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Dancing with the devil? Emmanuel Macron, Marine Le Pen and the articulation of a new political divide in France

Lise Esther Herman¹  | Marta Lorimer² 

¹Department of Politics, University of Exeter, Exeter, UK

²European Institute, London School of Economics, London, UK

Correspondence

Marta Lorimer, European Institute, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK.

Email: m.lorimer@lse.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper investigates how political challengers articulate new political divides in European political party systems and with what implications for representative democracy. Focusing on the case of France and the discourse and practices of Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen, the paper identifies three strategies these actors have used to articulate a new political division beyond Left and Right: the discursive rejection of traditional Left/Right politics, the combination of elements from across the Left/Right divide and the identification of each other as opposite sides on a new cleavage. Our analysis also suggests that rather than addressing the democratic pathologies associated with the traditional Left/Right party system, this new divide has largely contributed to deepen them. Specifically, the new dichotomy carries risks in terms of representative deficits, electoral demobilisation and the further legitimisation of illiberal politics.

KEYWORDS

Far Right, Radical Right, Populist Right, France, French, Cleavages, Emmanuel Macron, Marine Le Pen

Political cleavages are the enduring political divisions that structure political conflict in society (Marks et al., 2022). Although the socially rooted nature of cleavages means that they are hard to change, there is growing evidence that cleavage structures in Europe are evolving (Hooghe & Marks, 2018).

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France is a case in point. On 23 April 2017, French voters were faced with an unprecedented choice. Following the first round of voting in the presidential election, neither candidate from the two traditional mainstream parties qualified for the second round. Instead, voters had a choice between political newcomer and self-declared centrist Emmanuel Macron and experienced radical right leader of the Rassemblement National¹ Marine Le Pen. Although the candidates differed in many respects, they shared the view that the Left/Right cleavage was obsolete and was being supplanted by a new division between 'patriots' and 'globalists' in Le Pen's language, or 'progressives' and 'nationalists' in Macron's (Drochon, 2022).

There are two plausible ways to make sense of the apparent decline of the Left/Right cleavage in French politics and beyond. The first is to focus on 'bottom-up' or 'demand' dynamics of cleavage formation (Evans & Tilley, 2012; Marks et al., 2022) and analyse how the changing sociological background of voters led to the emergence of new divisions between 'winners versus losers of globalisation' (Kriesi et al., 2012) or a 'transnational' cleavage (Hooghe & Marks, 2018). The second is to focus on the 'top-down' or 'supply' side of cleavage formation and concentrate on how political parties reflect these changes and how they shape cleavages through discourse and practice. Whereas bottom-up approaches are predominant in the literature, top-down dynamics, and especially the process of cleavage articulation, have received less attention (Enyedi, 2005; for exceptions, see Evans & Tilley, 2012; De Vries & Hobolt, 2020). There is a specific lack of attention for cases where competition is between actors with no experience of government ('challenger' parties), rather than between 'challengers' and parties with experience of government ('dominant' parties) (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020).

In this paper, we ask the following question: how do political actors in challenger–challenger dynamics engage in cleavage articulation, and with what implications for representative democracy? We address these questions inductively, through a study of how Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen framed political divisions in their discourses and practices since 2017. By bringing attention to how parties articulate cleavages, we do not intend to suggest that bottom-up dynamics of cleavage formation are irrelevant or that political actors can create *political* cleavages with no relation to existing or emerging *social* cleavages. However, the latter are not the focus of our paper. What we wish to highlight is that without political agency, social divisions would not be given an institutional form (Bartolini & Mair, 1990) and that parties maintain a significant degree of leeway in terms of how they choose to represent such divisions. In times of political volatility like our own, when less 'structure' underpins political divisions, agency acquires a particularly prominent role in creating more permanent structures and defining which issues are discussed, and how (Hooghe & Marks, 2018). As such, it is worth studying how actors seek to bring order to volatility by looking at their articulation of political conflict and understanding what they make such conflict *about*.

Additionally, by not assuming that new parties are a natural translation of pre-existing aspirations within society and centring instead the agency of political actors, we open the door to interrogating whether the new divisions promoted by parties effectively contribute to a better integration of politics and society than the Left/Right dichotomy (Disch, 2011, 2015). With this in mind, we complement our empirical analysis with an assessment of the democratic performance of the French party system under this new dichotomy, focusing on three main criteria derived from theories of democratic partisanship: representativeness; electoral mobilisation; and the safeguarding of liberal norms of political tolerance and respect for minority rights (for an overview, see Herman, 2017).

Our findings show that despite their stated ideological differences, Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen have used three similar strategies to articulate a new political division beyond Left and Right: the discursive rejection of traditional Left/Right politics, the combination of elements from across the Left/Right divide in a single programme and the identification of each other as opposite sides on a new political scale. The preliminary evidence we examine suggests this new divide is largely exacerbating longer-term issues within French democracy rather than addressing them.

The paper proceeds as follows. We discuss agency in cleavage articulation before presenting the paper's methodology. The empirical section presents the discursive strategies employed by Le Pen and Macron to articulate a new division. The following section addresses the democratic implications of this new divide. The conclusion summarises our findings.

