



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The French Right-Wing Paradox – Maintaining the cordon sanitaire

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**Abstract:** In this article, we explain why the French mainstream right-wing party, today Les Républicains, has maintained until now a cordon sanitaire between itself and its far-right counterpart, the Rassemblement National. We examine the usual hypotheses identified by the literature on coalitions between mainstream and far-right parties, and confirm that they are not able to explain the French case. We argue that this paradox can be solved by re-evaluating some core ideological disagreements, as well as the importance of competence and credibility in the party image of the mainstream right, which we identify – discussing Panebianco’s genetic model – as a result of its historical role of governmental, established party.

**Keywords:** anti-systemness; cordon sanitaire; electoral alliances; extreme right; mainstream right; party politics

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## 1. Introduction

In many aspects, France looks at odds with the other West European countries regarding the strategic situation of its extreme right. While in Italy, Spain, Switzerland, Norway, Finland or Austria, significant far right parties have already been members of governmental coalitions or parts of a steady electoral coalition with a mainstream right-wing party, the Rassemblement National (RN, formerly Front National, FN) has been systematically excluded for the past two decades from national and local *a priori* or *a posteriori* electoral coalitions with the mainstream right-wing party, today Les Républicains (LR, formerly the Union pour un Mouvement Populaire, UMP).

The RN is yet one of the oldest significant far right parties in Western Europe and also one of the most successful – having gained more than 10% of the votes in every presidential election since 1988, qualified two times for the second turn of these elections and reached the first position in the 2014 and 2019 European elections. Besides, France can be considered as the native country of a successful “master frame” based on

the assumed negative consequences of uncontrolled mass immigration, which was mobilized by every nascent European far right party (Rydgren 2005). The Rassemblement National is today a leading member of the far right, nationalist and Eurosceptic alliance in the European Parliament called Identity and Democracy, and is generally considered as a kind of role model for its European partners due to its electoral success and position in the French public debate. More generally, the tensions and transformations of contemporary France, which foster protest, populist and radical parties, do not deeply differ from those known by other Western European countries (Elgie, Grossman and Mazur 2016), positing the comparability of the French case.

What is intriguing here is that despite the RN's importance in the French electoral system, the party has been kept out of coalitions or compromises with other significant, established parties, and particularly from alliances with its most likely partner, Les Républicains, as the mainstream right holds tight the cordon sanitaire built in the 1990s, after a decade of *ad hoc* local coalitions (Lebourg 2014). The latter keeps excluding the cadres or members who are getting too close to the Rassemblement National, and denying the idea that such an alliance, even at a local level, is necessary for the party's success, or the "natural result" of a so-called ideological proximity. However – and this will be developed more extensively in the next section – we know that the RN aims at mainstreaming itself by making its image more respectable and by sending some friendly messages to local or national LR leaders; that LR's intense, long-term strategy of "parroting" the far right (van Spanje and de Graaf 2018) in order to co-opt the issues (and the voters) of the FN/RN (on immigration, security, Islam, etc.) proves it considers this party as a major threat for its own success; that the majoritarian rule is less and less able to contain this electoral threat for the established parties; that LR has been experiencing since 2017 a sharp electoral decline and serious challenges for its internal cohesion and organizational resources.

The French mainstream right party has indeed been considerably endangered by the national success of Emmanuel Macron and its party, and yet did not change its strategic options, including the maintaining of the cordon sanitaire, whose cessation could help enlarge the electoral basis of its coalitions and consolidate its elective positions. Even if it estimates La République en Marche to be a short-lived disruption of the French political life, the upholding of the cordon sanitaire has increasingly appeared as an irrational, or at least a not very justified choice, given LR and the RN seem ideologically close, especially on cultural issues, and moderate and far right parties appear as "natural allies" if we turn to other European countries. This strong refusal then contradicts the main motivations of mainstream and far right coalitions and non-coalitions determined by the political science literature, which is the paradox we try to answer in this article by proposing alternative explanations.

First, we briefly outline the literature on the relationship between these two parties, showing that we still lack an explanation which can account for the most recent developments of French politics. Then, we examine the general literature on the relationship between mainstream and far right parties and identify three hypotheses which could explain the RN's ostracism: both parties remain ideologically too distant on the key themes of the extreme right; an alliance with the RN would not really be electorally interesting for LR; the RN remains too demonized for LR. We show that none of these hypotheses is verified and propose an alternative, twofold explanation: on one hand, an alliance with the far right would include significant costs for LR, both in terms of programmatic compromise (especially on economic and European issues) and for its party image largely based on its credibility and competence, thus possibly compromising its remaining electoral support and organizational resources; on the other hand, the partisan ethos of the French mainstream right, which originates in its historical relationship to the political institutions it contributed to create, leads LR leaders to conceive themselves as guardians of the socio-political institutions, who shall prevent the coming into power of irresponsible political forces. As a more theoretical and methodological

contribution, we also intend to demonstrate that, sometimes, the analysis need to go deeper in case studies, with another perspective on already existing datasets and a more comprehensive approach to the inner motivations of the political actors, in order to complete the political science's understanding and explanation of mainstream and far right alliances.

## 2. Literature review and theoretical framework

### *The French right-wing case through the lens of the literature*

A rich, comparative literature has been dedicated to the relationship between mainstream and far right parties, partly because mainstream right-wing parties have the power to certify the complete mainstreaming of far-right parties and are the first mainstreamers of the far-right's ideas, and in this sense "represent one of the most fundamental challenges to liberal democracies in the years to come" (Castelli Gattinara 2019, p. 323). Within this literature, a significant trend has analysed the role of mainstream right-wing parties in the success of their radical and extreme counterparts. The most influential work was probably the one of Bonnie Meguid, who proposed a typology of the mainstream parties' strategies regarding niche parties, whether dismissive, accommodative or adversarial (Meguid 2008). She dedicated a chapter to the case of the Front National, underlining that the accommodation strategy used by the mainstream right to convince FN's voters that it would deal more efficiently with the issues of immigration and security was insufficient and too late compared to the adversarial strategy of the Socialist Party, which presented the FN as an untouchable party, *de facto* rising the salience of the latter's favourite issues and legitimizing it as an opponent to the established political system. Mayer showed however that this strategy of parroting was temporarily efficient in the Sarkozy's campaign of 2007, which attracted 26% of the 2002 Le Pen voters, reaching a less educated, more popular part of the electorate (Mayer 2007).

This strategy, even exacerbated, did not work as well in his 2012 campaign, due to his inability, after five years as Chief of State, to appear still marginal regarding the French political elite, compared to the now-leader of the FN, Marine Le Pen (Carvalho 2019). Thus, even though the souvenir of the successful 2007 campaign remains well spread, the UMP and then LR leaders had multiple occasions to observe the limits of the accommodative strategy, and to conclude that most FN voters would not just "turn back home", which is precisely an argument for breaking the cordon sanitaire. As previously stated, the Front/Rassemblement National has regularly gathered an important part of the French electorate since the end of the eighties, reaching at its maximum more than 10,6 million votes in the second round of the 2017 presidential election, that is to say 22,4% of the enlisted voters. Conversely, Les Républicains was not qualified for the second round of this election for the first time in the Fifth Republic's history, despite an *a priori* unlosable election. Afterwards, LR's number of deputies was more than halved and lots of important LR cadres and representatives retired, left the party or joined Emmanuel Macron's majority, which has seduced a lot of its voters and behave itself more and more as a centre-right party. This party – built in 2002 as the unique party of the right side of the political spectrum, extremes excluded – also experienced catastrophic European elections, by getting only 8,48% of the votes, leading Laurent Wauquiez to quit his position of party president. All this had important consequences in terms of financial and human resources, with a loss of three quarters of the party members between 2017 and 2020, despite rather good local elections in 2020-2021 – even though not all representatives supported by LR formally belonged to the party, as the demonetized party label incentivizes political leaders to act autonomously.

