

Zemmour, Reconquête!, and the Evolution of the French Far Right in the 2022 Elections

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Abstract

The ongoing rise of populist, illiberal, and far right parties around the world has had a dramatic effect on contemporary politics. The party of Éric Zemmour, *Reconquête* [Reconquest], made a major splash in French electoral politics in early 2022 and commanded anywhere from 10 to 15 percent of the vote prior to the presidential election. Many worried that this new party, even further to the right than Marine Le Pen's National Rally, could make major electoral gains and become a permanent fixture of the French political system. However, to the surprise of many, *Reconquête* did not win a single seat in the National Assembly or have their candidate Zemmour ascend to the second round of the Presidential Election. This article details who Éric Zemmour is and what his party *Reconquête* stands for, as well as the reasons why they were not successful in the last national elections, and the likely consequences their entry into the political system can hold for French politics.

Keywords: Populism, Far Right, French Politics

Introduction: Who is Eric Zemmour?

When Eric Zemmour launched his candidacy for the Presidency on November 30, 2021, he had already benefited from being a household name. One of the most prominent of the journalists, writers, and intellectuals known as the “*nouveaux réactionnaires*,” Zemmour is well known in France for courting controversy and scandal in his many books and television appearances. This strategy, not so indifferent from that of Donald Trump in 2016, brought him an enormous amount of media attention (Frigoli and Ivaldi, 2019, p. 75) that has allowed him constant standing to frame contemporary issues according to his wishes. Unlike Trump, however, Zemmour has used this attention to craft his public intellectual persona, giving the radical ideas that he presents to the public an intellectual veneer. Zemmour's arguments frequently delve into historical developmental trends, quotes of past reactionary philosophers and thinkers, and immigration statistics, all with the aim of convincing his audience of the importance of the “identity” issue. Among some of his more scandalous arguments that have

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rocked the French media world are advocating for a return to naming newborns according to the Catholic calendar, reviving the revisionist thesis of the “sword and the shield” wherein the Marshal Pétain only collaborated with the Nazis in order to protect the French, and reorienting French immigration policy in order to stop the “Great Replacement” (Sawyer, 2022). He has already been convicted three times of provoking racial hatred.

The Zemmour phenomenon closely resembles the emergence of other populist candidates on the far right. Chastising the ‘corrupt’ elite for having corrupted and betrayed the nation, the charismatic strongman presents his (and usually ‘his’) candidacy as nothing less than a mission to save the nation from its own destruction. As with other radical right candidates, Zemmour’s populism is explicitly anti-pluralist, as its cultural essentialism implies that one’s national origin, culture, or religion make the individual, and not the other way around (Alduy, 2022, p. 21, 26). Moreover, while all populist dichotomies include the two poles, “the people” and “the elite,” the conception of these two homogenous groups usually differs based on the host ideology and cultural context. For Zemmour, there is less of an emphasis on the dominant position in the national or international market of the elite, instead, he attacks an elite he sees as embodying the “dominant ideology” that began with the left-wing movements of 1968 and continue to this day.

Figure 1. Word Cloud of 20 Campaign Speeches Given by Eric Zemmour



Using twenty of Zemmour's speeches from the 2022 Presidential and Legislative elections, many of these themes come to the fore. First, we can observe a clear overemphasis on the populist dichotomy; on one side are 'the people' (peuple), 'us' (nous, notre), the French (français.e), and on the other, the foreigners (étrangers), the left (gauche), and the macronistes. As noted by French semiologist Cécile Alduy, (2022, p. 13), Zemmour's discourse envisions a society in a constant state of conflict, and expresses this with constant references to 'war' (guerre), defense (défense, défendre), military (militaire), protect (protéger), combat, armed (armés). It should be noted that some of these terms are in reference to the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine which took place in the backdrop of the election, however, elements of this conception of the world can still be made out:

“Since the 60s, the left has tried to destroy a French culture they consider “bourgeois,” they want to destroy the Republican meritocracy that they consider unjust, they have the clear intention to make schools into a machine for ideological warfare and at their disposition.” - Eric Zemmour at Saint Quentin