1 | AGENCY IN CLEAVAGE ARTICULATION

Cleavage theory, as described by Stein Rokkan and Seymour Martin Lipset (1967), is generally presented as holding that national political party systems reflect the underlying social conflicts, or cleavages, that were dominant in a country when mass democracy was introduced. Although Rokkan and Lipset acknowledge that political parties play a role in the articulation of political cleavages, the analyses that followed in their steps privileged structure over agency, dedicating most attention to the sociological underpinnings of political divisions and paying limited attention to how parties articulate such divisions (Enyedi, 2005; Kitschelt, 2010; Kitschelt et al., 1999). This absence is problematic. As Hanspeter Kriesi noted, demographic divisions are not 'translated into politics as a matter of course' (Kriesi, 1998, p. 167) but need to be articulated and expressed in organisational terms, usually by political parties (Bartolini & Mair, 1990, p. 215).

In response, agency-centred approaches have sought to address the shortcoming of structure-focused analyses of political cleavages. Zolt Enyedi and Kevin Deegan-Krause (2011) identify four ways in which parties contribute to the establishment of cleavages. (1) They can shape political institutions and manipulate the rules of political competition to determine who can compete. (2) They can shape the content of political programmes and the salience of certain issues, determining how cleavages are (re)presented. (3) Through their policies, they can actively try to shape the values and interest structures that undergird political competition, to create a more conducive environment for their own politics to resonate. (4) They can foment crises to undercut existing structures and strengthen their own position. Other studies show how parties can structure cleavages in collaboration with, or in contrast to, other political parties. Dominant parties may stress their political competence and collude to maintain a traditional division that benefits them. Conversely, challengers may promote novel dichotomies by introducing wedge issues and seeking to discredit their dominant adversaries (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020).

Although agency-centred analyses of political cleavages have advanced our knowledge of how parties contribute to the articulation of political divisions, these works present four main shortcomings that our study seeks to address. First, few of these approaches focus on how parties do this work relationally—that is, how they engage (or not) with one another. However, as cleavages count two poles, understanding how parties define their own pole is as important as understanding how they define the opposite one.

Second, and relatedly, existing approaches to top-down cleavage articulation tend to focus on measures of salience and positioning for individual parties (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020; Deegan-Krause, 2009; Evans & Tilley, 2012). While these approaches provide us with essential information on the changing positions of parties over time, they miss the fine-grained detail of how cleavage co-construction happens in practice.

Third, particularly little attention has been paid to challenger–challenger dynamics, as opposed to challenger–establishment dynamics. However, challengers do not only compete with established parties—they also compete with each other, and the strategies they employ in these cases will differ. In times of growing fragmentation, the challenger–challenger dynamic is likely to become more frequent and flank the traditional challenger–establishment dynamic.

Fourth, few empirical studies consider systematically the democratic implications of shifts in the structure of political divisions. However, once we accept that political representation is a creative act and that partisan divisions do not solely represent pre-existing positions within society but also respond to political representatives' interest in shaping the fault lines of political debate, this opens the door to examining the democratic performance of parties' efforts to change the terms of political contestation (Disch, 2011, 2015). If we recognise, with Schattschneider (1960), that 'the definition of alternatives is the supreme instrument of power', then we can also interrogate, rather than assume, whether emerging dichotomies reinforce or detract from democratic life.

2 | CASE STUDY AND EMPIRICAL APPROACH

In this paper, we address these limitations by turning our attention to the dynamics of cleavage articulation when neither party is already established. Our intent is not to argue that political actors matter in the articulation of political cleavages—a well-established claim (Enyedi, 2005; Przeworski & Sprague, 1986; Rokkan & Lipset, 1967). Rather, starting from the idea that political actors matter, we seek to identify the discursive strategies challengers employ to co-construct new political divisions, as well as the implications of these strategies for democracy.

We focus on the case of France. Recent changes in France's cleavage structure make it an ideal case study for our investigation. Since the establishment of the 5th Republic in 1957, France's two-round majoritarian electoral system combined with semi-presidentialism facilitated the entrenchment of centre-right and centre-left blocs. In recent years, however, the traditional bipolar structure of French politics has come under strain. Like other western European countries, France has witnessed the emergence of new divisions within its electorate (Knapp, 2022; Chamorel, 2019, p. 57), in particular between the 'winners' and 'losers' of globalisation (Foucault, 2017; Kriesi et al., 2012). The emergence of a new division has led to voter dealignment from traditional parties (Mayer, 2013) and to the emergence of new parties seeking to attract those dealigned voters. The emergence of the RN as a third pole in the political space was an early indication of this process of de-alignment and realignment and opened up the political space to increased contestation of existing cleavages.

These processes came to a head in the presidential election of 2017, in which traditional parties were swept away by Emmanuel Macron, leader of the newly formed En Marche! (later renamed La République en Marche, LREM, now Renaissance), and by the RN's leader Marine Le Pen. Their presence in the second round of the presidential elections of 2017 and 2022 harboured the emergence of a new dichotomy in French politics dominated by two challengers representing radically different electorates (Lorimer & Herman, 2023).