The maintenance of the extreme right's ostracism is thus surprising for a party which currently knows the most critical period of its history in terms of electoral results and whose very survival is sometimes said at stake, not being protected anymore by the electoral system that made it successful. The majoritarian electoral

formula is indeed often considered as the main explanation of the RN's marginality, as its large disproportionality favours strong majorities and avoids *a posteriori* coalitions, preventing challengers from translating their good scores in seats, and then from influencing local or national public policies. This is particularly obvious in the legislative elections, based on single-member constituencies and two-turns plurality voting: the FN obtained 13,2% of the votes during the first turn of the 2017 legislative elections (with 553 candidates for 577 constituencies and a substantial demobilization after the loss of the presidential election), but at the end only 8 seats, that is to say 1,4% of the seats. And even when the electoral rules seemed more favourable to the FN, like the proportional system of the regional elections, they were changed to prevent the need for coalitions (here with a 25% bonus for the first list). Thus, the French electoral system has undoubtedly mitigated the electoral threat of the FN/RN and contributed to the sustainability of the "cordon sanitaire", but this logic holds only until a certain point.

Indeed, the majoritarian system only protects the parties which are able, even intermittently, to reach the first position. And even if the two-turns system encourages strategic voting at the second round, thus favorizing the established parties or coalitions (Carter 2002), it does not automatically prevent the rise of a third-party capitalizing on the distrust toward the political establishment, which sometimes only needs a few additional percentage points to get first and upset the whole election results. It is why the "republican front", that is to say left-wing parties giving up to help the mainstream right beat the extreme right, appeared necessary in the last two regional elections in the PACA region – a situation which seems hardly sustainable for the left and a bit uncomfortable for the right. We also saw a new party, La République en Marche, getting a comfortable majority from nowhere at the last legislative elections, despite – and even thanks to – the majoritarian rule. A breakthrough is then possible for the RN, which keeps having trouble to get into office but continues to reach new voters. Besides, the RN is generally perceived as the direct competitor of Les Républicains, whose leaders often consider that the RN often "helps" the Left by taking votes to the mainstream right, sometimes preventing it to get the first place (which can be the case for legislative elections, with "three ways" second rounds for instance). The fact that LR, which is now an outsider party, has nevertheless maintained its strategy regarding the RN then leads us to think that it cannot be considered as the sole explanation to the French right-wing paradox

On the matter of mainstream parties' strategies, other typologies have been established; the most complete certainly being the one of William Downs, who differentiated between strategies which either engage with the far right by co-opting its issues or collaborating in electoral, legislative or executive arenas, or disengage by banning or ignoring it (Downs 2001). One of his results is that, the more united right-wing parties are, and the tighter their hands are because of the symbolic pressure of left-wing parties, the more likely they are to stand away from the far right. It corresponds to the French case of the early 2000s, when the mainstream right parties managed to prevent massive and significant deviations from the cordon sanitaire, with an intense pressure from the symbolic "antifascist" stance of the Socialist Party (Brustier and Escalona 2015). According to Downs, this is typical of democracies which have been "compromised" in the past by extreme right governments, and are now more likely to provide "militant" responses to far-right parties, i.e. less likely to accept coalitions (Downs 2012). Due to the Nazi and Petainist experiences, Germany and France are two countries where the concern for democracy – as a representative regime based on values of freedom and tolerance – is central in the political debate about intolerant parties. This was particularly visible with the outraged reactions to 1987 Jean-Marie Le Pen's statement on television about the gas chambers as "a detail point of the history of the Second World War".

However, the Front National has initiated a mass movement of "de-demonization" to improve its public image since the election of Marine Le Pen as its leader. Built by the nationalist and reactionary movement Ordre Nouveau, with founders including former fascist and collaborationist personalities, the Front National

was already considered at its birth as a way for the extreme right to enter the electoral arena with a more respectable image. However, the party never really succeeded in balancing its tendencies to “adaptation” and to “distinction” (Dézé, 2003), with numerous and regular controversial words of Jean-Marie Le Pen about the Second World War, immigrants or gay people. So, even though Marine Le Pen has often been implied in a lot of controversies for her discourses on immigrants, she implemented a severe internal policy against any forms of antisemitism and even tried to remove her father’s title of “honorary president” of the party after another controversy on this issue. She has extensively exploited a rhetoric of republicanism, explaining that her party is the most “republican” of the political system, a discursive shift largely conveyed by the mass media (Dézé, 2015), even though the programmatic platform did not drastically change. The last step of this strategy of “mainstreaming” (Akkerman, de Lange and Rooduijn 2016) was the relabelling of the party in 2018, from the “Front” to the “Rally” in order to apparently break with the darkest side of her party’s past. It should then be taken into account that there have been numerous attempts since the already cited academic studies of the 2000s to relieve the party from its label of “pariah” and enter the field of “normal politics” (ibid., p. 1023). For instance, by asking Laurent Wauquiez, then leading candidate to be LR’s president, to propose her an alliance, or by supporting the LR candidate in a 2018 partial legislative election in Mayotte, Marine Le Pen showed her clear will to break the cordon sanitaire, in order to get LR’s missing votes and additional respectability in the context of a coalition.

Furthermore, there are some intuitive reasons to believe that Les Républicains’ leaders will overall act according to their own electoral interests and not according to altruistic, idealistic ones. The Gaullist parties have historically been associated with the catch-all model (Kirchheimer 1966), and both the RPR and the UDF were founded on entrepreneurial organizational models (Haegel 2012, p. 298). The UMP/LR closely corresponds to Panebianco’s ideal-type of the electoral-professional party (Panebianco 1988), and is then very weakly institutionalized in order to provide flexible support for its candidates and executives, its legitimacy resting upon its ability to ensure the re-election of its incumbents. And if party leaders sometimes used the rhetoric of the cordon sanitaire<sup>1</sup>, they are clearly at the rear-guard of the fight against the extreme right, generally adopting a passive attitude towards it, not presenting it as a major threat for democracy and democratic values, and sometimes even acknowledging their ideological proximity, especially on immigration and security issues. Finally, we have observed for some years the emergence of a movement of marginal actors, qualified as “the Right beyond the walls”, calling for an alliance of the mainstream and far rights to stand united against the left, “progressive” side, and trying to stress a common ideological platform. So, even though it has always been ignored by Les Républicains, we note the existence of an opportunity structure for such an alliance, which makes its non-realization even more paradoxical.

#### *Building a theoretical framework to solve the French right-wing paradox*

In order to explain the sustained ostracism of the Rassemblement National, we need to look for the hypotheses already established by the comparative literature on the determinants of mainstream and far right alliances in West European democracies, which we will then test for the French case. As a prime example, Joost van Spanje identified three factors favorizing alliances between mainstream and far right parties: the electoral weight of the far-right party, the ideological proximity between the two parties, and the absence of extreme stances from the far-right party (van Spanje 2010). The first two are based on a Schumpeterian paradigm (Schumpeter 1942), stating that political parties will opt for the more favourable strategies to gain profits – i.e., seats and offices – and will look after alliances with the ideologically closest partners to appear

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<sup>1</sup> The most famous occurrence being the sentence of President Chirac about its 2002 opponent: “In our history, extremism almost led us to the abyss. It is a poison, which divides, corrupt and destroys. Everything, in the soul of France, says no to extremism”.

as coherent for the political consumers. The third factor is based on a “defence of democracy” approach, stating that democratic actors should ostracize from the decision-making arenas the organizations presenting “reprehensible ideologies” (Van Spanje 2010, p. 357), among which the Rassemblement National. The conceptualization of such unacceptable ideologies is not really clear, given their definition depends on the established political, moral and intellectual actors of the democratic systems; however, they often encompass references to the authoritarian and xenophobic ideologies of the thirties, with ideas close to racism, Nazism, fascism, political violence, etc. This approach has sometimes been considered as too idealistic, given that parties, especially with the generalization of the professional-electoral model, are mostly incentivized to work according to their own electoral interest. But in some aspect, this approach could also be translated in Schumpeterian terms, ostracism becoming a consequence of a negative cost/benefit calculus of an alliance with the pariah parties given their problematic reputation. These two perspectives can then form a coherent theoretical framework for explaining these coalitions.