The questions of French national identity and immigration are by far the most prominent themes in Zemmour's discourse and political agenda, as noted by both their importance in *Reconquete!*'s manifesto (Ivaldi, 2022), the demands of the party's support base (ENEF, 21-24 March 2022; Ivaldi, 2022), and the ex-polemist's own admission. This placed him in direct competition with Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National that traditionally “owned” these issues in the French party system. On the economic dimension, however, Zemmour's platform is much more economically liberal than that of his far-right competitor, placing him in competition with the traditional neoliberal Républicain voters. Zemmour's economic platform aims at the reduction of the “assistinat,” or welfare state: his manifesto included promises to save more than 65 billion euros by removing social programs for non-European citizens, getting rid of wasted spending, auditing all fields of public policy, and cutting spending on the French bureaucracy, (Ivaldi, 2022). On the issue of the pension age, a salient issue during the 2022 election cycle, Zemmour argued in favor of raising the pension age to 64 years old. He sought to remove taxes for working overtime, propose relief from the inheritance tax, and remove family allowances for “disruptive” and “absentee” students. Instead of positioning the party towards winning converts from the working classes, he instead sought to attract the

support of small business owners by proposing a lower corporate tax rate for SMEs, craftsmen, traders, and farmers. In this respect Zemmour appears to have moved into the political space once occupied by Jean-Marie Le Pen, denoted by a “fiscal Poujadism,” prior to Marine Le Pen’s ascension to the party in 2011 and reorientation towards a more economically protectionist platform (Alduy and Wahnich, 2015, pp. 40-41; Stockemer, 2017). Despite these differences on economics, however, surveys demonstrate that their position on the socio-cultural axis is of higher importance to voters, as supporters of the *Rassemblement National* and *Reconquete!*, when asked, stated that they would largely prefer to support the other party as their second choice than any others with similar economic platforms (ENEF, 2-3 March 2022; June 2022).

It is important to note, however, that unlike mainstream liberals, this economic liberalism is considerably tinged by nationalism and cultural nativism. For one, much of the savings envisioned by Zemmour were to come from reducing levels of immigration and instituting a national priority to welfare spending, thus reducing spending on social security programs. Other policies are more economically nationalist; instead of promoting government spending to reduce inequality and promote protectionist measures, Zemmour envisions more of a market economy that operates in favor of French nationals. Some proposals include requiring public spending to privilege French products, ending current and future negotiations for free trade agreements, giving privilege to locally-grown food, creating a large investment fund for investing in French businesses, and instituting a “Patrie-Score” for labeling products made in France (Ivaldi, 2022).

The Campaign

Early polling for the 2022 elections placed Eric Zemmour near the top of the right-wing contenders prior to the first round of voting on April 10. By October 2021, polls had placed Zemmour above both the *Républicains*’ candidate Valérie Pécresse and the highest-scoring left-wing candidate, Jean-Luc Mélenchon. During this time, competition arose between Zemmour, Le Pen, and Pécresse to see who would become the second placed “candidate of the right” to eventually face Emmanuel Macron in the second round. In practice, this meant Marine Le Pen attempting to distance herself from the radical views of her more far-right challenger and appeals by Pécresse to the “Great Replacement” during her speech at the Zénith to sap support (Caulcutt, 2022). Polling in March demonstrated that Zemmour was pulling support primarily from voters who had supported either Marine Le Pen or François Fillon in 2017 (ENEF, 2-3

March 2022). Zemmour polled around 15% until the end of February when he would start to see a precipitous decline in support (ENEf, 2-3 March 2022).

While Zemmour found support from certain constituencies in the country, he found less among the political elite. Since the founding of the Fifth Republic, France has had in place an institutional set-up known as *parrainage*, which requires candidates running for the presidency to obtain a certain number of signatures from elected officials around the country in order to be eligible to run. While this only required 100 signatures prior to 1976, today, candidates are required to obtain 500 signatures from officials in more than 30 departments to be placed on the ballot. Many candidates without much support or name recognition face an uphill battle to be eligible to run, and *parrainage* usually has the effect of limiting the number of candidates running (Bréchon, 2022, p. 12). Such was the case with Éric Zemmour, who despite inhabiting the third to fourth place position for much of the Winter, only acquired the required amount in early March, just prior to the deadline, and after much weaker candidates as Nathalie Arthaud (LU), Jean Lassalle (RES), and Fabien Roussel (PCF) had obtained theirs.

