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Between neo-liberalism and the nation: France's political landscape in 2022

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ABSTRACT

France's 2022 electoral cycle suggests that the basic contours of French politics are in flux. This is largely because the traditional left-right spectrum proved increasingly incapable of structuring France's political supply through the 1990s and 2000s. The result has been a reconfiguration of the political spectrum along a new quadripartite axis, in which political actors and voters position themselves along two spectrums: neoliberal-anti-neoliberal and globalist-nationalist. This quadripartite system has changed the way French parties operate and the way political actors present themselves. It has also given rise to—and reinforced—emerging patterns of electoral sociology and geography, which became particularly evident after the 2022 legislative elections.

RÉSUMÉ

Le cycle électoral de 2022 semble confirmer une mutation profonde du paysage politique français. Celle-ci tient largement à l'affaiblissement du traditionnel clivage gauche-droite qui structure de moins en moins l'offre politique depuis les années 1990-2000. Dès lors, on constate une reconfiguration selon laquelle les acteurs politiques et l'électorat s'alignent sur deux axes différents: néolibéral-anti-néolibéral et globaliste-nationaliste. Ce système quadripartite change la façon dont les partis politiques fonctionnent ainsi que les discours des acteurs politiques. Il renforce également certaines tendances sociologiques et géographiques qui sont apparus clairement après les élections législatives de 2022.

After bequeathing the terms 'left' and 'right' to global politics in the late eighteenth century, will France become the first country to abandon them? Its current leader, Emmanuel Macron, has made no secret of his desire to transcend France's historic political cleavage. When he launched his party—En Marche!—in April 2016, he explained that it was 'neither right nor left'. A little under a year later, in March 2017, he had updated his pitch; he and his party were now 'both right and left'.¹ By the end of his successful presidential election campaign, Macron's desire to unite France's diverging political traditions had crystallized into a slogan: 'en même temps ...' (Darrigrand 2017). This much-repeated phrase was a way of signalling his ability to embrace contradiction and

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smooth out the rough edges of French politics. The message was clear: he wanted to be a consensual president for a post-ideological age.

Since his meteoric rise to power, Macron has frequently been attacked for this aspiration. Some—mostly on the left—see his post-ideological discourse as little more than window-dressing. They argue that he has always been a president of and for the right. This argument certainly makes sense when viewed in terms of René Rémond's famous 'three rights'. Macron comes across as a typical 'Orleanist'—liberal, relatively comfortable with limited democracy, but profoundly elitist and occasionally given to authoritarianism (Rémond 1954). A different line of attack has focused on the current president's hubris. His claim to transcend left and right appears as yet another iteration of a long-standing tendency on the part of French leaders to claim that they are overcoming division, while presiding over a deeply divided society (Garrigues 2012). Given that Macron was in charge at the time of the *gilets jaunes*, one of France's largest protests in decades, he can hardly claim to have healed the country's divisions. Moreover, even if the protestors were as ideologically heterogenous as their president, they all seemed to hate him personally.

There is, however, a more analytical and less partisan way of reading Macron's desire to be 'neither right nor left'. Rather than see it as a programmatic statement, we can interpret it as a strategic acknowledgement of a political landscape in flux. When he entered the presidential race in 2017, Macron was not so much announcing a new configuration as recognizing it as a *fait accompli*. He and his party were not aiming to fashion a political landscape in which right and left ceased to exist; they were, like many other political actors in France, simply recognizing its existence and adapting themselves accordingly. If we accept this as a starting point, the question is: how and why did this new political landscape emerge? And what, if anything, has Macron done to accelerate its development? This article offers some tentative answers to these questions. In the first instance, it provides a historical account of the ways in which France's left-right divide came apart. Then, it proposes an alternative interpretation of the ideological and party-political configuration of contemporary French politics.

Many scholars and commentators have explored the ideological recomposition of contemporary European politics, especially visible in the instability of the categories of right and left since the end of the Cold War. Their arguments can be broken down into separate and not always compatible interpretations. Perhaps the best-known is the claim that the left-right divide has been rendered obsolete by growing political consensus around key (and formerly contentious) issues, such as democracy or free-market capitalism. In the 1990s, this interpretation came to be associated with Francis Fukuyama's (1992) 'end of history' thesis, in which the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union led to widespread agreement that there was no ideological alternative to free-market capitalism and liberal democracy. This precipitated the decline of contested politics—especially visible in the rapid disappearance of European communist parties—and a marked drift to the political centre. In many parts of Europe, this process was seen as a positive development. This was not the case in France, where the political and intellectual elite remained more attached to the ideological frameworks of the mid-twentieth century than elsewhere. As a result, there was widespread unease about the advent of consensus. Some intellectuals bemoaned the emergence of a bland 'République du Centre' (Furet, Julliard, and Rosanvallon 1988), while others spoke disapprovingly of a neoliberal 'pensée unique' that had rendered all

mainstream political parties indistinguishable (Kahn 1995). Nevertheless, even these critics accepted that left and right did not have the same political power as in previous decades.