A previous work from Tim Bale presented alternative but analogous explanatory factors, also based on a Schumpeterian approach (Bale 2003). According to him, a mainstream right-wing party has an interest in an alliance with a far-right party not because the latter is electorally significant, but because the alliance would enable a “bloc expansion”, allowing the mainstream party to reach voters it cannot seduce (because of their opposite tendencies on the economic issues, of their opposition to the political system, of their social background, etc.). Besides, such governmental coalitions directly follow elections where the key themes of the far-right like immigration gained a prime importance, the same coalition then implementing more radical public policies on this theme. Mirroring what happened on the left side of the political spectrum with social-democratic parties and their green partners, the more and more frequent alliances between the mainstream and the far rights are believed to have fostered a dynamic of bipolarization of party systems, breaking with centripetal tendencies of some democracies like the First Italian Republic. It is probably why France is not included in Bale’s study, which focused on countries following a trend of bipolarization, while it can be considered as largely attained in the French party system of the 2000s – although the situation became quite uncertain with the emergence of LREM which has no stable alliance with established, outsider parties.

In order to properly characterize what we qualify as a “French right-wing paradox” in the domain of the relationship between mainstream and far right parties, we will test three of the mentioned hypotheses to verify whether the French case of ostracism complies with the Schumpeterian paradigm (an alliance with the RN would be of little interest for Les Républicains) and/or with the defence of democracy one (the mainstream right considers the extreme right as an unacceptable part of the political system). The first hypothesis relies on the ideological assumptions of both Bale and van Spanje, positing that ostracism means that LR still keeps a significant ideological distance regarding the key issues promoted by the RN (especially immigration, security and multiculturalism), or that those issues are not that salient in LR’s discourse. The second hypothesis relies on the first assumption of Bale’s article: if ostracism still persists, it is because an alliance would not allow a bloc expansion of the right-wing electoral pole – which is considered as a more logical hypothesis than the mere electoral weight of the far-right party proposed by van Spanje – i.e., the major part of RN’s voters could still be co-opted by LR. The third hypothesis relies on the assumption that ostracism still holds because, despite Marine Le Pen de-demonization of the Front National, LR leaders consider in fact that this party represents a threat for democracy and democratic values.

There are no already existing indicators to test those hypotheses, however a lot of primary and secondary sources are available for this kind of interrogation. We will use two survey databases, one about the detailed structuration of the French electorate in 2017 – the French Electoral Study 2017 (CEVIPOF 2017) – and another about the ideological positions of European political parties – the 2019 Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Bakker, Hooghe, Jolly, Marks, Polk, Rovny, Steenbergen and Vachudova 2020). We will also use previous

academic works on Les Républicains' electorate and ideological positions, in addition to official documents written by the party's central office or its leaders, to analyse their discourse on the extreme right, and how they justify their refusal to ally with the Rassemblement national.

This article does not aim at contradicting the existing literature on the relationship between mainstream and far right parties, as it has already showed its virtues, but at pinpointing its limits, as comparative studies are very efficient in explaining “why” some parties coalesce and not others, but not “how” they coalesce or not. Yet, this “how”, exploring both the motivations and justifications of mainstream right-wing parties and their history regarding their far-right counterpart, can better explain some paradoxical cases. It is why some additional material (mainly party manifests, discourses and documents like essays) will be required to explain this “French right-wing paradox”, besides a re-examination of a more traditional, statistical material. We add that previous studies partly rely on data concerning the mainstream right-wing parties (their electorate, ideological positions and core values), but on hypotheses and theories relying mainly on far-right parties (especially on their success and strategies), considering implicitly the mainstream counterparts as passive organizations, only following the natural slope drawn by the extreme and radical ones. We show here that, sometimes, focusing on mainstream right-wing parties is necessary to understand borderline, paradoxical cases like the French one, and that it can allow us to complete or reorient the literature's hypotheses.

## **2. Assessing the theoretical inconsistency of RN's ostracism**

### *LR and RN as ideological neighbours*

We use the 2019 Chapel Hill Expert Survey to objectivize the measurement of LR's and RN's ideological positions on key issues. In the Table 1.1, we summarized the positions of both parties on issues that are key for the extreme right (i.e. whose salience is the highest), which is the case for the GAL-TAN scale (7.6/10), immigration (9.9), multiculturalism (9.5) and European integration (8.6). We also took into account the positions of LREM, as a way to compare the proximity of LR with a more “centrist” party on issues which are sources of controversies in the French public debate.

We can observe that in most issues promoted by the Rassemblement National, Les Républicains are ideologically closer to it than to La République en Marche. LR exhibits very rightist scores (more than 7.5) for the restriction of immigration, the refusal of a multicultural model, the rejection of more rights for ethnic minorities, the valorisation of a conservative social lifestyle and the preference for law and order over civil liberties, issues on which the RN is almost systematically extremely rightist. Somehow surprisingly, LR is closer to the RN than to LREM on the general economic scale – even though the RN exhibits, as Jan Rovny theorized (Rovny 2013), an important score for blurring on economic issues (5.8/10). The only issue where Les Républicains seems significantly closer to the other mainstream parties is European integration, as it remains opposed to the RN's project of exiting the European Union – or at least create a new type of union. However, it also shows a very important level of internal dissent on this issue (6.7), as the party is quite divided between those favourable to European cooperation, and those very sceptical about the way the EU has been made. We could then consider that there is no consensus on this disagreement with the RN. Finally, all the issues largely promoted by the RN also seem very important for LR, with relatively high saliency scores: 6.5 for GAL-TAN issues, 6.8 for immigration and 7.2 for multiculturalism.

Table 1. Ideological positions according to the Chapel Hill Expert Survey, version 2019.3.

	Les Républicains	Rassemblement National	La République en Marche	Proximity with the RN compared to proximity with LREM
Left-right scale	7.9	9.8	6.3	-0.3
Economic scale	8.1	6.9	6.3	0.6
GAL-TAN scale	6.9	8.1	3.2	2.5
European integration*	5.5	1.4	6.8	-2.8
Immigration	7.9	9.9	5.7	0.2
Multiculturalism	8.1	10	5.6	0.6
Law and order	7.6	9.3	6	-0.1
Liberal lifestyle	7.6	7.8	2.5	4.9
Minorities rights	8	9.9	4	2.1
Nationalism	7	9.6	4	0.4
Anti-Islam	6.5	9.5	3.2	0.3

\*Every score is on a 0-to-10 scale, 10 being the most conservative position, except for the support for European integration, which goes from 0 (most Eurosceptic) to 7 (most Europhile). Bold numbers indicate the most striking differences in terms of proximity.