The candidates who came together to support his new party *Reconquête!* are nearly a who's-who of the French radical right (Macé and Plottu, 6 May 2022), who all have in common a similar antipathy for Islam and immigration, and are generally willing to be more openly radical than the RN. First, there are the established radical right figures that have passed from party to party over the years. After longtime *Front National* (FN) candidate Thierry Lollieurou left the party with the ascension of Marine Le Pen to the leadership, Lollieurou joined *Reconquête!* and ran for office in the 5th circumscription of the Finistère. Head of the *Mouvement Conservateur* and ex-spokesperson for François Fillon in 2016, Laurence Trochu migrated towards *Reconquête!* in early 2022. Guillaume Peltier, whose political journey took him through Bruno Mégret's *Mouvement national républicain* (MNR), the *Union pour un Mouvement Populaire* (UMP), to the mayor of Neung-sur-Beuvron in 2014, he would take another leap to the *Reconquête!* in January 2022. Vice-President Jérôme Rivière came to the party after formerly having been a part of the UMP and the FN. Finally, Philippe de Villiers, ex-secretary of state for culture under the Chirac II government, and founder of the souverainist party *Mouvement pour la France*, joined the party in late December 2011.

Next, are the Identitarians from both inside and outside of the *Rassemblement National* who joined the upstart political party. Marion Maréchal Le Pen was the highest profile politician from this camp (Darmanin, 2022). The niece of Marine Le Pen, who always leaned towards

the civilizational, catholic traditional, and great-replacement positions of the hard right-wing, joined *Reconquête!* just prior to the election. Nicolas Bay, another high-profile candidate who left for the MNR during the 1998 party split, returned and remained in the FN from 2009 to 2022, occupying a handful of different positions, and then left for *Reconquête!* in February 2022 after being excluded from the FN and accused of feeding information to Zemmour's upstart party. Coming from the social movement direction, Jérémie Piano, the ex-spokesperson for the now banned extremist group Generation Identity, and twice found guilty for inciting racial hatred, joined Zemmour's cause and was rewarded with representing the party in the 11th circonscription of the Bouches-du-Rhône during the legislative elections (Gibert, 30 May 2022; Thimonnier, 17 May 2022). Another ex-member of the Génération Identitaire, the co-founder and spokesperson Damien Lefèvre (Rieu), joined the party in 2022 and became a candidate in the 4th circonscription of the Alpes-Maritimes (GPAHE, 2022; Macé and Plottu, 6 May 2022).