As the attractiveness of the 'end of history' thesis waned in the early 2000s, a different group of scholars began to look more closely at the economic and class-based dynamics that had defined the left-right divide. Rather than argue that the left-right divide had disappeared, they claimed it had been augmented by new lines of fracture around issues such as immigration, religious tolerance, and European integration. These frequently led to left- and right-wing political actors aligning in unexpected ways. Over time, political scientists and political commentators have proposed various frameworks for interpreting this increasingly fluid political landscape. These have ranged from the so-called GAL-TAN framework, in which 'green-alternative-libertarian' politics is juxtaposed with 'traditional-authoritarian-nationalist' politics (Hooghe, Marks, and Wilson 2002), to frameworks that focus on the relative support for 'globalisation' (Mann 1997; Kriesi et al. 2008). Along similar lines, other scholars have identified the emergence not simply of new cleavages but new or repackaged ideologies that are not fully captured by the traditional left-right divide. The rise of a language of 'human rights' in Europe after 1990 (Moyn 2012) and, in the case of France, the revival of interest in republicanism in the same period (Chabal 2015) are two good examples of dominant ideologies that do not fit neatly onto a left-right spectrum. It is worth pointing out, too, that these arguments for a diversification of political identifications at an ideological level are strongly supported by detailed studies of opinion poll data in France and elsewhere. These have repeatedly demonstrated the extent to which the categories of left and right do not have the same purchase and meaning for voters today as they did in the period from 1945 to 1990 (Perrineau 2014; Tiberj 2017).

Our argument builds on these earlier interpretations and incorporates necessary insights from more recent work (eg. Drake et al. 2020) by offering a framework that helps to explain the shifts in both the French ideological and electoral landscape. In our view, the bipolar left-right spectrum is being superseded by a quadripolar spectrum organized around two axes: globalism-nationalism and neoliberalism-anti-neoliberalism.² This has created four distinct political spaces in contemporary French politics. We reject the idea of political convergence or consensus; indeed, the new spectrum is precisely a reaction to the failure of aspirational or de facto convergence as it occurred in the 1990s. We also disagree with the view that the old left-right spectrum has simply been muddied by the emergence of new issues and ideologies. Rather, we maintain that the political system structured around the left-right spectrum proved increasingly incapable of structuring France's political supply through the 1990s and 2000s. The result was a reconfiguration of the political spectrum that finally became explicit in 2017 and was accentuated by the 2022 electoral cycle. This new spectrum, at least for now, seems to be as effective in shaping the political supply as the old one. If it persists in the coming decades, it may turn out to be the most profound transformation of France's political landscape since the stabilization of democracy in the 1870s.

The slow decline of the categories of 'left' and 'right'

To understand the origins of the quadripolar system, we first need to explore the historical decline of the categories of right and left. Our focus here is primarily on the nationalism-

globalism axis of our quadripolar spectrum, although, as is apparent below, this cannot always be easily disconnected from the neoliberal-anti-neoliberal axis. We begin in the 1980s, when the traditional bipolar axis was deeply embedded in political behaviour at all levels of French politics. Over the course of the 1980s, a series of events and debates shifted the key ideological parameters of the French left, which was in power at the time. This started in 1983, when François Mitterrand's socialist administration embraced austerity economics in what appeared to many as an abrupt ideological about-turn for a government that had been elected on the most radical socialist platform anywhere in Western Europe at the time (Bernard 2015; Fulla 2016). The widespread anger with this 'tournant de la rigueur' set in motion a powerful critique of the French left, according to which it no longer truly represented an alternative to the capitalist orthodoxy. This sense of ideological convergence was intensified by the first government of cohabitation in 1986—which featured a left-wing president and a right-wing majority in parliament. This successful cohabitation demonstrated that it was possible for right and left to work together without institutional paralysis. Although Mitterrand and the socialists went on to win again in 1988, the collapse of communism in Europe in 1989–91 led to the slow embrace of 'third-way' social democratic ideas on the centre-left, which represented a compromise with capitalism and further detached the left from its historic electoral base. This process reached its apogee with the presidency of François Hollande from 2012–17, during which the French left splintered and ultimately fell apart.

This sustained 'crisis' of the French left—common to almost all West European countries—acted as a major catalyst for the blurring of the left-right axis, not least because it was accompanied by a resurgence of republican ideas and symbols in the 1990s. These reintroduced the nation and nationalism into mainstream French politics. The renewed interest in republicanism was driven by a series of controversies related to the practice of Islam in France, most famously the *affaire du foulard* in 1989, where a school in Creil expelled 4 female students for wearing the hijab. The debate that erupted in the wake of this *affaire* precipitated a growing division between those who defended 'republican values' (especially *laïcité*) and those who saw them as oppressive and outdated (Rochefort 2002; Laborde 2008; Bowen 2010). Over time, the latter were pushed to the margins of French politics, with the result that, today, everyone from the far-right to the communists can be found openly extolling the virtues of French republicanism (Chabal 2015, 2017). This has made it increasingly hard to differentiate between parties and politicians on complex cultural debates relating to, for instance, immigration, multi-culturalism, colonial memory, and gender politics. This problem has become particularly acute on the left, which has been torn apart by divisions over issues like *laïcité* since the 1990s. It is no exaggeration to say that 21st century debates over republican values have pushed the question of the nation to the top of the political agenda in a way that is unprecedented since the end of the Algerian War in 1962 (Shepard 2008; McDougall 2017).

