

Presidential campaign (France): How the Splits on France's Far Right Helped Marine Le Pen Go Mainstream

Tuesday 26 April 2022, by [AIOLFI Théo](#) (Date first published: 10 April 2022).

Éric Zemmour's presidential campaign didn't go well — but it helped Marine Le Pen project a moderate image, including by denouncing his Nazi supporters. Far from a spoiler, Zemmour helped to shepherd traditional right-wing voters to her.

Contents

- [Zemmour and His Reconquest](#)
- [The Far Right's Civil War](#)
- [Comparing Le Pen and Zemmour](#)
- [The Contrasting Use of the \(...\)](#)
- [Zemmour and Trump](#)
- [Zemmour and the Future of \(...\)](#)

If the 2022 French election is today largely posed as a duel between Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen, it has also been marked by the civil war between two strands of the far right. Embodied by Marine Le Pen and Éric Zemmour, respectively, this clash opposed modernists seeking to build a “populist popular front” and traditionalists who instead sought to unite the whole political right.

As I have discussed in [Jacobin](#), Le Pen has worked hard to silence internal opposition to her strategy within her party. In recent years, she has conducted what critics call a “[purge](#)” of the conservative wing of her Rassemblement National (RN), marginalizing key figures like her niece Marion Maréchal. While most reluctantly chose to stay in RN to keep their voices present in internal debates, others followed Maréchal's example. In 2017, she announced she had [retired](#) from politics, and sought to develop her influence outside RN ranks.

It was thus no surprise that the biggest challenge to Le Pen's line ultimately came from an outsider: Éric Zemmour. Running for the first time in 2022, Zemmour created his own personalistic party, and, in this sense, his candidacy was novel. But he also stands in continuity with an older traditionalist line on the far right, representing the latest embodiment of the strategy of *l'union des droites* (the union of the right wings), tearing down the wall between mainstream conservatism and the “frontist” far right historically inspired by Jean-Marie Le Pen.

Comparing Zemmour and Le Pen through the lens of ideology and use of populist style, here we will see how their strategies conflict — but also why they are complementary. I will further touch on the centrality of transgression in Zemmour's political style — a common trait he shares with Donald Trump, with whom he is often compared. This will help us see his specificities as a reactionary ideologue — and the limits of his campaign.

Zemmour and His Reconquest

A household name in France, Zemmour has commonly been described as a *polémiste* — a media personality invited for his controversial opinions. While he started his career writing for the conservative daily *Le Figaro*, it was his move to talk shows — particularly *On n'est pas couché*, where his transgressive quips created countless controversies — that made him a popular media figure. Moreover, his output as a conservative essayist, notably *Le premier sexe* (The first sex) in 2006 and *Suicide français* (French suicide) in 2014, granted him the reputation of an influential right-wing thinker, unwavering and explicit in his anti-feminism, xenophobia, and reactionary outlook.

Although his role as pundit meant that he had long mixed in political circles, Zemmour presented himself as an outsider as he launched his bid on November 30. Yet in many ways, he embodies the return of an older conservative line. During this campaign, Zemmour has been candid about his bid to rejuvenate the project of the [“union of the right wings,”](#) which he sees as the only way to challenge Emmanuel Macron’s hegemony over the political center.

Zemmour has always been a loud critic of Marine Le Pen, both personally and politically. He argues that her search for *dédiabolisation* — to “de-demonize” her party — led her too far from the far right’s nationalist fundamentals. In June 2021, after RN’s underwhelming showing in regional elections, [Zemmour claimed](#) that her father used to offer “a different type of politics, for better or for worse, but at least it was original,” whereas Marine Le Pen was becoming a centrist “speaking like Macron.” Against what he saw as a “radicalization, a hardening” of the far-right electorate, he said that Le Pen’s blind persistence at softening the RN was “a surrender” and “a betrayal” for which her voters would “make her pay.” Using the platform provided by conservative billionaire [Vincent Bolloré with CNews](#), which aspires to become “[France’s Fox News](#),” Zemmour’s campaign developed a remarkable media presence, soon driving a wedge within Le Pen’s electorate.

The Far Right’s Civil War

Between his open criticism of the RN leader and his considerable visibility, Zemmour’s personalistic party, *Reconquête* (Reconquest), provided an attractive alternative to both strategic dissidents and those holding personal grudges against Le Pen. Zemmour attracted a [steady stream](#) of increasingly prominent RN figures to his side, including Gilbert Collard and Nicolas Bay, both recently ousted from the party’s candidate selection board — the latter even [accused of being a spy](#) attempting to sabotage Le Pen’s campaign. However, none of these defections matched the impact of Marion Maréchal’s choice, on March 6, to return to frontline political life to support Zemmour’s campaign. Often described by his aides as [“the Grail”](#) who would turn the tides in his favor, Maréchal had maintained a false sense of suspense over this question since January.