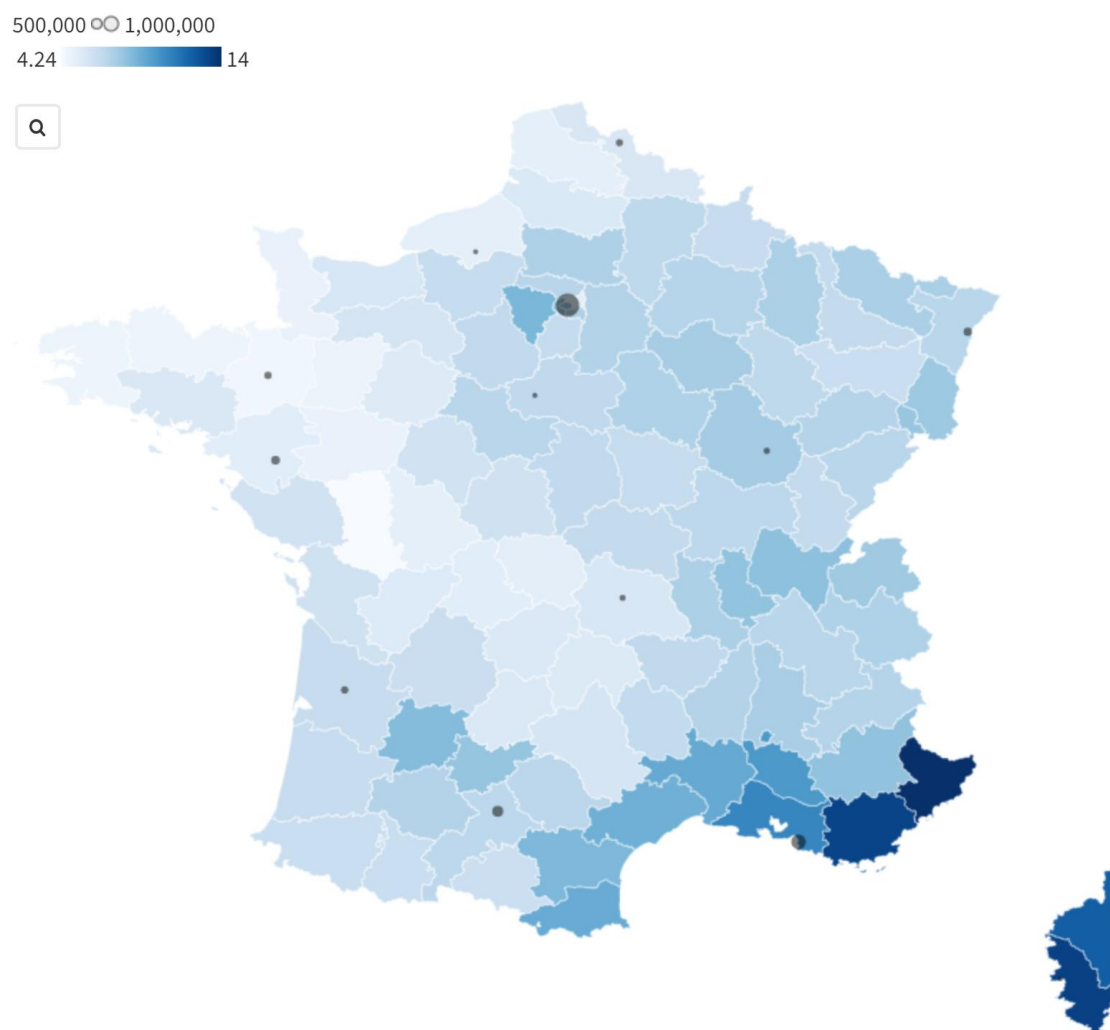
Finally, there are those from the online 'fachosphère' similar in nature to America's alt-right. In the 2nd district of Mayenne, Pierre d'Herbais, who has written for the site *Résistance républicaine*, and allegedly hires extremists from the GUD for his private security firm, presented himself. Patrick Jardin, who turned the death of his daughter in the attacks of November 13 into an intense Islamophobia, once openly tweeting support for the "sacrifice" of extreme right terrorists Brenton Tarrant and Anders Breivik, would run in the 4th circonscription of the Nord. Police officer, youtuber, and frequent media guest Bruno Attal, who regularly advocates in favor of the "great replacement" conspiracy theory and stigmatizes citizens of foreign origin, was 'parachuted' into 14th district of the Rhône (Peru, May 6, 2022).

In the first round of voting, Zemmour earned 7.07% of the vote, earning him a fourth place finish, below the threshold necessary to advance to the second round (Talpin, et al. April 10, 2022). While he earned a significant amount more than most other contenders, the gap between his score and that of the third-place candidate, the left-wing populist Jean-Luc Mélenchon, was nearly 15 percentage points. The beginning of the tripolarization that we observe today would ultimately take its toll on the newcomer.

