

# THE SEMANTICS OF RACE AND NATION IN CONTEMPORARY FRANCE: AN ANALYSIS OF RECENT POLITICAL DEBATES

## A SEMÂNTICA DA RAÇA E DA NAÇÃO NA FRANÇA CONTEMPORÂNEA: UMA ANÁLISE DOS DEBATES POLÍTICOS RECENTES

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**Abstract:** For centuries France has lauded a republican tradition that defines national belonging in terms of civic and legal parity. Within this conception of nationhood, race and ethnicity are seen as extraneous and inconsequential in extending the French citizenship to non-nationals. However, a historical survey of the politics of citizenship both within France and in the overseas departments yields a more complex narrative, where race and racialization have been problematically tethered to the practices and the politics of national belonging and the extension of the French civic parity. In the context of the recent presidential race, defined by the remarkable rise and appeal of the far-right, critical discussions around race and the racial politics of nation and national belonging have gained renewed currency, as several candidates mobilized longstanding themes of immigration and the anti-social impact of non-European ethnic settlement on meanings of Frenchness and the French national identity.

This study seeks to analyze the recent electoral debates in light of the ongoing critical discussion around race and immigration in France. The prominence of immigration as a rallying point in electoral campaigning is viewed as a rather older development that can be traced back to at least the public discourse surrounding North African settlement in the 1980s and 1990s. An essential feature of this discourse is that it rearticulates and encodes “race” in more subtle, politically correct cultural idioms, notably “nation” and “endangered national French identity.”

**Keywords:** France, presidential race, North African immigration, race, nation

**Resumo:** Durante séculos, a França louvou uma tradição republicana que define o pertencimento nacional em termos de paridade cívica e legal. Dentro dessa concepção de nacionalidade, a raça e a etnia são vistas como estranhas e inconsequentes na extensão da cidadania francesa a não nacionais. No entanto, um levantamento histórico da política de cidadania na França e nos departamentos ultramarinos produz uma narrativa mais complexa, em que a raça e a racialização foram problemáticamente vinculadas às práticas e à política de pertencimento nacional e à extensão da paridade cívica francesa. No contexto da recente corrida presidencial, definida pela notável ascensão e apelo da extrema-direita, as discussões críticas sobre raça e a política racial de nação e pertencimento nacional ganharam força renovada, já que vários candidatos mobilizaram temas de longa data sobre imigração e o impacto antissocial da colonização étnica não europeia sobre os significados da francesidade e da identidade nacional francesa. Este estudo busca analisar os recentes debates eleitorais à luz da discussão crítica em andamento sobre raça e imigração na França. A proeminência da imigração como ponto de encontro nas campanhas eleitorais é vista como um desenvolvimento bastante antigo que pode ser rastreado até, pelo menos, o discurso público em torno da colonização norte-africana nas décadas de 1980 e 1990. Uma característica essencial desse discurso é que ele

rearticula e codifica a "raça" em expressões culturais mais sutis e politicamente corretas, especialmente "nação" e "identidade nacional francesa ameaçada".

**Palavras-chave:** França, corrida presidencial, imigração norte-africana, raça, nação

## Introduction

On 24 April 2022, after a heated run-off race against die-hard far-right anti-immigration RN (previously known as Front National) leader Marine Le Pen, Emmanuel Macron was reelected as the French president, the 8<sup>th</sup> in the history of the fifth republic. Le Pen may have lost the election, but her historic success, scoring 41.5 % of votes (58% for Macron) is a powerful indication of the increasing appeal that the radical right, for long marginal to French electoral politics, now enjoys. Soon after the primary results of the election were announced, Le Pen made a significant address, ensuring her constituencies that "the results of tonight represent a shining victory [...] I can't help but have a form of hope. The results constitute for our French leaders as well as the European leaders the testimony of a great mistrust of the French people towards them which they cannot ignore and that of the widely shared aspiration of great change." ("Le Pen Cedes Election," 2022). The results of the recent legislative election confirmed Le Pen's confident expectations. The party has secured a ten-fold increase in its National Assembly representation (89 deputies) to become the leading opposition party, causing the now powerless Macron to lose the absolute majority in the parliament (AFP, 2022).

Established in 1972 and gaining its first electoral success in the 1980s, the National Front was first an exception in Europe before other similar parties of comparable and even greater electoral base emerged across Europe, some of which have been enabled to form coalitions and right-wing majorities (Giblin, 2012). The party's remarkable success was the outcome of significant changes in its ideology, allowing it to appeal to more mainstream and liberal-leaning electorate. The change in the party's ideology has turned upon a set of discursive strategies that allow the party to adjust its position to an increasingly liberal post-war global environment. Notions of endangered national culture and jeopardized national identity (as a result of immigration) supported the party's new discourse around "race" with subtle and covert cultural idioms, circumventing accusations of racism.