Macron attracted the votes of better-off, well-educated, urban voters able to take advantage of the opportunities offered by globalisation (Foucault, 2017). Importantly, Macron was also able to attract many voters who previously supported mainstream left and right parties (Bréchon, 2018), participating in a process of realignment on a new line of division. On her part, Le Pen gained support primarily from worse-off, working-class, lower educated and rural voters for whom the nation-state remains the main political referent. Since taking over the party from her father, she has also made her most significant gains away from big cities, in the deindustrialised zones of Northern France and the traditionally conservative Mediterranean basin (Foucault, 2017; Chabal et al., 2023, pp. 12–13).

The specular nature of Macron and Le Pen's electorates was clearly visible in the 2022 run-off. Whereas the Macron vote was strongest in the middle and higher classes, and in the higher professional categories—with 77% of those in management roles and 59% of those in intermediate professions picking the current president, Le Pen received the votes of 67% of manual workers, 57% of employees and 54% of those earning less than 1250 euros per month (IPSOS Sopra Steria, 2022; Knapp, 2022).

The role of political agency has been strongly visible in the emergence of a new axis of competition in the French political system. This divide was not created from scratch: As noted above, there had already been changes in the sociology of the French electorate conducive to its emergence. Yet, it was necessary for someone like Macron and Le Pen to embody and articulate this new division for it to become an axis of political competition. Although our study focuses on France, the waning of old cleavages and the rise of challenger parties competing with established parties and with each other on new political cleavages is a common feature of European politics (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020). Therefore, while our findings may not be immediately generalisable, our analysis is relevant beyond the confines of this specific case.

Our empirical analysis proceeds in two parts. First, we identify the strategies Macron and Le Pen employed to articulate this new cleavage in French politics. We do this through an in-depth inductive analysis of their discourse and practices, based on a close reading of campaign materials, speeches, books, programmes, statements and policy measures proposed (and enacted, in Macron's case) between 2015 and 2022.

Second, we provide a preliminary analysis of whether this new dichotomy is working any better than the Left/Right cleavage on key criteria for democratic performance. Following recent work in political theory on democratic partisanship (for an overview, see Herman, 2017), we assume that political efforts at building new terms of competition can be labelled as democratic when they contribute to both the *democratic* and the *liberal* dimensions of liberal democracy. The *democratic* dimension relates to the classic notion of popular self-rule, which requires engagement of citizens with, and participation in, the political process of representative government (White & Ypi, 2016). The *liberal* dimension of liberal democracy relates to the preservation of political pluralism and minority rights in an otherwise majoritarian system of political decision-making (Herman & Muirhead, 2021). In line with these criteria, we focus on the evolution of citizens' attitudes and preferences since the 2017 election to explore the new division's *democratic* performance in terms of *representativeness* and *electoral mobilisation*. Specifically, we aim to explore the empirical grounding of the candidates' own claims that their political offer is more in line with French voters' preferences than the old politics of Left and Right. We also take interest in the new party system's *liberal* performance. We assume, in line with the current academic consensus, that Le Pen's radical right offer is opposed to liberal norms (Crum et al., 2023; Ivaldi, 2016; Müller, 2017); instead, we explore whether Macron's offer is, as he has made the case repeatedly, an efficient bulwark against the further progress of illiberal extremism in France.

3 | HOW TO ARTICULATE A NEW POLITICAL DIVISION

In the following, we present the three strategies employed by Macron and Le Pen to articulate a new cleavage beyond Left and Right: rejecting the old; merging opposites; and identifying the other.

1. Rejecting the old: 'Ni droite, ni gauche'

The first step in Marine Le Pen and Emmanuel Macron's articulation of a new divide is the rejection of the 'old' world of traditional parties and of the existing Left/Right axis of competition. This process helps them place their political offering as new and ill-fitting with traditional political divisions. The rejection of Left and Right specifically situates them as actors working in a changed political space, requiring a new language of politics and a new political cleavage to represent it.

For Le Pen, the rejection of the old takes the shape of a populist denunciation of the political class (Moffitt, 2017; Rovira Kaltwasser et al., 2017). She relegates her adversaries to the category of an 'evil elite' while arguing that she is a true representative of 'the people'. Le Pen not only rejects existing parties and politicians; she also rejects the Left/Right cleavage on which they compete (Drochon, 2022; Lorimer, 2019). This explicit rejection of Left/Right acquired a central place in the run up to her 2017 campaign, including in her first official presidential campaign speech in 2017. On that occasion, Le Pen announced that 'the ancient debate between Left and Right has had its day [...] the debates on secularism and immigration, as well as those on globalisation and generalised deregulation, constitute a transversal and fundamental cleavage' (Le Pen, 2017). Even though talk of the decline of Left and Right decreased following the departure of Florian Philippot (former Le Pen adviser and proponent of her rejection of the Left/Right cleavage), it is still a marker of Le Pen's discourse. For example, in a 2019 interview with far-right media organisation Breitbart, she claimed that her party aimed to explain 'to the French people that the divide between right- and left-wing does not exist anymore' (Boyle, 2019). More recently, in a press conference with mayor of Béziers Robert Ménard, when Ménard claimed that he still believed in the Left/Right cleavage, Le Pen responded: 'I don't' (Le Monde, 2022b).