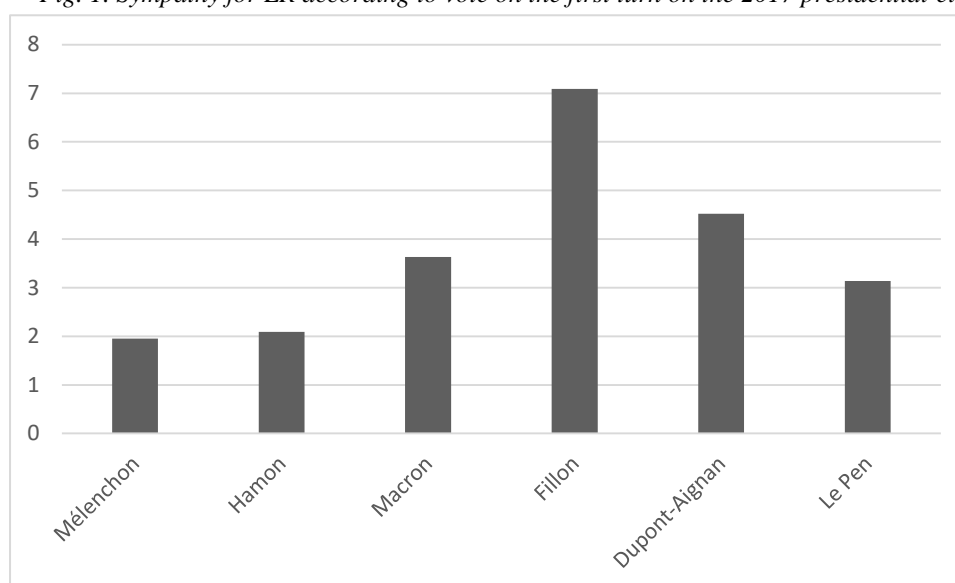
These results are coherent with previous researches on the parroting strategy of the mainstream right, which intensified with the leadership of Nicolas Sarkozy who, both as candidate and as President, realigned the discourse of the mainstream right on issues like immigration, “national identity” and moral and social order, then legitimizing authoritarian and ethnocentric positions in the political debate (Haegel 2011). After him, some party challengers tried to reclaim his legacy by promoting an “uninhibited” French right, explaining that political correctness was an electoral trap set up by the left, and that “telling the truth” about immigration and security problems was necessary to get back a significant part of the electorate. About this electorate, Haegel and Mayer showed that LR sympathizers and Fillon voters exhibited a lot of proximity with the FN sympathizers and Le Pen voters on immigration, law and order, even though the latter were always more radical (Haegel and Mayer 2018). Even in programmatic measures, the proximities are visible and somehow intensifying, for instance on the medical aid for illegal immigrants, national borders’ controls or *jus soli*. To sum up, the co-optation of the key themes of the extreme right has been pushed quite far and for a long time in the French case, and regular or occasional alliances between the mainstream and extreme right, on a programmatic platform centered on immigration and security, would not seem ideologically incoherent.



### *The RN's impact on a right-bloc expansion*

An investigation into the data of the 2017 French Electoral Study<sup>2</sup> also allows us to understand why some of the RN voters are unreachable for the mainstream Right, even with an intense parroting of the extreme right discourse, and why an alliance between the two parties would indeed extend the elective potential of LR, that is to say consolidate its existing electoral strongholds and maybe help it conquer new ones. If we look at the level of sympathy for Les Républicains according to the votes of the respondents for the six major candidates of the 2017 presidential election, we observe that the level of sympathy for this party is quite low for Le Pen voters, around 3.1 out of 10. In the details, approximately one-third of them expresses the maximum level of antipathy for LR.

*Fig. 1. Sympathy for LR according to vote on the first turn on the 2017 presidential election.*



The numbers of the Figure 1 are very similar to those concerning the likelihood to vote “one day” for Les Républicains. As shown in Figure 2, the comparison of this likelihood for 2017 Fillon voters and Le Pen voters are quite remarkable in this sense. While Fillon voters are pretty likely to vote once again for LR in the future, it is only the case for one-fourth of Le Pen voters, the vast majority being unlikely to vote for this party and more than 30% being certain never to do it.

To understand this situation, we have to study the political positioning of the RN voters. In Figure 3, we compare the way Fillon and Le Pen voters positioned themselves on the left-right scale. We observe that a significant part of Le Pen voters considers itself as far-right voters, whereas Fillon voters generally positioned themselves as centre to “tough” right voters. Furthermore, more than 10% of Le Pen voters consider themselves as left-wing, and the most important segment as centrist. However, we know from the literature that those are mostly people rejecting both left and right parties, called “neither norers”, with a more detached relationship to politics (Mayer 2005, p. 9). Indeed, we observe that they have the lowest interest in politics voters in the Le Pen electorate, with an average score of 1.9 out of 3 for disinterest in politics, compared to 1.3 for those who position themselves on the far right. The divergence perceived by RN

<sup>2</sup> All calculi were weighted according to sociodemographic factors, diploma and actual votes on 1st and 2nd rounds of the 2017 presidential elections, which are critical elements when studying RN voters.

voters between LR and them is even higher when we compare their own estimation of LR’s position with their auto-positioning. For instance, the neither-norers think themselves as 1.3 point at the left of LR; but the difference is the highest for the voters positioning themselves at 8, 9 or 10 out of 10 on the left-right scale, as they consider LR as too left-wing by 2.0, 2.0 and 3.6 points respectively. To put it more simply, the most radical Le Pen voters consider Les Républicains as far too moderate, too “soft” for them.

Fig. 2. Probability to vote for LR in some future election

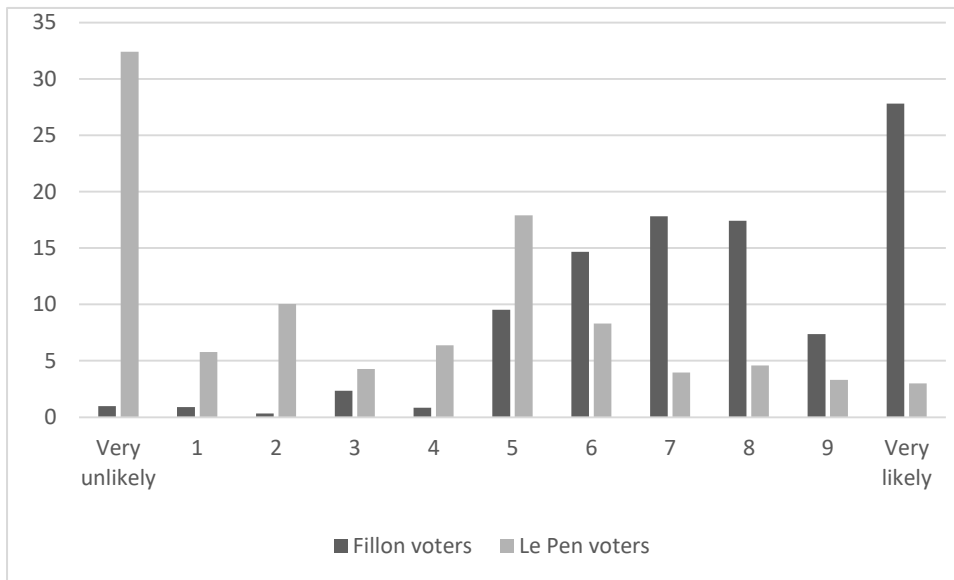
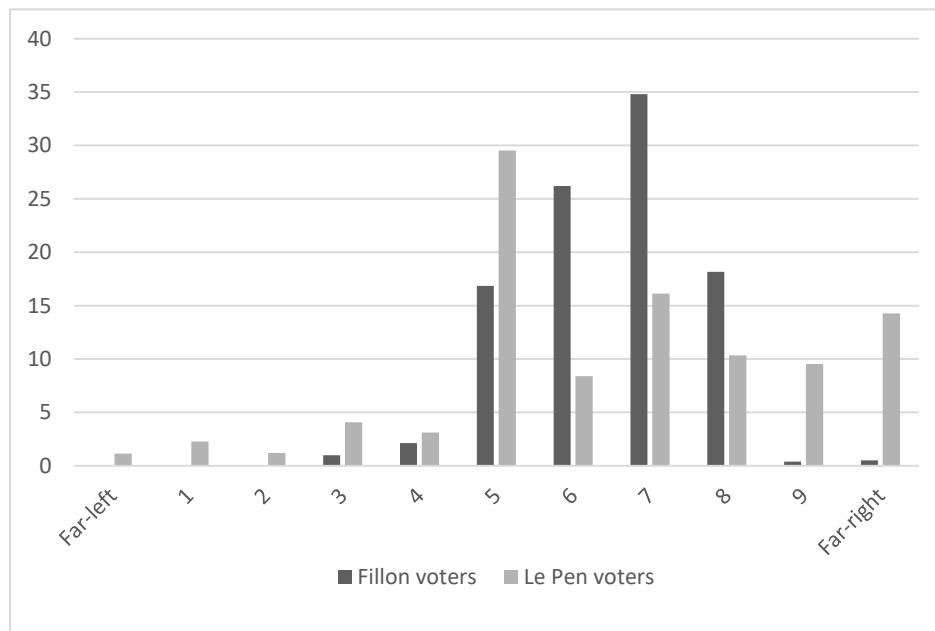


