resolved through compromise' (Tévanian 2005). Yet this pseudo feminist and laic argument has proven a powerful line of attack as both progressive republicans and feminists found themselves split on the question as many felt they had to side either with women oppressed by Islam or with Muslims oppressed by western states. As Christine Delphy (2006) pointed out, the opposition between anti-sexism and anti-racism can only work if one assumes that the victims of racism are only men, but also that women only suffer sexism from men within their own family or community. Yet, this racialization of Muslim communities has spread and not only gripped the attention of French people but come back to haunt them. So much so that in a 2016 IPSOS survey,⁷ French respondents guessed that out of 100 people in France, thirty-one were Muslims (something they thought would rise to 40% by 2020), when the correct estimate is around 8%. Worse perhaps, another survey in the same year showed that 56% of respondents felt that 'Islam was not compatible with the values of the Republic'.

Islamophobia has also been normalized in the wake of murderous terrorist attacks in the name of Islam in France over the years. This was particularly clear in the aftermath of the attack on *Charlie Hebdo* in 2015 which witnessed the weaponization of free speech not only to further mainstream Islamophobia, as is common after such attacks (Qureshi, 2020), but also to push ever more stringent

⁶Note that this is not the official names of the laws, which were instead couched in more innocuous terms. Yet research referenced in this article has made clear that this was their target, something anyone who was paying attention at the time could not miss.

⁷<https://www.ipsos.com/en/perils>

security laws, often curtailing freedom of expression (Titley et al. 2017). Again, this authoritarian and racist slide did not occur with the far right in power or even under its sole pressure, but through the actions of mainstream politicians, spurred on by much of the mainstream media and prominent academics and intellectuals (Bourmeau 2024). The mainstream elite's penchant for Islamophobic moral panics extended to those suspected of aiding the Islamization of France.⁸ This became particularly prevalent under the Macron presidency when in 2021, his Minister of Education accused Universities of being hotbeds of 'Islam-leftism'. While she quickly backtracked as it was clear her claims were spurious, the impact was again significant in strengthening the Islamophobia which had by now become the norm across the political spectrum (Louati 2021; Mohammed 2021; Beaman and Mondon, 2023).

2.3 The construction of the reactionary people

The third aspect of the top-down mainstreaming of far-right politics in France takes its roots in the construction of a reactionary people whose demands must be followed by the mainstream elite. Said elite may claim to be opposed to such views, but what choice do they have but to listen to 'the people'? This approach of course ignores over a century of research on the formation of public opinion, mediation, and agenda-setting (for a summary of the literature in these fields, see Mondon 2022a; Tiberj 2024). From the very beginnings of modern political science, Walter Lippmann (2012 [1922]) warned about reifying public opinion and ignoring its highly mediated nature. This was powerfully reiterated in France by Pierre Bourdieu (1973) who claimed polemically that 'public opinion does not exist'. Similarly, much work has been done on the formation of our beliefs as we do not come to ballot boxes with opinions created in a vacuum—these are mediated and shaped by various actors.

As systematically analysed by Vincent Tiberj (2024), the so-called right-wing turn (*droitisation*) in the French population is clearly a top-down construction rather than based on bottom-up demands emanating from 'the people'. Yet this false narrative is incredibly powerful not only to push certain policies and politics, but to prevent a shift in focus on other issues which would require radical change and open alternatives on the left. Instead, a singular choice is created between the bad (the distrusted status quo) and the worst (the far right which remains both demonized but also legitimized by being pitted as *the* alternative). This construction of the reactionary people takes shape through a number of narratives, including that of anti-populism where the reactionary 'populist people' are berated for

⁸A similar moral panic was created around transphobia (Palheta 2024).

falling for populists, but whose grievances are validated as 'legitimate' (see [Yates and Mondon forthcoming](#)). The other common narrative pins the blame on the 'white working class', whose grievances again should be heard – this is something some actors on the left such as Francois Ruffin have fed ([Goanec 2024](#)). While not denying that a portion of the working class votes for the far right, which has always been the case ([Mondon 2017](#)), arguing that it is the root of far-right support is not only partial but deeply politicized. Indeed, such claims ignore that abstention remains where most of the working-class 'vote' ends ([Braconnier and Dormagen 2007](#); [Gougou 2014](#)), but also how complicated constructing said working class is and how contentious classifications are. It is politicized as it ignores the diverse nature of the working class today and instead racializes it as white, creating a horizontal split between similar interests at the expense of a vertical one, thus diverting attention away from power structures, hierarchies, and inequalities. As noted by Vincent [Tiberj \(2024: 249, 250\)](#), 'if there is such a difference between citizens' values and electors' votes, it is because many citizens no longer vote [...] Those abstainers leave the space to privileged social groups and to Boomers'.