Emmanuel Macron's rejection of the old shares similar features with Le Pen's. Arriving on the political scene in 2017, Macron positioned himself as an alternative to traditional party politics, reviving the third way critique of the inadequacy of the Left/Right dichotomy in the face of contemporary complexity (Giddens, 1998; Weltman & Billig, 2001). He has conflated left and right parties labelling both the PS and LR as 'conservateurs passésistes'

(‘past-oriented conservatives’) in his campaign book *Révolution* (Fougère & Barthold, 2020, p. 421). In his rejection of traditional party politics, Macron questions mainstream parties’ capacity to further the common good. He insists that these rigid ideological frames ‘no longer allow us to face the world’s and [the] country’s challenges’ (as cited in Bordignon, 2017; De Royer et al., 2017; Emelien & Amiel, 2017) and claims traditional parties nourish ‘sterile and nefarious’ divisions within society (Collectif, 2021).

Beyond criticising the ideas that traditional political parties stand for, Macron delves into anti-establishment rhetoric. During the 2017 campaign, the candidate described partisan politics as dominated by ‘always the same people’ (Bordignon, 2017) while stressing how mainstream elites ‘no longer speak for the people, they speak for themselves’ (cited in Perottino & Guasti, 2020). Macron labelled his own political movement as ‘populist’, a posture that he has defined as ‘talking to the people in an intelligible way, without institutional intermediation’ (JDD, 2017).

2. Merging opposites: ‘Et de droite, et de gauche’

The second step in Macron and Le Pen’s articulation of a new political cleavage is the creation of catch-all political agendas that go beyond Left and Right by merging elements of both camps into a single political offering. Positional ‘blurring’ enables parties to alter the structures of political competition (Rovny, 2013) and makes it possible for Le Pen and Macron to cover a large part of the political ground and break down existing cleavages.

For Le Pen, the formal rejection of old politics has been accompanied by the presentation of a self-styled ‘patriotic’ political programme that, as she put it, ‘is not designed to be a right-wing or a left-wing programme’ but to ‘speak to all French people’ (Le Pen, 2022a). In line with other radical right parties (Halikiopoulou et al., 2013), Le Pen embraced a republican stance and more socially liberal positions—although mostly in an anti-Islam key. Her party has also tried to incorporate elements of environmentalism by presenting the new issue of ‘localism’ (a belief that economic processes should favour the local over the global) as an environment-friendly policy (Rassemblement National, 2019).

Most notably, Le Pen has expanded her economic agenda to incorporate elements of both Left and Right (Ivaldi, 2016, 2022) while maintaining a core focus on identity. Her 2022 presidential election programme illustrates this well. Identity remains at its core, with the first three points in the 22-point programme addressing immigration, Islamism and security (Le Pen, 2022b). However, these measures are followed by a series of economic and social measures targeted primarily at working class voters, such as lowering the VAT on energy products and essential goods and lowering the retirement age to 60 for those who started working when very young (overwhelmingly, in Le Pen’s view, manual workers).

Le Pen’s ‘social-populist’ (Ivaldi, 2015) agenda encroaches on traditional left-wing territory and represents a significant departure from the RN’s original ‘winning formula’ (Kitschelt & McGann, 1995) of opposition to immigration and support for neo-liberal economic policies. As Gilles Ivaldi has shown, whereas in the RN’s 1986 programme 79% of the measures were classed as ‘liberal’, with only 14% considered ‘redistributive’ and 7% ‘economic nationalist’, in 2022, only 21% of the party’s measures are considered ‘liberal’, while 66% are described as ‘redistributive’ and the remaining 13% as ‘economic nationalist’ (Ivaldi, 2022).

The left-wing character of some of her economic measures is not lost on Le Pen, who has explicitly presented herself as someone who could attract former left-wing voters (Le Pen, 2018a) and has been successful at doing so (Perrineau, 2017). Thus, even though many RN voters identify with the right, the party is increasingly attracting self-defined centrists and far-left voters (IPSOS Sopra Steria, 2022; Mayer, 2013).

Although like Le Pen, Macron rejects Left and Right as a meaningful dichotomy, he also explicitly defines his own movement as ‘both right-wing and left-wing’ (Brochet, 2017). Macron has made the combination of opposites a key theme in his discourse, as evidenced by his recurring use of the expression ‘en même temps’ (‘at the same time’; Darrigrand, 2017, pp. 28–29; Dosse, 2017). In one of his last campaign meetings in April 2017, the future president took ownership of this expression in the following terms: “‘En même temps’ means integrating imperatives that are seemingly opposed, but indispensable to reconcile for the good functioning of society” (Macron, 2017).