Fig.3 Left-right auto-positioning.



Finally, Le Pen voters are only 4.3% to think that LR is the most able party to bring concrete solution to crime issues, while they are 86.4% to think that the FN is. For immigration, the percentages are even more remarkable: 2.2% against 90.9%. And we also observe that 63,3% of Le Pen voters agree with the idea that political leaders are the main problem of France and that 84,5% think politicians care only about the rich and powerful people, against respectively 38.7% and 39.6% for Fillon voters. It thus seems dubious that LR would be able to conquer Le Pen voters, who are either too radical or too detached from politics, that is to say too leery of LR to consider more than an alliance with it.

The French Electoral Study data also show more basically that the breaking of the cordon sanitaire would also constitute a bloc expansion in the sociodemographic characteristics of the right-wing coalition (see Annex 1 for details). In 2017, the Le Pen voters were typically much younger than the Fillon voters: 17,7% were 65 or older, while it was the case of 46,9% of the Fillon voters, and 28,7% were 34 or younger while only 9,7% of the Fillon voters were. This is not without relationship with the religious practice of these electorates: 37,7% of the Fillon voters attended the mass frequently or not, while it was only 15,8% of the Le Pen voters; 83,9% declared themselves Catholic and only 11,1% without religion, against respectively 63,1% and 34% for the Le Pen voters. There is also a sharp difference in the level of education, already well-known by the literature (Amengay, Durovic and Mayer 2017), as 37,6% of the Fillon voters went to tertiary education against only 13,7% of the Le Pen voters, and 28,2% of the Fillon voters did not go further than primary education against 34,1% of the Le Pen voters – remembering that the latter are in average from more recent generations. But the difference is the most obvious for the socioeconomic status: 20,7% of the Fillon voters who feel they belong to a social class identify themselves with the upper classes against 4,0% of the Le Pen voters, while 13,1% of the former to identify themselves to the working classes against 49,5% of the latter. Finally, only 18,6% of the Fillon voters said they had periods when they experienced financial problems against 57,1% for the Le Pen voters. An alliance between both parties can then be considered as a bloc-expansion opportunity for the right-wing pole of French politics<sup>3</sup>.

#### *The end of the extreme right scarecrow?*

We have already presented the strategy of mainstreaming that has been implemented by Marine Le Pen since her election as head of the Front National in 2011. However, we also know that the end of ostracism primarily relies on the reaction of the mainstream, established parties and that, for instance, the efforts of Gianfranco Fini in the 90s to break up with the fascist roots of the Italian Social Movement – thereafter National Alliance – would not have been successful without the support of Silvio Berlusconi, who normalized the left's fight against the extreme right in a regular electoral competition against the right-wing pole. The demonstrative efforts of Marine Le Pen to sweep up all possible accusations of support to the Vichy regime of the 40s – deflecting them on the “old” Front National – then depend on their reception by the established parties. On this point, the left-wing parties have been of no help, since they express their disbelief regarding these “artificial” changes and did not abandon the “moral disqualification” as a rhetorical tool against their “best enemy” (Brustier and Escalona 2015, p. 507).

On the contrary, such disqualifications seem far away for today's mainstream right leaders. In the 2016 “Orientation Text” published by LR as a form of elementary manifesto, the central office successively expressed its refusal of any electoral agreement with the Front National, due to the “total incompatibility with [its] economic, European, social and societal policy” and of “any form of Republican front or grand coalition” against it. The rejection of both the left and the Front National is presented as balanced, even

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<sup>3</sup> Conversely, an alliance with La République en Marche looks less advantageous for Les Républicains (see Annex 1 for comparison).

though the divergences with the former are based on “its ideology as well as its project” whereas the differences with the latter seem merely programmatic. Today, following the Sarkozy presidency and the success of the “uninhibited” Right, it appears difficult even for the most moderate cadres to fully oppose the RN, as it could be considered as an offense to its voters and ruin the co-optation strategy. Maybe because some of the cadres secretly dream of this forbidden alliance or because they still believe in the co-optation strategy, criticizing the FN as an immoral party would be, in their opinion, the best way to increase the gap with its voters and “play the game of the Left” (as the demonization of the FN is sometimes described as a strategy invented in the 80s to divide the right-wing electorate).

Some cadres really “denounced” the FN in the last decade, like Nathalie Kosciusko-Morizet, former minister of Environment and former spokesperson on the 2012 Sarkozy campaign, who published in 2011 a book titled “The Antinational Front”, where the mainstream and far rights are said to have “only one word in common”, the latter being a “threat” with “xenophobic theses”. During the 2012-2017 period, some divergences still existed on the strategy regarding the Front national, but the fiercest opponents to the RN finally left the party after the election of Laurent Wauquiez as “uninhibited” president of the party, like N. Kosciusko-Morizet or former Prime Minister and candidate to the 2016 primary Alain Juppé. Generally speaking, after the defeat of François Fillon in 2017, most of the moderate cadres who expressed some sympathy for the idea of the Republican front either left politics or supported the centrist government and allied themselves with La République en Marche, leaving no real space for frontal opposition to the Front National inside the mainstream right.

Concretely speaking, LR leaders generally tend to avoid speaking about an “extreme right” party, as it supposes an extraneity to democratic and Republican values, a stance which would be difficult to assume as it would suppose a more radical criticism of the RN and a possible questioning of their ideological proximity with it, if the RN’s positions on immigration and security were really racist and xenophobic. Strictly speaking, the “defence of democracy” approach is contradicted by the attitude of Les Républicains, which does not express signs of disgust when dealing with RN’s ideas and does not exploit the rhetoric of the RN being an unacceptable part of the French party system or as a prime threat for democratic values. But what we observe in fact is a real discomfort regarding the attitude to adopt vis-à-vis the Rassemblement National, and a general unwillingness to speak about it, to adopt a more precise attitude vis-à-vis this party. Somehow, it is as if Les Républicains was restrained by a form of implicit taboo, as if the Rassemblement national was still untouchable, even though the French mainstream right is now quite detached from a demonized vision of the RN and has implicitly accepted Marine Le Pen as leader of a “normal” party. Thus, at first sight, their tightrope strategy i.e., refusing the moral position of the republican bulwark without directly engaging with the extreme right, seems irrational regarding their current electoral interest; at best a dying scrap of the time it was a dominant centre-right party facing a rogue extreme right organization.