On a mass level, Zemmour drew support during the presidential elections from professionals, small business owners, and those in the agricultural sector (ENEF, 2-3 March 2022). Unlike other candidates, supporters of Zemmour largely cast 'votes of adhesion,' because they

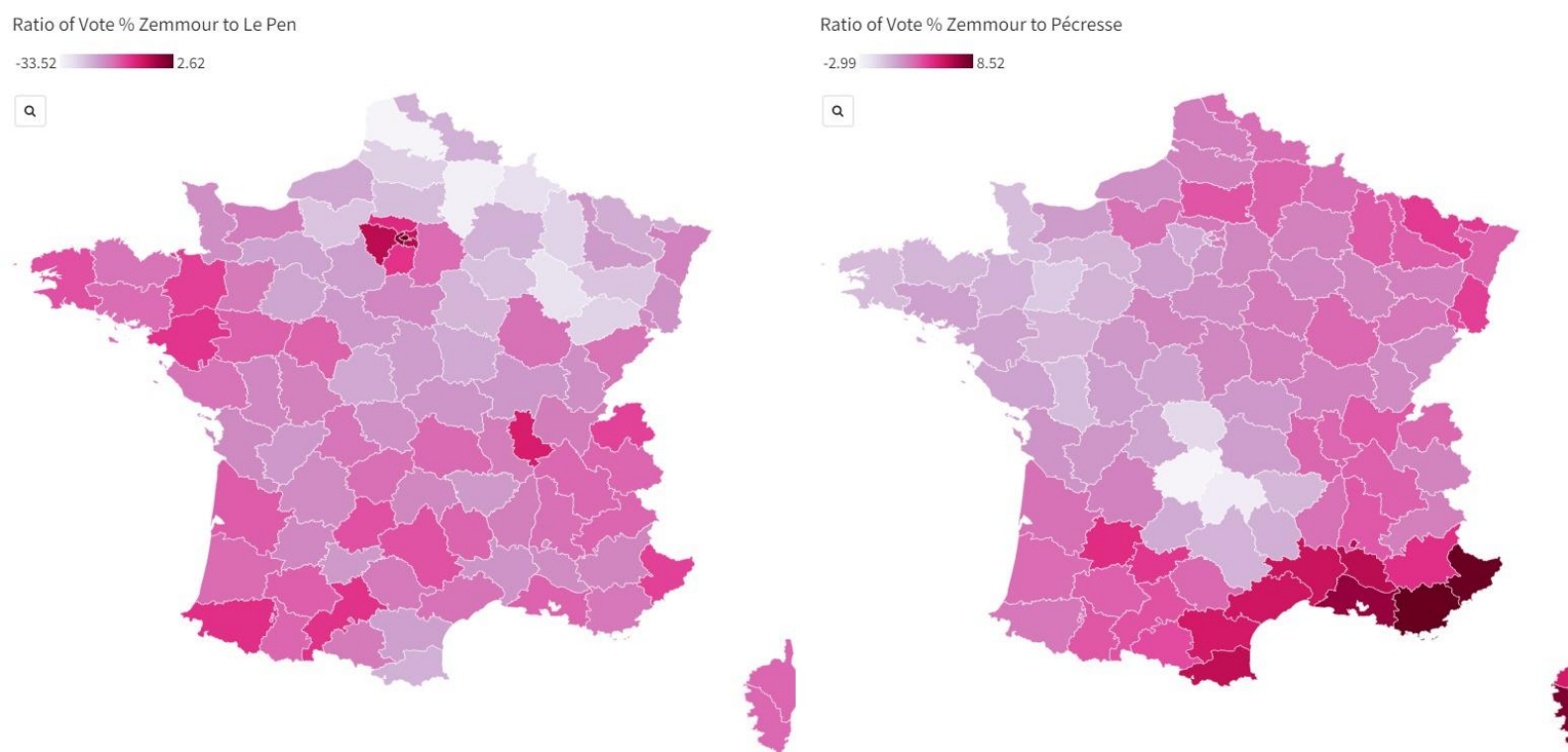
sympathized with his politics, over ‘votes of pragmatism.’ Support for Zemmour primarily appeared in the bourgeois western suburbs of Paris, the south-east coastal regions of France, and in Corsica. This could be evidenced by his ability to organize a massive rally at the Trocadéro in Paris, one of the wealthiest sections of the city where immigration and identity-related issues took priority over the cost-of-living (Paris, 2022). Support was lowest, on the other hand, in parts of Bretagne. Compared to his closest far-right competitor, Le Pen, Zemmour lost every contest with the exception of the western suburbs of Paris. As expected, Le Pen was particularly dominant in the north-eastern working class regions that have supported her heavily in the past, where she beat Zemmour by more than 30 percentage points. The *Républicain*’s Valérie Pécresse scored much better with this constituency, but fared worse in the south.