Alongside Islam, another reason for the omnipresence of the nation as a salient term in contemporary French political discourse is the far-right. From 1983 onwards, the main far-right party—the Front National (FN)—posed a growing threat to the institutional and ideological structures of the Fifth Republic, which was built around the idea of bipartisan competition between a left and right committed to republican values. Initially, attempts by the governing left-wing majorities of the 1980s somewhat succeeded in cementing the FN's position as a neo-fascist party beyond the pale of French politics. But, from the 1990s

onwards, the FN reinvented itself as a protectionist and populist party, a process which was intensified by the fact that its strongholds were in former communist regions of northern and southern France (Shields 2007). The FN's normalization was demonstrated in spectacular fashion in the presidential election of 2002, when the party's then leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen, edged out the socialist, Lionel Jospin, to reach the runoff. This led to a strong anti-fascist *front républicain*, with over 80% of voters lining up behind the centre-right presidential candidate, Jacques Chirac, in the second round. Over the next decade, however, this anti-fascist consensus began to decay. With a string of strong election results in the 2010s, the FN confirmed its potential to disrupt the left-right spectrum, to such an extent that the presence of a far-right presidential candidate in the second round of the 2017 and 2022 elections did not elicit a strong negative reaction from many voters.

The question of the nation also featured heavily in debates surrounding European integration in France in the period from the 1980s to the 2010s. Since the end of the Second World War, France has been a major European player, repeatedly seeking European hegemony through different strategies of integration (Sutton 2007). One of the most sustained periods of French dominance in Europe was Jacques Delors's long presidency of the European Commission (1985–1995). Delors oversaw the extension of the single market, the elaboration of plans for economic integration, and a more interventionist European bureaucracy. But the French electorate as a whole was not as convinced of the value of European integration as Delors. In 1992, the French only narrowly voted to ratify the Maastricht Treaty in a referendum (Appleton 1992), and in 2005 they rejected a proposed European constitution in another referendum. The latter was a major turning-point in European politics. Crucially for our purposes, the 'no' campaign for both of these referendums was made up of figures and movements of both the right and the left. For the most part, those across the centre of the political spectrum supported 'yes', with representatives of the far-left and far-right advocating for 'no' (Reungoat 2019). The sight of former sparring partners like the right-wing politician Charles Pasqua and the erstwhile Marxist firebrand Jean-Pierre Chevènement standing together on a platform to oppose European integration in the 1990s was one of the first signs that the left-right divide was coming undone. It is true that, since Brexit and especially since the invasion of Ukraine, there has been a notable renewal of pro-European sentiment. Nevertheless, political faultlines surrounding European integration have been a major contributing factor to the strengthening of a nationalism-globalism axis in French politics.

Finally, it is worth highlighting the impact of more recent events, many of which have sharpened still further the antagonism between nationalist and globalist ideas. One of the most important of these has been the wave of terrorist attacks beginning in 2015 that radicalized republican language surrounding Islam and led to a wave of cross-party legislation on terrorism, radicalization, nationality law and 'separatism'. The sight of Hollande, a nominally left-wing president, leading a failed attempt in 2016 to extend the conditions under which a French person could be stripped of their citizenship for terrorist crimes was as powerful a symbol as the 'tournant de la rigueur' in 1983 (Zalc 2018). The left once again appeared to have abandoned its values in the name of right-wing pragmatism. This disillusionment with the left was one of the reasons for Macron's victory in 2017, which was both a symptom of and a catalyst for the disintegration of the categories of left and right in contemporary French politics. As we will see, Macron's

presidency has been marked by the final decomposition of the institutional structures that underpinned the left-right binary—most obviously, the two mainstream parties. In addition, Macron's positioning as a European bulwark against nationalist strongmen like Donald Trump, Viktor Orbán or Vladimir Putin has strengthened his image as a figure who transcends right and left. Instead of defending the values of the left against the reactionary right, Macron has cast himself as the saviour of liberal democracy in the face of demagogic populism.

In a sense, Macron's victory in 2017 represented a partial resolution of a long-term crisis of representation in French politics, in which stable parliamentary majorities concealed 'a political landscape of assorted anti-system parties and growing support for far right and far left' (Shields 2006). Although there had been earlier attempts to transcend the left-right divide—most famously, the presidency of the reformist liberal, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, from 1974–81—these did not durably change the political landscape. It is too early to tell whether Macron's presidencies have done so. But there is no doubt that, in 2022, he presides over a political system in which the power of right and left as organizing categories of French political life has significantly decreased (Gauchet 2021).

Ideological realignment and the party system

In this section, we examine how French parties since the mid-1990s have attempted to reorganize themselves in this new political landscape, with a particular focus on the neoliberalism-anti-neoliberalism axis of the quadripolar system. This process was the consequence of the historical narrative described in the previous section, which encouraged political actors to adjust to these new circumstances in ways that significantly altered the political supply—that is, the choices available to voters in the market for political goods. Three main shifts can be identified. First, the centre-left split over neoliberalism, nationalism, and the relationship between them. Second, the centre-right divided over ideas of national sovereignty. Third, the far-right reoriented itself from neoliberalism to anti-neoliberalism. The concatenation and near-simultaneity of these transformations explains the speed with which the bipolar left-right spectrum seemed to fall apart in 2017.