Of course, we cannot consider this preference for *status quo* as a mere lock-in effect of past promises: some politicians in other countries succeeded in breaking with the choices made in the past by other politicians of their party family. We must find the hidden motives of this strategy which makes Les Républicains insensitive to a new political context, despite apparently higher interests and lower costs for ending ostracism. We then need to reconsider the importance of the blind spots of existing hypotheses about the relationship between the mainstream and far right parties, by studying the objective and subjective shortcomings of the extreme right party from a mainstream point of view, re-evaluating the costs of such an alliance and eventually proposing a different, specific interpretation of the “defence of democracy” approach.

### 3. Why does the cordon sanitaire still hold in France?

#### *Re-evaluating the ideological sticking points between LR and the RN*

If we take a deeper look at the disagreement LR's cadres express regarding RN's ideological positions, economy can be considered as the major issue of divergence between the two parties. Even though we saw that this divergence was objectively not that important, because the RN maintains a median, blurred position on economic policies, it is the prime argument advanced by LR leaders to criticize this party. Economy is for instance the main theme of one of the only recent right-wing books to confront the FN/RN, titled *The truth on the Front National's program*, by Maël de Calan, former candidate for the 2017 internal election of the LR president, who dedicated three chapters to the criticism of the economic, monetary and fiscal policies of the FN. Qualifying the first policy as "more left-wing than Jean-Luc Mélenchon" (the leading radical left figure in France currently), he criticizes the bureaucratic temptation and the unrealistic generosity of the party. Indeed, when we look back at the 2019 CHES data on more precise economic issues, we see more divergent scores: 7.4 out of 10 for LR against 4 for the RN on the opposition to redistribution; 8.5 against 5.4 for the reduction of taxation; 8.4 against 4.5 for the deregulation of markets; 6.9 against 3.9 on the opposition to State intervention. De facto, even if the catch-all nature of the Rassemblement National incentivizes it to comfort each part of the electorate, for instance the shop owners and little entrepreneurs usually supporting the mainstream right, it distanced itself in the nineties from the first winning formula of Herbert Kitschelt (authoritarian + neoliberal) more rapidly than other far right parties, and has converged toward the second winning formula (authoritarian + economically centrist) identified by Sarah de Lange in order to attract the declining French working class (De Lange, 2007), which favours protectionism and interventionism.

Of course, the idea is not to exaggerate those differences, as LR's focus on economic issues appears like a desperate attempt to compensate the major convergences on immigration and security issues. But even though LR leaders highly distort the positions of the RN, they primarily condemn what is perceived as a form of incompetence and detachment from the economic reality; in his book, Maël de Calan stresses the incoherence of the FN's program, particularly its mistakes and goofy promises. These accusations say at least as much about the RN as about LR, which presents itself inversely as a competent party, anchored in the concrete economic realities of the citizens, aware of the laws of economics which cannot be broken. Given its historical (even though reduced) electoral base composed of retired people, entrepreneurs, private-sector executives or other relatively wealthy voters, the discourse about freedom of entrepreneurship and the necessary economic growth has been a major pillar of the mainstream right platform for a very long time. This argument can be extended to European issues given that, despite their dissent on the degree of sovereignty France should keep in the European Union, LR leaders adopted a soft consensus on the economic virtues of the Union, and the economic catastrophe which would follow a Frexit, clearly disagreeing on these issues with the RN (for instance, their CHES score in favour of the European internal market is 5.8/7 against 1.6/7 for the RN). An alliance with the Rassemblement National would then contradict some of their core ideological beliefs and be another risk for the stability of their electorate. Indeed, Haegel and Mayer showed that the caveats of LR leaders' proximity with the RN platform on economic and European issues are also shared by their voters (Haegel and Mayer 2018). With the 2017 French Electoral Study, we also observe this distrust toward the supposed economic incompetence of the RN on the consensual issue of unemployment, for which only 1.9% of the Fillon voters consider the RN as the most able to bring concrete solution, against 50.1% for LR and 43.5% for LREM.

But the economy is not an important question simply because of the LR's belief in the classic liberal economic paradigm. Since the beginning of the Fifth Republic, the economy has been the main ideological divide between the right and the left electoral blocs, one of the two pillars of the left-right divide, with the

religious cleavage on secularism which is now more centred on cultural liberalism and moral issues. For a long time, the Front National was not able to stop a bipolarizing dynamic which ended in an imperfect bipartisan system (Grunberg and Haegel 2007). For sixty years, French politics was divided between the Right as the advocate of a pre-existing order, characterized by a certain number of “natural” rules on the functioning of economy and society which must be respected for the sake of some social harmony, and the Left as the advocate of more abstract values like equality and social justice, whose attainment justified quite radical transformations of the pre-existing economic, social or moral order. Broadly speaking, the French right follows what Karl Mannheim called the “conservative idea”, that is to say a mindset in which political action is mainly seen as a *reaction* against exogenous shocks or “ideological” attempts to destabilize the fragile equilibria of a given society (Mannheim 1954, p. 256). In this logic, the right used during a long time to focus its criticisms toward the left as the main factor of destabilization. The most convenient discursive strategy to contain the emergence of the Front National then largely relied on the assimilation of this party to a covert ally of the left, either because it was supposed to promote left-wing policies, or because it aimed at dividing the right-wing electorate. If we suppose that Les Républicains keeps some coherence in the criticisms it formulates to its diverse political opponents, we must acknowledge that the reluctance to engage with the RN proceeds from a deeply rooted belief in the inability of the latter to propose credible and realistic solutions to society’s problems and to show some competence in the management of public affairs, as Le Pen’s party is considered as a demagogical rabble-rouser thinking first of all about their own, petty interest. In some sense, the inconsistency of the RN’s program and their outrageous political style (and sometimes ideological proposals) makes this party, in LR’s point of view, not more desirable than a left-wing party. And LR’s program and discourse may be close to the RN’s ones on the latter’s key issues like immigration, but they also rely on issues on which the two parties diverge much more clearly, a point understated by the literature until now.

*The critical issue of the party image: why competence and credibility matter?*

The divide between LR and the RN is also a matter of sympathy and reputation. Indeed, 61.3% of the Fillon voters asserted they absolutely disliked the Rassemblement National, with less than 7% liking it (i.e. with a score of 6 or more out of 10). These numbers are respectively 55.2% and less than 4% for Marine Le Pen. Finally, less than 14% find her “honest” (score of 6 or more). This negative perception of the FN’s leader was already present 10 years ago, during the 2007 presidential election (Boy and Chiche 2006): only 12% of the voters thought Jean-Marie Le Pen had the four proposed qualities (“honest”, “willing to change things”, “understands people like you” and “stature of a President”). This was the case of 54% of the far-right voters, but only of 19% of the moderate-right voters and of 7% of the centrist voters; against respectively 58%, 77% and 46% for Nicolas Sarkozy. Besides, 72% of the centrist voters and 55% of the moderate right ones declared to be “worried” about Jean-Marie Le Pen, against only 48% and 27% for Nicolas Sarkozy.

In some aspects, this particular distrust regarding the RN could be considered as a vivid concern for the endangerment of democracy and democratic values. On this subject, the polling institute Kantar publishes each year a barometer on the image of the Rassemblement National, with a particular focus on the relationship between the mainstream and far right parties (Kantar-onepoint 2019). Having to choose between qualifying Marine Le Pen as the representative of a “patriotic Right attached to traditional values” and a “nationalist and xenophobic extreme right”, only 31% of the 2019 LR sympathizers chose the second option, against 49% for the citizens in general and 70% for the LREM sympathizers. This teaches us that an alliance with the RN would certainly alienate an important part of the LR voters, but also that most of them do not have a perception of this party as antidemocratic. However, only 32% of them consider this party as “able to

participate in a government”, which is really close to the general number. This indicates that the general reluctance regarding the RN and its leader can be linked to issues of competence, realism and seriousness. There is indeed a wide disagreement over the solutions proposed by Marine Le Pen (90% of LR sympathizers), even when they agree with her analyses of society’s problems (56%), showing the RN’s leader is not perceived as a serious and convincing potential representative. As seen previously, the Fillon voters also differ from the Le Pen voters in their relationship with politics and the political system, implying that most of them have difficulties with her populist discourse, not on her criticism of the governing elites, but in her way to simplify issues and to propose demagogical solutions to complex problems because of her preference for the easy way and radical postures – which is partially linked to their sociodemographic characteristics, being older and higher in the social hierarchy.