A key hallmark of the new racial discourse, more commonly known as the "new racism" (Barker, 1981) is its ability to cut across traditional lines of party politics and be embraced by actors on the leftist, liberal and progressive ends of the political spectrum

(Gilroy, 1988). How this ideological consensus plays out in various moments of the French post-war history has been reviewed elsewhere (Agzar, 2016). In this paper, however, I focus on the political debates in the wake of the 2012, 2017 and 2022 presidential elections to make the case that various presidential candidates, on the right and the left alike, have mobilized immigration as a populist theme for exaggerating differences in their electoral programs. Immigration, I argue, endures as a significant strategy for mass popular mobilization even as mass immigration to France long came to a halt.

### **The radical-right going mainstream: the ideological self-refashioning of the Front National**

The remarkable rise of Marine Le Pen's party is more than the outcome of a mere labeling tactic (from *Front National* to *Rassemblement National*). For long marginal to the French political landscape, the party underwent a series of profound ideological transformations that allowed it to thrust itself into the political mainstream, extending its support base to traditionally socialist and communist constituencies. Since the party defines itself primarily as an anti-immigration movement, the ideological development of its political discourse can only be understood with relation to different moments in the history of immigration and ethnic settlement.

Founded by Jean-Marie Le Pen in 1972, the FN was intended to unify various conservative and radical forces around notions of nationhood and pure national identity. By the time the party emerged, France had been receiving significant waves of immigrants from various non-European countries, mainly French ex-colonies in North Africa, the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean as part of the country's need for labor in the post-war era. However, starting from the oil crises of the 1970s, French policy towards immigration became more restrictive. Immigrants ceased to be a desirable workforce and were rather viewed as competitors in the crisis-stricken job market. It was around this perceived threat and the impact mass immigration posed for the French national identity that the previously marginal radical political forces like the FN organized to become powerful competitors over popular vote. The remarkable success Le Pen's party scored in the municipal election of 1983, gaining swing constituencies in traditionally socialist and communist municipalities, was possible through a set of discursive strategies centered on immigration and the dangers of ethnic settlement to the French national identity. The new racial discourse and the popular

discontent it fueled was further bolstered by the series of policies known as *les regroupements familiaux* (family reunification plans) the French government had launched that allowed immigrants, now turned into settlers, to be joined by their families.

The riots that broke out in the suburbs of many French cities in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s that involved many working class ethnic youths are major moments in which the contradiction between race and nation was thrust into stark relief. Media and official depictions of the riots zeroed down on the “ethnic” identity of the rioters, regardless of the fact that many of the so-called “jeunes émigrés” involved were born and raised in France and many other rioters came from white working class background. Construed in the new racial discourse as a pathological and ethnically inflected proclivity towards criminal behavior rather than a form of social protest, the riots were joined into a broader set of ills that are the anti-social effect of North African and black settlement. Anchored in the ideological propositions of *la Nouvelle Droite* (the New Right), mainly the pseudo-scientific propositions of such scholars as Alain de Benoit, Pierre Vial, and Dominique Venner, the new discourse invoked notions of cultural difference and incompatible national cultures. The presumed propensity of ethnic youths, mainly those of North African descent, to commit crime and show antipathy towards law and order institutions is held by the new cultural racism as the testimony of their alien status and their incompatibility with the French national culture. Culture, rather than race, supports the new racism with subtle idioms that eschew accusations of racism, marking it off from classical racial ideologies.

Under current leadership, the RN espouses a less explicit xenophobic discourse that blames immigration for driving down wages and undermining pensions and social services. Taking advantage of the disappearance of the Communist party and the gap separating the Socialist party from the French working class, Le Pen is developing a program that combines socialism and nationalism, appealing to a broader inter-class electoral base (Reynié, 2011). The RN leader promised to devise an economic model that “benefits our own” and reverse the course of deindustrialization so that “France [is] for the French,” (Reynié, 2011, p.8). Its proclaimed commitment to defend “national material patrimony” through a more state regulated economy based on protectionism and reindustrialization is emblematic of an all-embracing stance targeting various class sensibilities:

It is aimed at both the working classes and the middle classes, at employees and at small employers in the trade and crafts industries, at employees in the private sector and in the

public sector. It is both a social and national position, directed at voters on the Right and the Left, echoing all types of anger and representing all types of protest. (Renyié, 2011, pp. 8-9)

In the overseas departments where the far right candidate finished ahead of Macron in the latest election, scoring 69.6%, 60.8%, 60.7% of the vote in the Caribbean islands of Guadeloupe, Martinique and the French Guiana, respectively; and in the Indian ocean departments of Mayotte (59.1%) and Reunion (59.5%), support for Le Pen was interpreted by one historian as more than a punishment vote against Macron, but as genuine adherence to the discourse of the RN that revolves particularly around social questions such as wages and housing. Le Pen tapped into the popular discontent with deepening inequality and exclusion and the significant socioeconomic divide separating overseas territories and mainland France which seemed all the more remarkable during the pandemic, calling these constituencies a “forgotten France” (Henley, 2022).