Let us start with the centre-left. The collapse of the PS, France's once dominant left-wing party, is one of the most consequential political events of recent decades. To explain this, we need to consider the extent to which attitudes towards neoliberalism became a major line of fracture in the 1990s. As early as the 1970s, the PS was split between a 'social liberal' faction that prioritized civil society (often called the Second Left), and a 'social statist' faction that saw the state as the primary vehicle for socialist transformation. The former's arguments gained ground during the Mitterrand era, despite the *tournant de la rigueur* in 1983, but the balance shifted the other way in the 1990s, when the PS pursued market-friendly policies. For instance, the government of Lionel Jospin (1997–2002) privatized a significant number of state-owned companies while passing a law intended to reduce the work week to 35 hours, while Hollande's administration (2012–2017) cut payroll taxes for businesses and imposed labour market flexibilities through the El Khomri law. At the same time, the party attempted to hold on to its historic anti-capitalist credentials by half-heartedly criticizing corporate wealth. This pleased no-one: business interests balked at the anti-capitalist language while the

party base felt increasingly alienated. By the end of the Hollande presidency, the party had become increasingly schizophrenic, not least because of existing divisions over the meaning of republicanism and the response to the 2015 terrorist attacks. A sign of this dysfunction was the emergence of a faction of the parliamentary party who revolted over the El Khomri law (the so-called *frondeurs*), and, at the same time, Hollande's decision to name Macron as his economics minister, whose commitment to competition seemed very distant from the socialist tradition. The disastrous electoral cycle of 2017 marked the culmination of this process, with the PS and its supporters divided between those who chose to support Macron, those who sought other left alternatives, and those who reluctantly voted for the party's ill-fated candidate, Benoît Hamon.

It is worth emphasizing that these disagreements over the PS's position in relation to neoliberalism overlapped with debates surrounding European integration, especially through concerns about honouring France's European commitments and caps on deficit spending. In the 1990s, most PS politicians came to accept elements of neoliberal economic policy. This orientation opened a political space for left movements embracing more explicitly anti-neoliberal and/or nationalist themes (Reynié 2005). The main beneficiaries of this opportunity have been the successive parties led by the dissident socialist Jean-Luc Mélenchon: the Parti de Gauche (PG), founded in 2008, and La France insoumise (LFI), founded in 2016 (Ducange 2018). After 2017, LFI emerged as the hegemonic party of the left. Meanwhile, the centrist wing of the PS was absorbed within Macron's political movement, which was explicitly founded on a commitment to globalization and the neoliberal order. These defections, which are a consequence of profound disagreements over both nationalism and neoliberalism, have—for now at least—destroyed the PS as a national political party.

Over the same period, the centre-right was also transformed by new political forces, though its evolution did not simply mirror that of the centre-left. From the 1970s until 2017, the centre-right assumed relatively stable contours. It was largely organized into two camps: a residually Gaullist camp that, over time, became a standard conservative party; and a centrist party that embraced a blend of classical liberalism and Christian democracy. The parties that have embodied the former current include the Union des Démocrates pour la V^e République (UDR; 1967–1976), the Rassemblement pour la République (RPR; 1976–2002), the Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (UMP; 2002–2015), and Les Républicains (LR; since 2015). The latter current was initially known as the Républicains indépendants, before becoming the Union pour la Démocratie Française (UDF; 1978–2007) and then the Mouvement Démocrate (Modem; since 2007). All these parties promoted a pro-business agenda and (usually) a pro-Atlantic foreign policy. Unlike their Anglo-American counterparts, these right-wing parties often supported welfare policies and some redistribution, though to a lesser degree than their left-wing rivals.

As in the case of the centre-left, the centre-right has struggled with disagreements over nationalism and, to a lesser extent, neoliberalism. On nationalism, the centre-right has found it difficult to incorporate new issues relating to nationality and national sovereignty into its political agenda. Since 1995, dissident centre-right candidates have regularly run for president on an anti-European and *souverainiste* platform. While most of the key figures of the contemporary centre-right—including Jacques Chirac, Nicolas Sarkozy, François Bayrou, Alain Juppé, and Édouard Balladur—have favoured European integration, the debate over the European Union's implications for French sovereignty has

become more discordant in recent years. Second, the centre-right has been deeply divided over its attitude towards the far-right. During most of the period when Jacques Chirac was its de facto leader (1981–2007), the centre-right refused to regard the FN as an ally and managed to impose the *front républicain*. In recent years, however, this so-called *cordon sanitaire* has weakened. Sarkozy's successful presidential campaign in 2007 was underpinned by anxieties about immigration and assimilation, the FN's signature issues—and, significantly, this was the only presidential election since 1988 in which the FN did not increase its first-round score. Moreover, when he became president, Sarkozy created a Ministry of Immigration, Integration, and National Identity—a clear reference to his campaign themes. At the time, several factions of the centre-right favoured a rapprochement with the FN and its identitarian politics. Others maintained that any such rapprochement would, as in the case of the centre-left, lead to the disappearance of the centre-right as an independent political force. This debate remains unresolved to this day, but, for the purposes of our argument, it is noteworthy that there is a strong correlation between those who advocate an alliance with the far right and those who oppose European integration.