These considerations relate to what Giovanni Sartori called the “party image”, that is to say a set of characteristics attached to a party which has a certain stability over time among the electorate and allows the identification of voters to a certain party. Party images can be linked to ideological characteristics (conservative, liberal, progressive, etc.), to social belongings (the party of the workers, of the farmers, etc.) or to certain manners of practicing politics (honesty, competence, empathy, etc.). The FN/RN, for instance, has done huge efforts to enhance its own image, which attracted the most radical, antisystem voters but also repelled a more significant share of the electorate. Facing the FN/RN as a close competitor in the party system, the mainstream right-wing party had to work on its comparative advantages to seduce its voters. According to Meguid, the accommodation strategy can work at the very emergence of a niche party, as the mainstream party appears more credible due to its established position in the system, and thus more qualified to implement the measures wanted by the niche voters (Meguid 2008). In France, the mainstream right was finally not very efficient in containing the extreme right, but this idea of its superior legitimacy in the political system remained, with continuous efforts to sustain this image of a competent, responsible, reasonable, rational, realistic party, with a lot of elected representatives and previous experiences in government, qualities which are more or less explicitly opposed to the defaults of the *Rassemblement National*. As Herman and Muldoon showed in their study of the discourses of the main candidates to the 2017 French presidential election, François Fillon was much more likely to oppose Marine Le Pen on the supposed incompetence and negative outcomes of her program rather than on her values (Herman and Muldoon 2018).

In some aspects, the need for the mainstream right to promote its comparative advantages regarding the far right, facilitated by the past decision to build a *cordon sanitaire* helped to create its own justification, based on its very belonging to the established political system – even in Sarkozy’s discourse as a so-called anti-elite candidate – despite its ideological convergence on critical issues. In this aspect, the mainstream and far rights remain “disjoined” electoral blocs, as Sartori said, not because of a concern for democratic values, but because of credibility issues which have become essential to the valorisation of the former’s image. This is also what led numerous high-ranked figures and elected representatives of *Les Républicains*, like Xavier Bertrand – potential candidate of the mainstream right for the 2022 presidential election – to leave the party after Laurent Wauquiez’ election as party president, as he was considered too close to the RN’s discourse and possibly likely to break the *cordon sanitaire* to satisfy its personal interest, even if it was finally not the case. Still today, the party central office can legitimately estimate that alliances with the RN are the red line of a lot of its voters, but also of its cadres. Thus, if 73% of RN’s sympathizers would like a permanent or circumstantial alliances between LR and the RN, as it would help the latter finally come into power, only 33% of LR’s sympathizers would accept that (Kantar Public, 2021). The bloc expansion associated with such an alliance would then severely compromise LR’s current electoral basis, making this alliance finally non-beneficial for the right-wing party.

*LR's "established" identity as the main driver of the French cordon sanitaire*

Despite the rational justification behind the issues of competence and credibility, we also know that such perceptions can be distorted by parties to fit their interest, especially if they are vote-seeking and office-seeking like Les Républicains. In other words, we must understand what is at stake and dig into the very meaning of these values for the mainstream right-wing party, especially regarding its position in the French political system and its own organizational history. As the tough competition imposed by the RN forces LR's leaders to state *who* they are in order to explain *how* they choose their alliances and *why* the RN cannot be part of them, the apparent attachment to competence and credibility engages what Angelo Panebianco called "identity" as a "collective incentive" of party organization (Panebianco 1988, p. 24), that is to say the common basis of a party's leaders, members and sympathizers that makes them supportive of each other and act collectively despite sometimes diverging individual interests. Of course, this partisan identity does not magically bind the different political actors, who work together to fulfil more selective incentives like building elective careers. If this collective incentive generally diminishes with time – as parties care less about ideology and policies and more about votes and seats – there always remains a sense of what party goals were at the beginning, before the process of institutionalization and professionalization. These goals then articulate with other ends which emerge from the party's necessity to adapt itself to its transformed environment. This allows us to understand the exact role and meaning of the party's attachments to general ideological propositions or principles of political action, as cumulative results of past configurations which have successively adjusted the party's identity.

Created as a merger of three moderate right-wing parties, whose major component (in terms of members, elected representatives and territorial diffusion) was the post-Gaullist Rassemblement pour la République (RPR), LR's (ex-UMP) most cherished historical references are Gaullism and De Gaulle's figure. Even though they have been empty symbols for some decades (Haegel 1990), they refer to a period when the French right was the dominant political force of its country, and in some sense so confident in its position that it did not consider itself as part of one of the two major coalitions (with the socialist-communist one), but as embodying the very political regime it created, the Fifth Republic. So, even though De Gaulle may not be the more representative figure of democracy and democratic values, he symbolizes the stability of the political regime, the defence of institutions and the national unity of the whole French people against external and internal enemies. As Panebianco's genetic model explained, the Gaullist organization as a "governmental" party did not primarily rely on its weak ideology, but tried to "objectivize" De Gaulle's charisma (Panebianco 1988, p. 147) by associating the party's image and identity to an experience of government, even after his death.

This self-perception was somehow reconfigured after the first victory of the left and the consciousness that power had to be shared – which correspond to the moment when this family began qualifying itself as "right-wing"<sup>4</sup> in a liberal-conservative sense – with the new aim of preserving the formal and informal institutions of the country against the "ideological", utopian tales of the left. But this was still highly coherent with the way the post-Gaullist party considered itself, that is to say as responsible for the political system and depositary of a tradition of pragmatic management of the State based on an inclusive representation of all the French people. While some local alliances were concluded with the FN in the 80s – a decade of (nuanced) left-wing domination over French politics – this practice ended in the 90s – a decade which reassured the right about its capacity to return to power, fulfilling the initial aim of the RPR as a post-Gaullist willing to reclaim the top governmental positions it lost (Knapp 1996, p. 96). It culminated in 2002, with the frontal,

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<sup>4</sup> As René Rémond explained, "[the post-1981 right] believes in its legitimacy: it is convinced to have rights on the future" (Rémond: 27, 1985)



“republican” opposition to Jean-Marie Le Pen which coincided with the creation of the new mainstream right-wing party by the President Jacques Chirac in order to win the following legislative elections (UMP initially stood for “Union for a Presidential Majority”). This reconstruction *by* the political power of a party *meant* to hold and retain the political power further sealed its future strategical choices: as the UMP/LR perpetuated the legitimacy of the post-Gaullist family as the guardian of the existing regime, it became even more difficult to divest this identity to seize opportunities of alliance with the extreme right which is “out of the system”. These past choices have also had a more indirect effect, given it also pushed the FN into the margins of the party system, thus plausibly encouraging its antisystem stance and its divergent positions on economic issues from the 90s (Ivaldi, 2015), which then gave additional arguments to the mainstream right to refuse alliances.