Macron's policymaking has borrowed from both sides of the political spectrum. Some of his flagship left-wing measures include the legalisation of medically assisted procreation for lesbian couples, a better protection of gendered violence victims or the distribution of €300 cheques for young adults to spend on cultural goods and services. Strong income support was also provided during the coronavirus pandemic. These measure notwithstanding, economic reforms under Macron have in their vast majority been inspired by liberal doctrine. His government abolished the wealth tax, decreased housing and unemployment benefits and lowered compensation for abusive redundancy. Many of Macron's 2022 campaign promises mirror policies long-defended by the centre-right, among which a vow to condition minimum social benefits to forms of economic activity. As discussed below, Macron's policies have also taken a right-wing turn on law and order and immigration.

Similarly to Le Pen, Macron's pursuit of both left and right-wing policies came with electoral and political benefits. In 2017, Macron's 'en meme temps' resonated with citizens who, in previous elections, would have made political choices at odds with each other. According to data from the French Elections Survey, this included 34% who self-identified as left-wing, 23% as right-wing and 39% as centrist (Bréchon, 2018). Pursuing politics beyond Left and Right also enabled him to rally an assorted range of activists (Cautrès et al., 2018, p. 92) and established politicians. Out of 310 members of the parliamentary group, 126 were previously affiliated with left-wing parties, 48 with right-wing parties and 17 with centrist parties (Beaumont & Théveniaud, 2021).

3. Selecting the Other: 'us' versus 'them'

The final step in articulating a new political division is the selection of the 'Other'. If a cleavage is understood as an axis with two poles, identifying who is on the other side of the pole is an essential aspect of this articulation. In this step, the relational aspect of cleavage creation is made explicit through the identification of the Other.

For Marine Le Pen, who defines her own programme and side of the cleavage as 'patriotic' or 'national', the opposing pole is the 'globalist' one incarnated primarily by Emmanuel Macron. This association of Macron with 'globalism', as well as the nature of the division between globalists and patriots, is well illustrated in a speech she gave in 2018. In it, she claimed that the presidential election of 2017 heralded a new cleavage between the nationals, represented primarily by the RN, and the globalists, represented by LREM. She then went on to stress how Macron had

attracted a number of people of the Right and of the Left who agree on Europeanism, people who adhere to ultra-liberalism and who call for generalised deregulation [...]. Us, we believe in something more valuable than money, and that's the feeling [...] of belonging, and we believe in the link that unites the people of a same nation. (Le Pen, 2018b)

Le Pen continued using the 'patriots' versus 'globalist' interpretive frame in 2022, holding, for example, that the presidential election would oppose two 'radically different, and even mutually exclusive political conceptions. Nationals against progressives; or, depending on the formulation, localists versus globalists; this cleavage separates the "somewheres" from the "anywheres"' (Le Pen, 2021).

The president's support for EU integration and his economically liberal positions fit neatly into Marine Le Pen's proposed cleavage structure and reinforced her claims concerning the replacement of the Left/Right cleavage with a globalists/nationalists cleavage. Even though Le Pen's claim of the emergence of a globalist/patriots cleavage pre-dates Macron's arrival on the political scene (e.g. Le Pen 2015), Macron helped her put a face to a name. As she put it, 'we theorised the end of the Left/Right cleavage, Emmanuel Macron put his foot in the door we opened, and today, the cleavage between nationals and globalists prevails' (Le Pen, 2018c).

Even when Le Pen does not directly reference Macron, it is still evident that she considers him her main political opponent. She barely references other candidates, and when they are mentioned, they are treated as irrelevant. She also implicitly recognises Macron as her main adversary by copying his technocratic behaviour. In recent years, she

has sought to specify her political programmes, presenting (frequently vague) costings for her measures. In response to the Covid pandemic, she shied away from anti-science positions, but constructed her opposition to Macron's measures by drawing on seemingly scientific evidence (Froio, 2022; Lorimer & VanderWilden, 2022). In the final stages of the 2022 presidential campaign, she started holding press conferences to detail her measures. Doing so, Le Pen sought to legitimise herself (Ivaldi, 2016; Lorimer, 2020), while hunting on Macron's ground and identifying him as her main adversary.

On his side, Macron selected Le Pen as his Other by positioning himself as an effective alternative to political extremism in general, and the RN in particular. In 2017, Macron explicitly and repeatedly described Le Pen as his key opponent, a polar counterpart in a newly configured political space. Macron was the second most likely candidate after Benoit Hamon to talk about Le Pen in the 2017 campaign (Herman & Muldoon, 2019, p. 254). Macron had important strategic incentives to do so: Having an opponent associated to extremism virtually guaranteed his victory in the second round of the 2017 election and has done so again in 2022—albeit with a shrinking margin.