Figure 2. Percent of the Vote for Zemmour in the 1st Round of the 2022 Presidential Election



Source: data.gouv.fr ; Visualizations created by the author

Figure 3. Percent of the Vote for Zemmour in the 1st Round of the 2022 Presidential Election Compared to Le Pen and Pécresse



Source: data.gouv.fr ; Visualizations created by the author

By the time of the “third round” for the legislative elections, leaders within *Reconquête!*, such as Marion Maréchal Le Pen, began calling for an electoral coalition with the *Rassemblement National* in order to compete with la *Nouvelle Union populaire écologique et sociale* (NUPES) [New Ecological and Social People's Union] on the left and *Ensemble!* [Together] in the center (Le Pen, 28 April, 2022). For his part, Eric Zemmour made a public call for a “coalition for the right and the patriots,” inviting the *Rassemblement National*, *Debout La France*, and members of *Les Républicains* who did not “want anymore of Emmanuel Macron” (Taburet, 24 April, 2022). Only Philippe Vardon of the identitarian wing of the *Rassemblement National* would advocate for the same, though his appeals fell on deaf ears (Herrerros, 29 April, 2022).

The following legislative elections saw fleeting support for the candidates of *Reconquete!*. In wave 12 of the French Electoral Survey (ENEF, June 2022) fielded in early June, only 62% of voters who supported Zemmour in the first round of the presidential election stated that they would support the local candidate of *Reconquete!*, while 20% opted to support Le Pen and 12% for Les Républicains (ENEF, June 2022). As the results were announced on June 12th, Zemmour claimed only 22.8% of votes in the 4th circonscription of the Var, compared to the

RN candidate Philippe Lottiaux's 25.4% and LREM candidate Sereine Mauborgne's 28.2% (Herrerros, 12 June 2022). Other party candidates would see similar results. In the 2nd circonscription of the Vaucluse, party spokesperson and head of Génération Zemmour Stanislas Rigault would lose to the RN and LREM candidates by double digits (Vella, 12 June 2022). The vice-President of *Reconquete!*, Guillaume Peltier was also eliminated in the first round in the 2nd circonscription of the Loir-et-Cher (Bourgeois, 12 June 2022) and far right Youtube personality Bruno Atal scored a measly 5.38% in the 14th circonscription of the Rhône (Micheletti, 13 June 2022). Despite the initial hype, *Reconquete!* would not go on to win a single seat in the National Assembly. These results are especially painful for the party considering many of their candidates were 'parachuted' into safe districts where they were most likely to win (Peru, May 6, 2022).

To add pain to misery, Zemmour ended up spending a comparatively massive amount on the Presidential campaign for the mediocre score he received. Of the 16,851,000 euros permitted for the first round, Zemmour burned through 11 million compared to similar amounts for the other top-ranking candidates (Herrerros, 19 July, 2022). Despite these miserable results and political infighting, Zemmour has expressed his will to carry on. In a letter to his 130,000 supporters, he expressed his "disappointment" with the results, blaming the war in Ukraine for the turn of events, but reaffirming that the civilizational question was "THE political question" due to its "existential" nature (20 July, 2022).

"Ben, voyons!" The Consequences of a Zemmour Candidacy

Why did Zemmour's *Reconquête!* fail to make any gains during the elections? The first likely reason is the new tripartite partisan system that appeared following Macron's success in the presidential election of 2017, which removed the dominant position of the traditional center-right and center-left parties of power. Prior to this, the French tended to "vote with their hearts" in the first round, knowing that a left and right-wing candidate was always assured to proceed, and in the second round, "vote with their heads" (Bréchon, 2022). This allowed for French voters to choose their preferred candidate without the threat of 'spoiling' the vote for a candidate closer to their ideological leaning. Following the 2017 election, however, things changed; in effect, a strong party inhabiting the space in the ideological center meant that, given the rules for the run-off election, a left-wing or right-wing candidate in the second round was no longer assured. This created a strong incentive to cast a "*vote utile*" in favor of the best-performing candidate within one's ideological camp in the first round. This could be observed

in the final weeks before the first round of the Presidential election in 2022 when nearly all candidates lost ground to the three front-runners Emmanuel Macron, Marine Le Pen, and Jean-Luc Mélenchon. Seeing that Marine Le Pen had the best theoretical chances of defeating Macron in the second round, many right-wing voters, including those from the *Reconquête* camp, flocked to vote for her.