To sum up, even if it was sometimes tempted by a populist-like discourse and distances itself from any assimilation to a fantasized establishment in times of distrust toward politics and politicians, Les Républicains maintained its *ethos* of established party and primarily defines itself as a guardian of both formal (political, constitutional) and informal (social, economic, cultural, moral) French institutions, thanks to its antiquity in the political system and its supposed deep understanding of the way society works. Therefore, using Giovanni Capoccia’s typology of anti-systemness (Capoccia 2002), we can observe that LR does not oppose the RN due to its *ideological* anti-systemness (for instance, an unacceptable threat for democratic values of tolerance and freedom), but to its *relational* anti-systemness, based among other things on “centrifugal propaganda tactics” which delegitimizes the political system built on political institutions and their core values, and valorises a maximal distance (both substantially and stylistically) vis-à-vis the established, mainstream political parties. In this sense, the relabelling of the UMP as “Les Républicains” may not be meaningless, with some attempts to renew its ideology around the defence of their own interpretation of the “republican values”. As such, Marine Le Pen’s normalizing strategy has not been enough to regain some legitimacy vis-à-vis the French mainstream right, whose resilience, based on its very party identity, can explain the survival of the cordon sanitaire.

#### **4. Conclusive discussion: the cordon sanitaire as a contingent phenomenon**

With this study of the underlying mechanisms of the French cordon sanitaire, we emphasized the interest of stepping away from an ahistorical approach of the political parties as organizations with no context and only abstract interests, whose relations with other parties and strategic attitudes would only be determined by the proximities of the doctrines and the complementarity of the electorates. The existing literature, much more focused on the intriguing object that the far right is, might have underestimated other factors, like the cost of such alliances or the characteristics of the mainstream parties, whose attitude is certainly determined by their electoral interests and opportunity structures, but far from self-explanatory or mechanical. The usual methods and data used by the academic literature can be exploited in various ways and show a more nuanced picture, where motivations are diverse and sometimes contradictory, with advantages but also drawbacks to an alliance, and where similar situations can lead to different outcomes because of a dynamic of self-reinforcement or self-justification stemming from past choices and configurations. If we turn back to our initial hypotheses, we can formulate the following subtleties: ideological proximity makes the mainstream and far right coalitions more likely, but minor divergences on very salient issues for one of the two parties can be a hindrance to such alliances; calculus about bloc expansion must also include its costs, i.e. the voters who can be lost if the cordon sanitaire is broken; a party can be a pariah not only because it is perceived as a threat to the political system’s values, but also as a threat to its good functioning, its stability and its credibility, provided the mainstream party considers itself as responsible for it.

In the French case, we argue that the specific role of Gaullist and post-Gaullist parties in the political system can explain the upholding of the *cordon sanitaire* despite an electoral downhill trend for the mainstream right and the increasing success of the far right, through the attachment to a competent, established party image and a conservative identity forged by a long bipolarization of the political life. However, we do not intend to say that the *cordon sanitaire* will last forever, and this ambiguous attitude based on a complex cost/benefit calculus and on the self-perception of the party's identity is probably more fragile than a simply moral and ideological opposition to the extreme right. Major prospects for change could be found in a proportionalization of the French electoral formula, or in a changing strategy of the *Rassemblement National*, as the adoption of a more serious, competent and pragmatic image could help closing the gap with some radical LR cadres who, despite their sovereigntist and rather ethnocentric positions, remain in their original party because of the unenviable, marginal situation of the RN within the political system. Above all, the lack of a strong party discipline, coupled with the continuing legitimization of the extreme right's issues and theses, might actually fuel the rise, within the mainstream right, of a more ethnic, essentializing reading grid of France's problems, which could make the extreme right's ostracism artificial as LR and RN's identities would become more and more compatible and the latter would look like a solution rather than a threat for the regime and its institutions. The survival of the *cordon sanitaire* thus appears as the changing product of the complex history of its own political system.

As such, this account of the historical conditions of the mainstream and far right parties' relationship could also, in our opinion, be extended to other European countries. In Germany, for instance, the CDU played a major role in the reconstruction of the Federal Republic and of its democratic institutions. This phenomenon, more than the will to avoid the emergence of a new far right party, can explain why the central office chose to refuse any alliance, local or federal, with the AfD. The deep emotion and calls for resignation after the opportunistic coalition of the CDU and the AfD representatives in Thuringia in February 2020 show the constraints of a party which is so closely linked to the history of its democratic institutions. On the contrary, the Spanish *Partido Popular*, which was founded 10 years after the return of democracy in the country, had less difficulties allying itself with the ultra-nationalist party Vox. Another, even more remarkable case, is the one of *Forza Italia*, which emerged in the Second Italian Republic to replace the Christian Democracy but, contrarily to the latter, immediately allied itself to the extreme right-wing, then still officially neofascist party of the *Movimento Sociale Italiano*, and thereafter perfectly accepted the anti-immigration shift of its partner, the *Lega Nord*. This was possible because *Forza Italia* was not the mere recreation of the Christian Democracy, which was the leading political force of the First Italian Republic and a major actor of the "constitutional arc" which excluded the neofascist and monarchist parties in the making of the first Constitution in 1946 (Ignazi 1989).

Where the *cordon sanitaire* still holds, like in France, a final question remains on the mainstream right's ability to enforce its strategy at the local level. Indeed, the kind of genetic effect experienced by a national party does not fully apply to local elections, where the reputation of the candidates can be more important than their ideology because of the lower politicization of local issues, where party labels are not as important, transpartisan list more common and officially independent candidates more frequent, and where institutions are less likely to be endangered by politicians' behaviours. A last number from the Kantar barometer is striking in this sense: among the LR's sympathizers who have a good opinion of potential alliances with the RN, almost 4 out of 5 think they must be considered "according to the context". Interpretations must be cautious, but the "context" generally refers to local conditions where the support of the RN voters or representatives might be necessary to win elections. In this sense, only a very marginal share of the LR sympathizers thinks a national and systematic alliance would be conceivable, given the seriousness of the associated issues, but this share drastically increases for local elections. If, for instance, some LR mayors

from regions where the RN is powerful took the initiative to merge their list with the RN's one to keep their office or if regional leaders concluded implicit agreements for a reciprocal withdrawal of either the LR or RN list, the question of the exclusion of these representatives could be a tough one for the central office. The local aspect of this topical issue has been underdeveloped in the literature, but could be decisive for a deeper understanding of the acceptance of far-right actors in democratic and liberal political systems.

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Annex 1: Selection of sociodemographic characteristics of the Fillon, Le Pen and Macron electorates in the first round of the 2017 presidential election (in percentages).

Vote 1st round of presidential election	Fillon	Le Pen	Macron	
Age	18/24	3.7	12.0	6.7
	25/34	6.1	16.7	10.1
	35/49	22.0	27.1	21.7
	50/64	21.3	26.5	33.4
	>65	46.9	17.7	28.1
Religious attendance	Once a month or more	20.4	4.4	7.1
	Sometimes	17.3	11.4	13.2
	Only special ceremonies	51.6	64.4	59.4
	Never	10.8	20.3	19.8
Religion	Catholicism	83.9	63.1	64.4
	Other religions	5.0	2.9	5.8
	No religion	11.1	34.0	29.8
Education	None or primary	28.2	34.1	19.8
	Secondary	34.2	52.2	38.5
	Tertiary	37.6	13.7	41.7
Social class	Upper classes	20.7	4.0	15.2
	Middle class	53.7	33.9	51.6
	Working classes	13.1	49.5	24.2
	Peasants & merchants	11.2	4.1	2.6
	Lowest classes	1.3	8.5	6.4
Had financial problems	Yes	18.6	57.1	29.7
	No	81.4	42.9	70.3

Source: Cevipof (2017). Note: Upper classes = Bourgeoisie, Leading classes & Managers; Working classes = The working class & Workers and employees; Lowest classes = The little, without rank & The poor, the excluded. 67,7% of Fillon voters, 55,7% of the Le Pen voters and 65,8% of Macron voters feel they belong to a social class.