An equally interesting feature of the party’s recent appeal is the disappearance of the gender gap that has historically characterized its electoral base, as more and more female voters have been drawn to the party’s ideological orbit. Like right and far-right parties elsewhere, the RN has traditionally appealed to male working class voters. Unlike female workers who generally perform non-manual labor, for instance in retail and service industry, manual male laborers occupy more precarious professional positions and are more likely to encounter and feel competition from immigrant workers. Together with other factors, these differences make male workers more inclined to embrace anti-immigrant rhetoric. Following the 2008 economic crisis, however, these socio-professional boundaries underwent considerable shift. As the French economy transitions into the third sector, working conditions in the service economy have given rise to an “underpaid service proletariat in which women are as numerous and as badly off as men” (Amengay et al. 2017, pp. 1-2).

Yet, the disappearance of the gender gap in the radical right vote, also termed the radical right gender gap (RRGG), is more than the result of structural shifts in the French economy. In contrast to her father’s sexist rhetoric, Marine Le Pen has sought to integrate female vote by posing as a “modern” woman who is more open to issues that concern women, such as abortion and patriarchy (even calling herself a “quasi-feminist”). Her emphasis on equal pay for women and the eradication of radical Islamic ideology “which rolls back women’s fundamental freedom” has enabled her to come across as a liberal candidate who is responsive to women constituencies (Amengay et al. pp. 4-5). Hostility towards Islam, a longstanding theme in the xenophobic rhetoric of the FN and held by some as the main

reason citizens vote for far right parties (Goblin, 2014), has been usurped with new vigor under the new leadership. This time the anti-Islam argument has been purged from the traditional rhetoric of overt xenophobic contempt into an “affected concern for secularism,” distancing the party from its traditional fascist and reactionary leanings and allowing it to pass off as the safeguard of liberal democracy and human rights against the onslaught of a radical Islamic conservatism (Renyié, 2011, p. 6).<sup>1</sup>

### **Jumping on the populist bandwagon**

Towards the center of the political spectrum, the electoral rise of Emmanuel Macron to national acclaim in the 2017 presidential election and his latest reelection invites a more nuanced analysis of the contemporary political landscape. Achieving a historic breakthrough as an uncontested candidate, Macron established himself as a progressive republican positioned outside left-right cleavage. However, Macron’s attempt to preserve a unique political profile was soon belied and put into task by the major socioeconomic upheavals that plagued the country under his administration. His securitarian approach in handling popular unrest in the wake of the *Gilets Jaunes* (yellow vests) protests in 2018, the demonstrations against the retirement reforms of 2019, and the numerous other protests against state sanitary measures contain many indications of the “populist turn” that mark off Macron’s discourse from that of his 2017 debut. The use of police violence in subduing protestors engendered vehement opposition of Macron’s administration, accusing him of leading a “police state” and undermining France’s liberal democracy that guarantees citizens’ freedom of protest (Fleurot & Souquière, 2021).

In his bid for the second presidency, Macron more overtly embraced insecurity, urban delinquency and terrorism, traditionally far-right political themes, as the focus of his political campaign. After desperate and ambivalent attempts to pit himself against right and far-right candidates by paying lip service to anti-populism, he was hailed by one columnist as a “populist against populism” (Caddeo, 2022). For another commentator, Macron represents “a singular populism from above and the center, not from below or the extremes [that] generates all kinds of logic in the population: explosion, rage, discouragement and withdrawal into self”

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Zemmour’s success at drawing away supporters from the RN and the mainstream right parties was largely due to his anti-Islam and anti-immigration views. See “12 candidates standing for the French presidency” [www.france 24.com/ /en/live-news/20220328-the-12-candidates-standing-in-france-s-presidential-election](http://www.france 24.com/ /en/live-news/20220328-the-12-candidates-standing-in-france-s-presidential-election)

(Ceaux, 2022). His proclaimed commitment to fortified national borders and a more nationally integrated economy contrasts with his previous position as a pro-Europe liberal.