Secondly, Zemmour's primary emphasis on immigration, identity, and the "Great Replacement" did not allow for the flexibility in issue-sets necessary to appeal to other constituencies, and deal with changing circumstances, especially when faced with a crowded field of candidates with similar ideological positions. In the rural districts, where Marine Le Pen's message has been strongest, Zemmour failed to win in a single constituency, despite strong showings in the southeast and Corsica. In the urban western suburbs of Paris, a typical stronghold for right-wing, pro-market candidates, Zemmour lost out to other established candidates such as Emmanuel Macron and Valérie Pécresse. Whereas voters whose most important issue was immigration had a strong preference for the Zemmour campaign, those most worried about the cost-of-living crisis and the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, the most salient issues of the campaign, largely did not (ENEF, May 2022). Marine Le Pen, on the other hand, had carefully crafted a party ideology and economic platform promoting protectionism, support for the welfare state, and economic measures to "level the playing field" for the better part of a decade, which became useful for demonstrating that she was a serious candidate with a plethora of policy sets, and responding to these sudden crises.

Finally, by positioning his candidacy, and that of his party, on the extreme right fringes of the political spectrum, and promoting radical policies such as the creation of a "Ministry of Remigration," a concept linked to only the most radical identitarian groups (Fritel, 2022), Zemmour and *Reconquête!* lowered the ceiling of possible vote margins they could attain and doomed themselves to political isolation. In an age of negative partisanship, most politicians have somewhat high unfavorability ratings, however, Zemmour's were exceptionally high (65%) (ENEF, 21-24 March 2022; Paris, 2022). When asked which candidate they could never vote for, French voters overwhelmingly (64%) said Zemmour (ENEF, 21-24 March 2022). The candidate worried a large percentage of voters (65%), was perceived as being demagogic (49%), giving a bad image of France abroad, and was considered to be incapable of confronting a major crisis (ENEF, 21-24 March 2022). An Ipsos-Le Monde poll placed him at the top of the most disliked candidates in the race (Paris, 2022). This tended to be an issue during both the Presidential and Legislative elections; when the Left had coalesced around NUPES, and

the liberal center formed *Ensemble!*, Marine Le Pen, who for a decade has led a campaign to “de-demonize” the party in the public eye by moderating the party ideology and jettisoning the more extremist elements of the party (Alduy and Wahnich, 2015; Dézé, 2012; Stockemer, 2017), was in no hurry to form a union with Zemmour and his band of radicals. In this respect, by forming *Reconquête!* and attracting the radical wing away from the Rassemblement National, Zemmour likely helped Le Pen appear even more moderate, and pass along the image of the party on the extreme fringes onto *Reconquête!*. According to polling, there was no considerable opposition to refusing this alliance from Le Pen’s supporters (ENEF, 16-19 May 2022). Thus, whereas on the left, the candidate with the best chances of winning was supported by the coalition, on the far right, the RN and *Reconquête!* directly competed with each other, which again lead to a ‘*vote utile*’ logic during the legislative elections.

While the far-right’s candidacy for both the Presidency, and a seat in the national legislature, may have ended in failure, Zemmour’s entry into the political arena is still sure to have lasting consequences. For one, his national position has brought a certain amount of respectability to the positions he takes, which in the long-term, will aid in mainstreaming them. Belief in the idea of a “great replacement” has only increased in French voters since Zemmour began promoting it several years ago (IFOP, 2019 January; Cnews, 2022, 17 February; Harris-International, 2021, 20 October). Based on the amount of early support the journalist-turned-politician was able to garner in early 2022, other right-wing candidates, such as *Les Républicains*’ Valéry Pécresse, began making references to the very same “great replacement” in an effort to win over far-right voters (Sawyer, 2022). These beliefs have undeniably been linked to authoritarian measures being imposed on minorities, and stochastic terrorism (Herreros, 15 May 2022).