Prior to the 2017 election, Macron's attitude towards Le Pen was ambivalent. On the one hand, the candidate pursued a classical strategy of extremist ostracisation in the name of democracy (e.g. Macron in Brézet et al., 2017; Herman & Muldoon, 2019, p. 261). At the same time, Macron also debated with Le Pen and described her as a legitimate opponent. In a striking parallel with Le Pen, Macron singles himself out as the RN's natural opponent on ideological grounds:

I have a political offer that is diametrically opposed to hers. She is our main adversary and the main line of debate is between her and me, that is between patriots and nationalists. She stands for isolation and withdrawal while I defend openness and the spirit of conquest. (Macron in De Royer et al., 2017)

This logic of positioning the far-right as the main opponent has continued since 2017, albeit in more indirect ways. First, Macron has delegated direct opposition to close allies. The unprecedented organisation of two televised debates between Minister of the Interior Gerard Darmanin and Marine Le Pen since 2017 is a clear example of this process of delegation. Second, Macron has also more indirectly positioned Le Pen as his main opponent by employing policy and ideological accommodation (Meguid, 2005; Wagner & Meyer, 2016). This participates in positioning her party's ideas as those to be addressed and anticipates accusations of weakness from Le Pen. One example is the April 2021 Global Security Law, which further strengthened police powers despite France being regularly lambasted for widespread police brutality and denial of justice (Le Monde, 2020). Another is the August 2021 Law for the Respect of the Principles of the Republic, which restricts the rights of France's Muslim minority in the name of fighting terrorism—for instance, banning the veil for employees of major state contractors. More symbolic actions testify of this right-wing shift, such as the president's interview by the far-right magazine *Valeurs Actuelles* in which he defines immigration as one of the most important issues he needs to address (Lejeunev et al., 2019) or his warning that France should 'protect itself against large irregular migration flows' as a first reaction to the Afghan exodus in August 2021 (Elysée, 2021). Most telling might be Darmanin's critique of the RN's position in his last debate against Marine Le Pen, according to which 'in her strategy of *dédiabolisation*,² Marine Le Pen has almost turned soft' (TFI, 2021).

4 | DISCUSSION: INTERROGATING THE LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC PERFORMANCE OF THE NEW DICHOTOMY

As the previous sections have shown, Macron and Le Pen have challenged the main Left/Right dichotomy after years of progressive decline and participated in the emergence of a new, structuring dichotomy between radical right-wing populism and liberal centrism. In the remainder of this paper, we consider whether the new dichotomy articulated by Le Pen and Macron has contributed to the *democratic* and *liberal* dimensions of liberal democracy in France. We

focus here specifically on the potential of the new dichotomy to address three key ills that have been plaguing French politics, and most other first wave democracies, for decades: a lack of representativeness, evidenced by growing distrust in representative politics over time; electoral demobilisation, evidenced by faltering turnouts; and failing liberal norms of respect for political pluralism and minority rights, evidenced by rising polarisation and the growing success of radical right ideas and politics.

Two caveats ahead of this analysis. First, we acknowledge that a systematic verification of the relationships we identify goes beyond the scope of this analysis and that we cannot offer a definitive assessment of the democratic consequences of current events in France without greater historical distance. We nevertheless develop some well-informed hypotheses on the current trajectory of French democracy that will need to be explored further in future research. Second, we recognise democratic deficits are inscribed in long-term evolutions that result from complex causes (Hay, 2007): Beyond structural changes that have affected citizens' relation to politics in much of the Western world (Mair, 2013; Norris, 2011), French mainstream parties, along with those in most advanced democracies, have largely contributed to their own demise (Godin, 2013; Marthaler, 2010; Ruiz et al., 2023).

Our analysis does not aim to minimise the role of these prior factors, but rather to examine whether the changes we have discussed contribute to a better integration of politics and society in France. Doing so, we also take seriously both candidate's claims that the divide they are promoting is better able to articulate citizens' preferences than the Left/Right dichotomy and Macron's claim that his brand of politics is most adequate to limit the growing demand for illiberal, extremist politics. Based on our analysis, we cautiously argue that the current divide has until now performed no better than the traditional, Left/Right one—it may, in fact, be deepening pre-existing democratic deficits.

a. Representativeness

First, there is evidence that the new political divide discussed in this paper may be contributing to an ongoing *representative* deficit. As shown by the work of Mossuz-Lavau (2020) and Mossuz-Lavau and Bono (2023), while politicians may be rejecting the Left/Right cleavage, citizens still very much rely on these categories as heuristic shortcuts and in their own self-identification. Citizens perceive the declining relevance of this dichotomy in public debate, with 70% of respondents agreeing with the statement that the 'categories of Left and Right don't mean much', but 41% also seeing this change negatively and only 10% viewing it positively (CEVIPOF, 2018).

The new divide specifically under-represents left-wing ideas by shifting the centre of gravity of the party system to the Right. Macron's rhetorical commitment to being both Left and Right co-existed with a neoliberal economic programme and a rightward shift on immigration and law and order, leading commentators to argue that the major axis of competition in France today is between factions of the Right (Chabal et al., 2023, p. 4; Rouban, 2023). This shift is perceived by French voters, who positioned Macron at 5.2 on a Left/Right scale of 1–10 in March 2017 and at 6.7 by May 2018 (Le Monde, 2018). As a consequence of this shift, since he was first elected Macron lost the support of a number of left-leaning ministers and MPs (Motet et al., 2021), but also a sizeable share of his 2017, left-identifying voters (CEVIPOF, 2018). Crucially, the shift of France's political offer to the Right over time does not correspond to equivalent shifts in the values of French voters. As shown by Tiberj (2023), preferences have remained stable on socio-economic issues since the 1980s, while public opinion has become substantially more liberal on issues of gender, immigration and multi-culturalism.