On the center right, Valérie Pécresse, representing the traditionally male-dominated Gaullist *les Républicains* (LR), sought to carve out a distinct political profile as a staunch pro-security anti-immigration candidate who would “restore France’s pride...[protect] the French... and bring back authority” (Chrisafis, 2021). By passing off as a radical guardian of national security, Pécresse follows in the footsteps of Nicholas Sarkozy whose electoral success in the 2007 presidential election hinged on a securitarian agenda of zero-tolerance policy towards “urban violence,” breaking the far-right Le Pen’s grip on these issues. Her “hardline” policy proposals for the 2022 election included withholding citizenship rights from French-born children of foreign parents, imposing immigration quotas for each country, prohibiting Muslim veil-wearing Muslim parents from accompanying their children to school, and stiffening sentences in neighborhoods deemed “tough” for law reinforcement in contradiction with the constitution which dictates equality before the law (de Gayets, 2018).

Pécresse’s emphasis on immigration and insecurity highlights a longstanding theme in contemporary politics in which discussions around rising crime have been tethered to the public concern around migrant influx, with the former construed as the offshoot of the latter. It is also emblematic of a complex ideological and discursive process whereby law is articulated into the core of the French national identity, making conformity to the republican legality the proof of authentic assimilation to the French cultural mainstream. I have, for instance, shown elsewhere how some of the most heated debates on the provision of French nationality and the problematic status of dual nationals also spilled over to law and order circles (Agzar, 2016). I have also explored that how the public reception of North African settlement, mainly the numerous episodes of Maghrebi youths’ clash with law enforcement in the wake of various urban riots and sports events have been framed in a language of ethnic absolutism whereby the youths’ criminal proclivities have been explained in terms of their supposed belonging to deviant alien cultures (Agzar, 2018). Conformity with the French discipline has become a yardstick for measuring the compatibility of immigrants and their descendants with the French citizenship model. The so-called “Maghrebi law-breaking” poses thereof as an issue not merely for law and order authorities but as a challenge to the very concept of the French identity and *l'intégration à la Française* model. The articulation of national identity around law finds its ideological rationalizations in the ethnic absolutist theories of *la nouvelle droite*, more particularly, the work of Alain de Benoist on political order in ancient

Indo-European societies from which he derives his vision of a fortified, culturally homogeneous Europe. Based on his conservative reading of Carl Schmitt's view of authority, order, and obedience as positive characteristics of the state, de Benoit conceives of law and order as a corrective to a socially disintegrating Europe as a result of ethnic settlement (Collins, 2013).

On the far left end of the political spectrum, the prominent rise of Jean-Luc Mélenchon as an anti-globalization political veteran who catapulted himself to the forefront of the leftist political scene, dwarfing other left-wing candidates, has spurred significant discussion around a distinctively “leftist” populism. In 2017, the candidate's political repertoire diverged greatly from his 2012 campaign, as he moved from “a leftist politics to a left-wing populism,” suggested by his renouncement of leftist unity. Having quit the PS, he formed *France Insoumise*, a party “unlike others” in the traditional left and a patriotic popular force that sought the support of “ordinary people”. Mélenchon's ban of red flags in his rallies and the singing of the left wing anthem in his meetings, which he replaced with the national flag and la Marseillaise, is an attempt to tap into populist and nationalist symbols, for long the monopoly of the right and the far-right politicians (Malière, 2017; Baros, 2021). In *l'Ère de peuple* (2014), the former Trotskyist spells out his theory of progressive politics that bypasses class altogether and purports to unify people across class and ethnic divisions, advancing an ambivalent line where a professed allegiance to leftist ideology coexists problematically with a class-blind patriotism.

## Conclusion

In the fashion of many countries across Western Europe, France has increasingly morphed into a battlefield for populist forces, hosting interesting similitudes in political orientation and electoral agenda. The racial discourse on mass immigration has hosted a convergence between the politics of the French left and right. What for long seemed to be conflicting political sensibilities eventually converged into a nationalist rhetoric, rendering left and right distinctions rather anachronistic and inept to account for the complexities of the electoral politics in present-day France. As economic policy ceased to be a divisive question, immigration is explored by various political actors to exaggerate their electoral differences and rally people from different political and ideological persuasions. Immigration and the many sub-themes it invokes (e.g., terrorism, penetrable national borders, unemployment) has

provided the pretext for a series of reactionary policies targeting public rights and liberties, putting the long-cherished concept of liberal democracy on the line and painting a grim picture of Western Europe in light of a growing Euro-skepticism and the specter of a dissolving European Union initiated by Brexit.

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