The construction of the narrative around the 'reactionary people' and their authoritarian demands for more anti-immigration politics can be illustrated through the analysis of Eurobarometer data (see [Mondon 2022a](#) for a wider study). While most polling agencies use the issues question, the Eurobarometer adds an illuminating layer to it by asking first what the two most important issues their respondents' country is facing, and then which two they are facing 'personally'. This may explain why journalists are happy to report only the country's response as a headline as if the results represented the people's demands. Yet, as per [Fig. 3](#), results show large discrepancies which point to the role of mediation in our understanding of the world and politics. Immigration is rarely an issue when respondents think of their personal situation, and yet is a significant one, albeit one moving with the news agenda, when they think about their country. This is significant as it is where politicians and the media, but also academics, draw their justification for the focus on immigration, and more importantly on anti-immigration politics. A more nuanced reading including the role of mediation could again open the door to other alternatives on the left and thus move the political struggle away from the far right's turf.

3. Hegemonic defeatism: the far right as a symptom of (and diversion from) the crisis of democracy in France

The mainstreaming of far- and extreme-right politics poses a real threat to democracy and in particular to the communities at the sharp end of such politics. Yet while most mainstream actors agree with this statement publicly, this article claims that their actions not only point towards complacency when it comes to

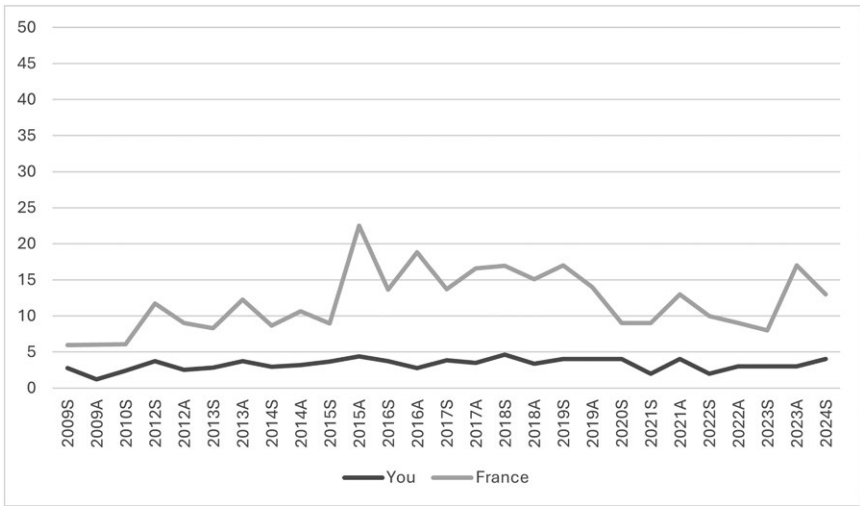


Figure 3 Immigration given as a response to the question QA3. ‘What do you think are the two most important issues facing France at the moment?’ and Immigration given as a response to the question QA4. ‘And personally, what are the two most important issues that you are facing at the moment?’
Source: Eurobarometer.

addressing this trend, but at times an active enabling. The French mainstream elite has reached a point of hegemonic defeatism where the rise of the far right is considered irresistible. The only choice left is whether it will be Le Pen at the helm or mainstream elites. These are the options: the bad and the worse. Yet, as Lorna Finlayson (2024) powerfully argues in the British case, the lesser of two evils is still evil. To understand this counterintuitive process, it is essential to take a more holistic approach which requires empirical and timely data, but also an in-depth knowledge of historical and political specificities and an inclination to go beyond common sense elite understandings of politics.

Rather than lamenting the irresistible rise of the far right, it is essential to challenge elite narratives about their own role in the process. This means that there is a duty to explore not only whether the mainstream, hegemonic discourses regarding acceptable strategies to counter the far right are working or not, but what political role they play. As I argue elsewhere (2024b), this necessitates a critical approach to ‘really existing liberalism’ and coming to terms with the fact that liberalism as it exists can accommodate and enable far-right politics. In this light, the role of epistemologies of ignorance become clear: the elite knows their so-called strategies to countering the far right are not working. They have been tried before, they have always failed. Ultimately, they know, but feign not to, that the far right is less of a

threat than real alternatives to the current system which has inequality at its core and feeds on various crises (environmental, poverty, health, etc.).

Ultimately, there is nothing particularly new or original in this article. Nothing that has not been said before. And that is the key finding: we know all we need to know to stop the far right. Yet those who are most able to shape the agenda, all too often choose not only to ignore this, but to enable the mainstreaming of the far right and reaction further.

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