Neoliberalism has not proved to be as divisive topic for the right as it has been for the left. This is not necessarily for the reasons one might expect, at least if one starts from Anglo-American assumptions—namely, that modern centre-right parties are predisposed to neoliberalism. Rather, the French centre-right has generally displayed a cautious attitude towards neoliberalism, embracing business-friendly measures while also supporting social welfare policies. Perhaps the main exception to this trend was the Chirac government of 1986–1988, in which the centre-right seemed to teeter on the edge of a neoliberal conversion and neoliberal enthusiasts like Alain Madelin found a place in the cabinet. Overall, however, even this government remained reluctant to cut welfare measures and remained sensitive to public opposition to its reforms—and Madelin himself eventually ran a dissident presidential campaign in 2002 (Brookes 2021; Chabal 2015, 252–4).

Still, despite this relative consensus, the rise of Macron posed a serious challenge to the centre-right. For a start, most centrists in the MoDem rallied to Macron before the 2017 election, buoyed by the prospect of a true 'centrist' president for the first time since the 1970s (Guillaume 2005). And, after Macron's victory, many pro-European and globalist elements of LR allied themselves with the new presidential party. They felt that Macron's blend of globalism and neoliberalism represented them more effectively than their own party. Macron's movement also seemed to provide stronger pushback against the nationalist and anti-neoliberal politics of the far-right. As a result, LR has faced the same challenge as the PS since 2017, namely, how to eke out a space between Macron's globalist-neoliberalism and the strident anti-neoliberalism of the far-right. One response that has emerged within LR in the last five years is an openly nationalist-neoliberal current, embodied by figures like Laurent Wauquiez and Éric Ciotti. This is a good example of how the new quadripolar dynamic has reconfigured mainstream politics.

Finally, we turn our attention to the far-right. Thanks to its single-minded focus on immigration and 'national identity', few political forces have been as instrumental in reorienting French politics along a globalist-nationalist axis as the FN, since renamed the Rassemblement national (RN). Thus, it is hardly surprising that the FN/RN has faced little internal disagreement over the globalist-nationalist question. More internally

divisive, however, has been the party's attitude towards economic policy, specifically neoliberalism. During the 1970s and 1980s—a time when anti-communism was still a central element of the FN's platform—Jean-Marie Le Pen repeatedly accused the centre-right of having betrayed its free-market principles. He 'extolled American Republicans, praising their moral conservatism as well as the ultraliberal economic policies of Ronald Reagan . . . and Margaret Thatcher' (Crépon 2012, 37–8). Yet, as we have seen, the party rapidly changed tack in the 1990s, as it began to draw on a more working-class support base. Feeling compelled to bring its ideology and its discourse in line with its electorate, the FN began denouncing neoliberal globalization and unpatriotic multinational companies (see also Goodhart 2017).

Since replacing her father at the party's helm in 2011, Marine Le Pen has completed this reorientation, which was prefigured by her ideological proximity to various 'Third Position' movements that were historically as critical of capitalism as of communism (Fourest and Venner 2011, 145). As a result, the present-day RN combines nationalist themes with statist, anti-neoliberal economic policies. For instance, during the presidential election campaigns of 2017 and 2022, Marine Le Pen promoted social policies designed to protect the French economy from the nefarious effects of immigration and globalization by making social security conditional on French citizenship, a policy widely referred to as 'préférence nationale'. Several attempts have been made to challenge the FN's hegemony by reconnecting aggressive nationalism and neoliberalism. Bruno Mégret tried it in the late 1990s, as did Éric Zemmour in 2022. But the electoral failure of these alternatives has given credence to Marine Le Pen's position. Today, the combination of anti-neoliberal policies and nationalist rhetoric explain the RN's omnipresence in the French political landscape.

A word, finally, about the impact of quadripolar politics on two smaller but influential parties: the Parti Communiste français (PCF) and the Greens. The PCF, which still exists today, has remained overtly hostile to neoliberalism in all its forms. Yet despite remaining philosophically internationalist, the PCF has often embraced nationalist themes. It campaigned against the Maastricht Treaty and the European Constitution, and it supports protectionist economic policies. In 2022, its candidate, Fabien Roussel, ran a nostalgic campaign aimed at reminding the French of the progressive social agenda of the immediate post-war moment when the communists were part of the national narrative of the Resistance (Chabal 2020, 23–34). He also supported bolstering France's nuclear programme to safeguard the country's energy sovereignty. As a result, the Communists have been led to emphasize the salutary role of the nation as part of their anti-capitalist agenda, even if their vision of the nation differs sharply from that of the RN.

The French Green movement has evolved very differently. Although some French ecologists have favoured adopting a 'neither right nor left' strategy, they have, for the most part, identified politically with the left. For example, they formally participated in the Jospin government (1997–2002) and, in 2017, they opted to back the Socialist's presidential candidate rather than run one of their own. Yet Europe Écologie-Les Verts (EELV), the main Green party, has been unapologetically pro-European in its outlook, not least because it maintains that an ecological transition could never occur within the confines of a single nation state. During the negotiations to form the NUPES coalition ahead of the 2022 legislative elections, some EELV members worried about having to ally with parties that did not share its unequivocal European commitments. Therefore, while EELV has

been generally critical of neoliberalism, its rhetoric on this front has been more tempered than other left parties, in large part because of its pro-European and globalist orientation.