Macron's right-wing turn has also meant a decrease in preference-based voting and abstention among left-wing voters. Certainly, the concentration of preference-based voting in the first round of French elections is partly a function of the electoral system (with many voters voting for their preferred candidate in the first round and for the 'lesser evil' in the second), and core support for mainstream parties in the first round of elections has only exceeded the 30% mark once since the late 1980s.³ Yet, these dynamics have heightened in recent years. In a recent poll, 72% of respondents stated that the last presidential election did not give voters a real choice as to whom they could support (CEVIPOF, 2022). The recent electoral dominance of two right-wing leaning contenders can help explain this feeling of a lack of options in two main ways. First, the anticipation of a radical right candidate in the second round

of the Presidential elections hampers the usual preference-based voting in the first round: In 2017, 30% of Macron voters backed him because he was best positioned to eventually beat Marine Le Pen, and only 58% out of preference for his ideas—compared to 79% and 78% of Fillon (*Les Républicains*) and Hamon (*Parti Socialiste*) voters who opted for their first choice (Biseau & Peiollon, 2017). Second, for far-left voters specifically, it widens the gap between their preferences and the choices on offer in run-off elections. In the usual second-round face-off between centre-left and centre-right candidates, voters further left were still given an option within their broad, political family. Within the current configuration, both second round candidates defend positions fundamentally at odds with the Left tradition—neo-liberalism in the case of Macron, nativism in the case of Le Pen (Chabal & Behrent, 2022).

b. Electoral mobilisation

Second, these representative deficits could be linked to an acceleration of the demobilisation of French voters. 2017 saw the worst first round turnout for Presidential elections since 2002, with 22.23% of abstention, and the worst second round electoral turnout since 1969, with 25.44% of abstention. This record was then beaten in 2022, when first-round abstention climbed to 26.31% and second round abstention to 28.01% (Ministère de l'Intérieur, 2022). The last two Parliamentary elections are also the first two in the history of the Fifth Republic where a majority of French citizens have abstained—with only 47.51 and 46.23% of voters heading to the polls in June 2022 (Durovic, 2023: 624).

These drops in turnout are part of a longer trend of citizen disengagement from representative politics that has affected most first wave democracies. Key structural causes include rapid changes in the primary and secondary socialisation of citizens in a globalised world—with younger and under-privileged voters in France and elsewhere being less likely to engage with traditional, representative politics (Fernández Guzmán Grassi et al., 2023; Muxel, 2018). Yet, scholars have also highlighted that there are supply-side factors to these changes, with ideological convergence, the bypassing of popular votes and the increasing remoteness of politicians from citizens' lives long fuelling distrust and disengagement from mainstream party politics (Hay, 2007; Mair, 2013; Ruiz et al., 2023).

With regard to the cases considered here, there is evidence to suggest that discontent at the choices on offer and feelings of lack of political agency have played a role in lowering turnout in the last two Presidential elections, specifically in the second rounds opposing Macron and Le Pen. First, these are the first Presidential elections since 1969 where turnout *diminished* between the first and second round—unlike in 2002, for instance, when the presence of a far-right candidate in the second round triggered a defensive mobilisation in favour of Jacques Chirac. Crucially, 31% of second round abstentionists in 2017 justified their decision by a 'refusal to choose between two candidates they reject entirely' (Bréchon, 2017). Second, both elections broke records in terms of the share of voters casting a blank or an invalid ballot to protest against their lack of options: 11.52% in 2017 and 8.6 % in 2022, against a previous record of 6% in 1969 (Blanchard, 2022; Gurrey et al., 2022).

Finally, lack of mobilisation is exacerbated on the Left where, as highlighted above, representative deficits are the strongest. Forty-one per cent of those who chose Jean-Luc Mélenchon in the first round of 2017 abstained or posted a blank vote in the second round—compared to 32% of first-round François Fillon voters (IPSOS Sopra Steria, 2017). This trend deepened in the run-offs to the 2022 Parliamentary elections, when only a minority of NUPES voters whose candidate was absent in the second round were willing to back their former adversaries to keep the RN out of Parliament (Knapp, 2022, p. 510). In short, while both Macron and Le Pen claim to better represent French society than traditional parties did, the new divide may ironically be leaving many more French voters unrepresented and unwilling to engage than did the traditional Left/Right cleavage.

c. Liberal safeguarding

Concerning our third criterion for democratic performance, we assume a priori that there exists a tense and problematic relationship between liberalism, pluralism and the brand of radical right-wing populism promoted by

Marine Le Pen. This has largely been demonstrated elsewhere (Crum et al., 2023; Ivaldi, 2016; Müller, 2016, 2017) and is not investigated here. Instead, we focus this part of our analysis on the implications of Macron's discourse and practices, taking seriously and putting to the test one of his key claims: that he is liberalism's best line of defence against Le Pen's authoritarian tendencies.