Zemmour’s Manichean and apocalyptic rhetoric has also led to violence at rallies. On January 21, 2022, for example, nearly 200 or more supporters of the party clashed with anti-fascist demonstrators at a rally in Nice, while earlier in December, a dozen supporters physically assaulted a priest in Lille. The far-right groups that have come to surround the *Reconquête!* Movement have also not helped in this respect. On December 5, 2021, a group of neo-nazi sympathizers from the group Zouaves Paris attacked a dozen SOS Racisme protesters while at a rally in Villepinte. Members of Génération Z, the official youth group of *Reconquête!* participated in the mob of far-right student collectives that sought to clear the student protest at SciencesPo on April 14 by violent means.

The founding of *Reconquête!* and the open radicalism of their charismatic leader have led to a unification of the previously fragmented extreme right. For nearly a decade, factions on the far right deemed too radical for Marine Le Pen's Front National, such as the Pétainists, Maurrasians, neo-fascists, fundamentalist Catholics, and openly antisemitic groups, have been purged from the party membership in order to soften the party's image in front of the French public. This led to a renewed fractionalization of the far right that began forming micro-parties such as the *Parti de la France*, *Comités Jaunes*, *Les Nationalists*, and *Souveraineté, identité et libertés* (SIEL), and the rejection of pressure parties and activist groups such as *Terre et Peuple*, *Génération Identitaire*, and Alain Soral's *Égalité et Réconciliation* (GPAHE, 2023). For many of these groups, Zemmour's candidacy, in late 2021 revealed a new opportunity for relevancy. Unlike Le Pen, Zemmour has publicly embraced many of the more radical views of these groups and refused to denounce them in front of voters. In return, members from these groups, such as the *Action Française*, *Le Parti de la France*, *Cocarde Étudiant*, and *Alsace d'Abord*, either endorsed the candidate in elections or joined *Reconquête!* or related organizations such as *Génération Z*, in hopes of pushing the political system right-ward (GPAHE, 2023). The announcement of his candidacy led to a small split in the party elite of the RN where members of the more radical faction, such as Marion-Maréchal le Pen and others, left to join the other Identitarians in Zemmour's new grouping. Others, such as Philippe Vardon from *Les Identitaires* who had chosen to remain in the *Rassemblement National* during the election, defected to *Reconquête!* afterwards and join the party elite (Vareille, 2022). As such, the once disparate galaxy of far-right activists and groupuscules in France quickly gravitated towards *Reconquête!* to form a network of activists to actively campaign on behalf of Zemmour, allowing *Reconquête!* a base of supporters to mobilize during elections, rallies, and demonstrations, and a politician with a national spotlight for the issues of these extreme groups.

Finally, in the electoral arena, Zemmour and his party *Reconquete!* provide a radical flank effect that has already born fruit for the other far-right opposition leader Marine Le Pen and the RN. From its founding in the early 1970s, the *Front National* (now RN) have long solidified their party 'brand' as being 'tough' on Islamic terrorism, 'law and order' and "mass immigration," so much so that there has been a stigma associated with support for the party for much of its existence. Since 2011, however, Marine Le Pen set out with a policy of de-demonization, jettisoning the more radical members (including her own father) from the party, cloaking the defense of "French civilization," as emphasized by her father, with a defense of secularism, women's rights, and individualism (from the Muslim 'Other'). Recent elections

demonstrate that this strategy has born fruit; while Marine Le Pen did not win the Presidential election, she did come in second place with her best score since coming to lead the Front National over a decade ago, and made record gains in the legislative elections that followed. While Zemmour's entrance into party politics may have split the far-right vote in certain constituencies, his open radicalism has only made Marine Le Pen's nativism seem moderate in comparison. Whereas the television commentator openly proves scandal, provokes violence at his rallies, and spouts the same conspiracy theories that have influenced both the now-banned Generation Identity and other far right radicals, Marine Le Pen looks presidential in comparison.

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