This brief—and necessarily schematic—survey of the changes in party-political alignments in recent decades highlights the importance of neoliberalism and nationalism as key areas of disagreement and debate in contemporary French political discourse. Combined with some of the historical processes outlined in the first part of this article, they have reshaped the political supply in such a way as to render older frameworks of analysis, if not obsolete, at least subject to significant modification. While the old bipolar left-right axis—represented in [Figure 1](#) below—can still help explain the historical architecture of French politics, we suggest that a new quadripolar axis—represented in [Figure 2](#)—offers a better guide to the current political landscape.

Far left	Center Left	Center Right	Far Right
PCF	PS EELV	LR (formerly RPR, UDF, UMP) Modem	FN

Figure 1. The bipolar left-right axis, 1980s-2017.

	Globalist	Nationalist
Neoliberal	En Marche/Renaissance Modem Parts of LR (Pécresse) Parts of PS (anti-NUPES)	Parts of LR (Ciotti, Wauquiez) Zemmour
Anti-Neoliberal	EELV Parts of PS (pro-NUPES)	RN LFI PCF

Figure 2. The quadripolar neoliberal-anti-neoliberal/globalist-nationalist axis, 2017-present.

The positioning of some parties in [Figure 2](#) may come as a surprise. In particular, our decision to group the RN, LFI and the PCF together as ‘nationalist-anti-neoliberal’ parties appears to validate the claim, often made by centrist politicians like Macron, that the political extremes are more-or-less the same. This is not our argument. The RN, LFI and PCF have different histories, are underpinned by different ideologies, and are very unlikely to form any kind of meaningful alliance. Instead, we suggest that they occupy a common political space in French politics. The fact that, in recent electoral cycles, a significant minority of LFI voters have given their votes to RN candidates is an indication that, despite their profound differences in ideological and historical genealogies, they can appeal to similar voters. This also explains why the two mainstream parties are not presented as unified entities in [Figure 2](#). The PS and LR are now clearly divided along the new quadripolar axis, with different wings of the party appealing to different electoral groups. It is as yet unclear whether both parties will entirely break apart along these lines, not least because they continue to rely on local power structures that gives them institutional weight, but there is no doubt that they have been severely weakened by the omnipresence of quadripolar politics. It is the latter that gives meaning to today’s political fault lines and cleavages, as well as new logics of opposition and alliance formation.

The 2022 electoral cycle and the future of French politics

As we have seen, the 2017 electoral cycle was the first to highlight the potential electoral significance of the new quadripolar axis. Macron's insurgent campaign, Marine Le Pen's successful run to the second round of the presidential election, and Mélenchon's strong performance on the left all reflected a changed political configuration. However, one electoral cycle alone was not enough to confirm the longevity of the quadripolar axis. It took until the 2022 electoral cycle to see just how embedded this new configuration has become. What tentative conclusions can we draw from the wealth of data we have acquired over the course of 2022?

One of the most obvious is that the quadripolar system is changing the role and function of political parties. While this cannot be attributed entirely to the new political spectrum, the obsolescence of the bipolar system has impacted the way parties operate. In the traditional bipolar system, parties competed to form broad electoral majorities, employing a wide array of structures (local party organizations, think tanks, etc.) and an extensive line-up of candidates. In a quadripolar system, they are more fluid. This is reflected in the apparently superficial fact that every French party grouping currently represented in parliament has changed its name in the last twenty years, with the notable exception of the PS. This suggests a constant need to 'rebrand' themselves to the electorate. As for the new parties that have emerged since 2016—especially En Marche/Renaissance and LFI—they are strongly associated with a charismatic leader and their organization is more akin to that of a social movement than a traditional political party. The penetration of social movements into mainstream politics is not, of course, new (Della Porta 2020). There have been several recent examples of this, including the influence of Momentum in the British Labour Party or the 5 Star Movement in Italy. But these have usually involved a push from the grassroots. By contrast, Renaissance and LFI are social movements created from above, rather like the Gaullist parties of the 1940s and 1960s. They have a clearly defined electoral purpose, and their job is to support an individual candidate. This makes them uniquely vulnerable: after all, there is good reason to doubt that Renaissance or Ensemble can survive after the end of Macron's presidency.

An important consequence of the growing prominence of 'movement-parties' is greater political volatility. But this is also inherent in the emergence of a quadripolar political field within an institutional and constitutional framework based on majoritarian principles. The strategy of 'no enemies to the left' (or to the right, as the case may be) inheres structurally in a majoritarian system. Yet in a quadripolar system, it has no obvious equivalent. In the latter, parties must decide on which axis they want to campaign. For example, in the first round of the 2022 presidential election, Mélenchon primarily activated the neoliberalism-anti-neoliberalism axis in order to unite other anti-neoliberal parties against Macron. In response, Macron attempted to play down his neoliberalism in the second round in a bid to appeal to Mélenchon voters, while presenting Le Pen as a dangerous nationalist. This dynamic flipped in the subsequent legislative elections because Mélenchon and his party had successfully negotiated a broad anti-neoliberal coalition (NUPES). As a result, Macron was compelled to denounce Mélenchon and his allies as delusional anti-capitalists (anti-neoliberals, in our terminology). In short, the quadripolar spectrum makes it harder for parties to find natural allies. Rather than political conflict pitting two large armies along an extensive but relatively legible front line, parties

and politicians are now engaged in a multifront war between at least four well-defined belligerents, with all the unpredictability this implies.