Macron appears to have largely failed in this task; in fact, there are grounds to argue that his discourse and practices have contributed to anchor the RN's illiberal platform as a mainstream, governing alternative. The radical right has considerably increased its vote share between 2017 and 2022. In the first round in 2017, Marine Le Pen and Nicolas Dupont-Aignan (Debout la France!) totalled 26% of the vote. With Éric Zemmour joining them, the combined radical right score rose to 32.8% in the first round of 2022. Marine Le Pen alone increased her score by close to 2 points in the first round and by nearly 8 points in the second round. Without denying the multifaceted and complex causes for the rise of radical right politics in first wave democracies (for an overview, see Bornschier, 2018), the contemporary dynamic of French party politics is likely accelerating these trends in several ways.

First, representation and mobilisation deficits are contributing to a weakening of the 'Republican front'—fewer voters are ready to go to the polls solely to keep Le Pen out of power (Startin, 2022). Marine Le Pen's successful 'de-demonisation' of her party's image, with increasingly fewer voters seeing the RN as a threat to democracy, is at least in part driving these phenomena. As shown above, however, a lack of convincing alternatives is also on the line, with left-wing voters increasingly unwilling to vote 'strategically' for the centrist political force, given a widespread perception that neither candidate aligns with their principles.

Second, many studies have shown that the accommodation of radical right positions normalises them without fundamentally contesting the radical right's ownership of issues such as immigration or law and order, for instance—thus increasing their electoral potential (Gruber & Bale, 2014; Meijers & Williams, 2020; Wagner & Meyer, 2016). When Darmanin criticises Le Pen for being 'too soft' on Islam, for instance, this minimises the human rights violations that Le Pen's programme would occasion. Accommodation also pushes radical right parties to up their policy bids in order to retain a radical edge, thus further shifting the centre of gravity of the political spectrum (Wagner & Meyer, 2016). Despite rhetorical 'de-demonisation', many of the RN's policies have become more radical in the recent past (Ivaldi, 2016). As a recent example, the RN's 2022 programme includes a new pledge to ban the Islamic veil in all public places, a point that was absent in 2017 (Le Pen, 2022a).

Finally, for Macron to position Le Pen as his main opponent is largely inconsistent with the type of adversarial relationships between mainstream parties that political liberalism is dependent on (Herman & Muirhead, 2021). In this new binary, the president's is the only legitimate option to choose from—democracy defended against authoritarianism, moderation against extremism, good against evil. In Mouffe's vocabulary, this is 'politics in the moral register' (Mouffe, 2005a, 2005b), a holist, anti-pluralist stance that political theorists have long associated with both technocratic and populist claims (Bickerton & Invernizzi Accetti, 2017; Caramani, 2017; Pastorella, 2016). To be clear, the issue here is not that Le Pen is described as an extremist, but rather that she is depicted as both an extremist *and* as the only credible alternative to Macron. The president's removal from the 2022 campaign and refusal to debate against other candidates is revealing here—Macron having united all people of 'good will' within previously opposed political camps, there is no one but Le Pen left to debate with (Le Monde, 2022a).

In short, Macron may have contributed to the ongoing normalisation of the RN, anchoring an anti-pluralist, illiberal party as a governing alternative. Going forward, the entrenchment of the RN as a mainstream opposition force could result in it accessing power as the only remaining alternative to the 'centre', with well-known associated threats to fundamental liberal democratic principles (Müller, 2016, 2017). With Macron finishing his second and last mandate in 2027, the likelihood of this scenario is heightened: parties centred on the leader's personality and with little independent organisation have been shown to struggle with electoral persistence (Abedi & Lundberg, 2009; Bolleyer & Bytze, 2016). Even if Renaissance could persist over time and maintain the RN out of power, this would come at the price of healthy electoral alternation and therefore of the very possibility for the French people to make a democratic choice and keep their leaders accountable.

5 | CONCLUSION

Changes within party systems are often interpreted as bottom-up processes, yet these narratives overlook how parties themselves contribute to aggregate and make sense of societal changes. We showed how both Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen deployed similar strategies to redefine the lines of political opposition in France: rejecting the old Left/Right dichotomy, combining ideas from both political camps and choosing one another as adversaries. Our analysis also suggests that rather than addressing the democratic deficits associated with the traditional, Left/Right party system, this new divide has largely contributed to deepen them.

Future research could investigate further the alignment between cleavage articulation by parties and voters responses to it, studying in particular the extent to which voters feel represented over time by the new cleavage advanced by Macron and Le Pen. As the end of Macron's second term approaches, it will also be important to assess the durability of this new cleavage and track whether it can survive in the long term, or if there will be a return to Left/Right politics as usual.

ORCID

Lise Esther Herman  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9796-5922>

Marta Lorimer  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9214-3898>

ENDNOTES

¹ Until June 2018, *Front National*. Given this paper mainly discusses the period following this name change, we use *Rassemblement National* throughout.

² Marine Le Pen's strategy to polish her party's image in view of conquering political office (Ivaldi, 2016).

³ One exception is Presidential candidate Nicolas Sarkozy, who gathered 31.18% of the first round vote in 2007.

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