In 2017, the instability of the quadripolar system was somewhat tempered by Macron's stranglehold over parliament. By 2022, however, both the French electorate and the French political class was working within a quadripolar logic. This was reflected above all in the results of the legislative elections, with huge gains for the far-right; a new coalition on the left (NUPES); and a minority governing party. These results were a direct consequence of a quadripolar dynamic. In a political system accustomed to multi-party coalition and minority rule, they would not present a particular problem. Except that, in the French case, the institutions of the Fifth Republic were constructed around the principle of majoritarian rule. Hence, the absence of a parliamentary majority for the president—the first time this has happened since 1988—is likely to cause significant instability over the next five years. The fact that there are at least two major opposition groups (RN and NUPES) also hampers the basic functioning of the parliamentary system. This has already been made visible in the debate over electing the chairman of the Finance Commission, which typically goes to the main opposition party, and the organization of *motions de censure*. The latter are difficult to coordinate when most MPs do not belong to the presidential party but are also internally divided and, in some cases, bitterly opposed to each other.

Moving away from parties and institutions, the quadripolar system has been driven by—and is, in turn, shaping—new patterns of electoral sociology and geography. On the former, it is obvious that the quadripolar spectrum corresponds to quite well-defined sociological groups (Amable and Palombarini 2017). According to an IPSOS poll based on the legislative election's first round, the Ensemble coalition—globalist-neoliberal, in our terms—was preferred by older and wealthier voters, as well as those who declared themselves most satisfied with their lives.³ The electorate of the RN—the leading representative of nationalist-anti-neoliberal politics—was much more working-class. The party won 45% of the vote of workers, 28% of those without a *baccalauréat*, and 31% who consider their background to be 'underprivileged'. The NUPES coalition—which includes both globalist-anti-neoliberals and nationalist-anti-neoliberals—brought together the urban middle class, young people, and non-white voters. According to the IPSOS poll, 30% of voters who struggle to make ends meet favoured NUPES. As for the most educated voters, they divided their support between NUPES (32%) and Ensemble (27%), a reflection of a substantial left-leaning cohort of highly educated but poorly paid, dissatisfied or precarious workers. Considered from the standpoint of electoral sociology, the most decisive axis seems to be the neoliberal-anti-neoliberal one, which splits France into a version of the divide between the 'haves' (Ensemble, LR) and the 'have-nots' (NUPES, RN). This recalls the old left-right divide. However, the globalist-nationalist split at least partially explains why these two camps cannot unite: some members of NUPES are globalist-anti-neoliberals while elements of LR are nationalist-neoliberals who are uncomfortable with Macronian globalism.

The quadripolar system is also reflected in the electoral geography of the 2022 electoral cycle (Delpirou & Gilli 2022). To put it simply, the country can now be divided into six zones, each of which corresponds to a particular place on the quadripolar spectrum.⁴ First, France's three big cities—Paris, Lyon, and Marseille—have emerged as

bastions of globalist politics, either broadly anti-neoliberal (NUPES) or neoliberal (Ensemble). The second zone runs down the Atlantic coast, from Brittany to Biarritz. This vast and diverse area returned a very high proportion of Ensemble candidates, both from regions that were traditionally conservative like the Vendée and regions like the inland southwest that had, in recent decades, voted for the PS. This reflects the concentration of a globalist-neoliberal vote, previously distributed amongst the centre-right and centre-left parties. The third zone, more mixed, runs through central and eastern France. This zone is characterized by small urban, peri-urban and rural constituencies. These are generally more depressed than those of western France, and—in rural parts of the Massif Central—still dominated by dynastic political families. In the case of the latter, the old bipolar model remains relevant, and consequently a large number of LR candidates were elected. By contrast, in *départements* like the Yonne and the Haute-Marne there was nothing to give meaning to the old bipolar system, and the RN made significant gains.

The best example of a region dominated by nationalist-anti-neoliberal politics is the fourth geographical zone of northern France. This has the largest concentration of archetypal post-industrial constituencies. The RN has now become the main player in the region, although the PCF remains powerful in some areas. The fifth zone—the Mediterranean basin—is perhaps the area that saw the most dramatic shift in political orientation in 2022. This has been a stomping ground of the RN since the 1970s, partly because of a high concentration of *pieds-noirs* (descendants of the European settler population in Algeria) and high rates of immigration in the major cities (Comtat 2009). But this is the first time that the RN has converted its popularity into seats. It did so by flipping a remarkable number of constituencies from Perpignan to Nice. The Mediterranean basin has now become a veritable laboratory for quadripolar politics, with the RN and LFI facing off against pro- and anti-NUPES left candidates and different factions of the centre-right. Finally, beyond metropolitan France, the picture is even more fragmented. Nationalism has come to dominate Corsican politics, while the Antilles and Indian Ocean territories are represented mostly by candidates on the anti-neoliberal end of the quadripolar spectrum (usually aligned with NUPES). By contrast, of the 13 constituencies for French citizens living abroad, 12 were won by Ensemble candidates in the legislative election, a reflection of the globalist and neoliberal orientation of France's expatriate community.

It is worth pointing out that the margins of victory in the 2022 legislative election were often very narrow. Second-round results in 13 seats were decided by a margin of less than 100 votes, 32 were decided by a margin of less than 200 votes, and 96 were decided by a margin of less than 1,000 votes. In places like the Mediterranean basin, where many seats flipped from the left to the RN, these narrow margins were crucial. This, too, reflects the shift from the old-left-right spectrum to the new quadripolar system. Voting strategies have evolved. Endorsements by defeated candidates (typically in favour of candidates on the same side of the spectrum) or the *front républicain* have less sway than they once did. Rather than cast a ballot for the available left or right-wing candidate in a second round, voters may opt to vote for the surviving candidate most in line, say, with their anti-globalist or anti-neoliberal proclivities. And they may do so even in defiance of traditional taboos—witness, for instance, the strong vote transfer from Mélenchon to Le Pen between the two rounds of the 2022 presidential election in the French Antilles.

There is, of course, an open question about whether our analysis works at all levels of the French political system. Notably, the municipal elections of 2020 and, especially, the regional elections of 2021 seem to confirm the residual strength of bipolarity. Seemingly in contradiction with the quadripolar dynamic that has come to dominate national politics, France's powerful regional councils are at present all governed by the PS, LR and their allies, with En marche, LFI and the RN far behind. This is a reminder that, rather than entirely supplanting the bipolar axis, the quadripolar dynamic has awkwardly superimposed itself on it. Indeed, the radical disconnect between national politics—which is dominated by presidential candidates and their ephemeral movement-parties—and local politics—which remains the domain of institutionalized parties and old-fashioned electoral alliances—has contributed to the instability of the quadripolar system. It remains to be seen whether the quadripolar system will eventually impose itself at all levels or, conversely, whether the PS and LR can use their 'regional' strength to launch a national comeback. It is even possible that the gap between local and national politics will continue to grow, which would turn France into a two-speed 'federal' democracy, closer in structure to Spain, Germany, Italy, or the devolved nations of the UK, where regional politics operates according to different patterns and priorities.

Quadripolar politics: a danger to democracy?

Whatever the future holds, it seems certain that, if France's political landscape becomes ever more dominated by the quadripolar system, then electoral volatility will become the norm. Combined with the institutional instability of contested parliamentary politics, this will have profound consequences for the way French political actors and parties behave. Whether this is a positive or negative change depends largely on one's political position. We would, however, caution against a common recent interpretation of contested politics as somehow 'undermining' or 'damaging' the foundations of democracy. This argument became particularly prevalent after Trump's election in 2016, a moment at which many English-language scholars and commentators bemoaned the rise of the populist extremes and urged people to back politicians and parties committed to protecting (neo-)liberal democracy (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Mounk 2018; Galston 2018; Snyder 2017). Indeed, Macron himself was often held up as an exemplar of this politics of 'moderation' and 'consensus'.

This interpretation may well make sense as a political strategy, but it rests on a narrow conception of democracy that, in the European case at least, was largely forged in post-war Western Europe and relies on an obsolete bipolar model (Conway 2020). The case of France shows that bipolar politics is ill-suited to contemporary political cleavages and debates. French voters and politicians today more readily think in terms of binaries such as neo-republican vs. pluralist; strong vs. weak *laïcité*; strong vs. weak state; pro- vs. anti-European; pro- vs. anti-globalization; or pro- vs. anti-immigration. These do not map onto a bipolar left-right divide, but they can be fitted into a quadripolar framework of the kind that we have outlined above. This new configuration is not a travesty of democracy, nor does it undermine democratic 'values'. It merely reflects powerful ideological and sociological currents. That France's political landscape now more closely matches the debates and disagreements taking place between real people reflects the strength of democracy at every level of French society. This should be a cause for celebration, not denunciation.

Notes

1. 'VIDÉOS—Macron affirme désormais être “de droite et de gauche”'. RTL.fr, 14/3/2017. <https://www.rtl.fr/actu/politique/videos-macron-affirme-desormais-etre-de-droite-et-de-gauche-7787662882>.
2. By *neoliberalism*, we refer to an ideology and mode of governance that promotes the free market, whether on normative or pragmatic grounds, at the national and international level. While all forms of neoliberalism stress the centrality of the free market, this emphasis is not incompatible with a degree of market regulation or social welfare (in other words, neoliberalism need not mean libertarianism). By *globalism*, we mean the position which holds that, in an increasingly interconnected and integrated global environment, most significant political issues have become international in nature and that nations must embrace this fact to ensure that most of their citizens benefit from globalization. Insofar as the international market is the main force driving these trends, globalism overlaps significantly with neoliberalism, while also transcending it. Globalism, for instance, includes cooperation on issues of international security as well as environmental policy. In France, globalism includes but is not limited to embracing European integration. *Nationalism* should not be confused with the term's meaning in earlier periods of French history. For our purposes, nationalism refers to the view that, in an increasingly interconnected and integrated global environment, the welfare of citizens depends on the prioritization of national sovereignty and national identity.
3. IPSOS, 'Qui a voté quoi ? La sociologie de l'électorat,' 12 June 2022, <https://www.ipsos.com/fr-fr/legislatives-2022/qui-vote-quoi-la-sociologie-de-lelectorat>.
4. These zones correspond broadly, though not exactly, to the most accurate geographical representations of voting evolution after the first round of the 2022 presidential election. On this, see Olivier Finance, 'De l'autocorrélation spatiale du vote à la présidentielle', *Cybergeo Conversation* (13 April 2022), <https://cybergeo.hypotheses.org/1199>.

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