Le Pen knew that her niece’s rallying to Zemmour was only a matter of time, so used the upcoming betrayal as an opportunity to further humanize herself. Adopting a deeply emotional tone, she described Maréchal’s choice not to support her as [“brutal, violent, and difficult,”](#) particularly since “[she] raised her with [her] sister in the first years of her life.” Framing Maréchal’s decision through the personal lens of familial conflict allowed her to avoid addressing the political reasons for this departure — and minimize its impact on her own troops.

However, Le Pen was not always so subtle in her attacks against Zemmour. In a [long interview](#) for his former employer *Le Figaro*, she lambasted Zemmour’s campaign for relying on “sound and fury,” an implicit reference to not only Faulkner’s original work but also to the more recent [Fire and Fury](#),

Michael Wolff's infamous book about Trump's chaotic presidency. Furthermore, she argued that his supporters included all sorts of "marginals" and "dodgy characters," including "traditionalist Catholics, pagans, and a few Nazis." These accusations — which [Zemmour rebutted vehemently](#), pointing at his own status as a Jewish man born in Algeria — allowed her to present her own party as devoid of these extremist tendencies thanks to the success of her "*de-demonization*" — a narrative that does not bear [closer scrutiny](#).

Zemmour's announcement immediately reshaped the electoral race, challenging the inevitability of a repeat of the 2017 election. Immediate success in the polls saw him rise to a third position below Macron and Le Pen as he contested a share of her vote, making her fall from 23 percent to 16 percent as he himself began polling at 16 percent. Although his predicted vote share has now dwindled to 10 percent, his sudden emergence in the political field made him a threat to Le Pen's campaign, where he was in turn [framed as a factor of division](#) that might weaken their whole camp. However, the fact that Le Pen only lost part of her predicted voters to Zemmour, and that he immediately polled much higher than her loss, demonstrates that their potential voters are not completely aligned. Indeed, they each appeal to a distinctive and somewhat complementary part of the French electorate — showing that, although there is a substantial overlap in their political inclinations, there are notable differences, both ideologically and stylistically.

Comparing Le Pen and Zemmour

There are clear similarities between the two candidates, not least given the centrality they each grant to immigration as *the* major issue at the root of the French crisis they diagnose. While Zemmour is more explicit about his open criticism of Islam — which he sees as incompatible with the French Republic — they concur in alleging a national identity crisis: *la France éternelle* is under threat because of "mass migration" beyond French people's control. Zemmour openly associates immigration with Renaud Camus's "[Great Replacement](#)" conspiracy theory — claiming that the ethnic French population is being demographically and culturally replaced by black and Arab people — whereas Le Pen shies from this expression.

In addition to this threat to the French *art de vivre*, both candidates diagnose an economic crisis created by an overwhelming influx of immigrants, added to an (in)security crisis brought by criminal behavior in the *banlieues* and by what they see as the emergence of an increasingly bellicose form of Islam. Lastly, they agree that France's national sovereignty has been undermined by the European Union, which deprives the nation of a genuine autonomy and prevents it from controlling its borders. Their policies thus emphasize economic protectionism, a strict law-and-order stance, and a foreign-policy commitment to sovereigntism.

However, outside of these three broad axes that constitute the foundation of what the political-science literature has called "exclusionary nationalism," or [nativism](#), many nuances emerge. Zemmour is much more explicit about his reactionary vision of France than Le Pen: where both aspire to a return to a simpler time, when the nation was supposedly glorious and stronger, Zemmour makes [nostalgia](#) a central point of not only his speeches but also his political communication. Conversely, whereas Le Pen has over time developed a social component to her program, aimed at convincing her popular electorate, Zemmour is much clearer about his economic liberalism and preference for *laissez-faire*.

Compared to Le Pen's interventionism — based around a [strategic](#) state that could own key companies — Zemmour's call for reindustrialization sounds much hollower, relying on the good will of transnational companies and tax cuts to bring jobs back. Beyond economics, Zemmour is

substantially more conservative in his stances on social issues: chastising modern feminism, embracing a heteronormative vision of the family, and refusing to acknowledge any form of systemic racism. While Le Pen mostly agrees with him on this last point, she has softened her stance on women's and queer rights. Of course, looking more closely makes it apparent that she has [hardly embraced](#) these either, but she strategically chose a more prudent ambiguity.

As highlighted above, these ideological divergences reflect two competing strategies within the far right: the opposition between Le Pen's modernist line and Zemmour's traditionalist one. However, these strategies are not only characterized by an ideological component but also have a stylistic dimension — and both of them are in constant interaction. This is precisely where the framework provided by populism — defined as a [political style](#) — offers a useful lens to capture the nuances in the way these two politicians articulate their politics.

The Contrasting Use of the Populist Style

In a nutshell, populism articulates a society in crisis where an elite is failing in its duty to represent and act on behalf of its people, and where radical change is embodied through the salutary intervention of a transgressive leader. To break down those components more separately, populism is characterized by three core features: (1) the articulation of an [antagonism between the people and an elite](#) embodied by a political leader; (2) the [transgression](#) of political norms to appear more authentic than other politicians; (3) the representation of society in a state of [crisis](#).

Indeed, while both Le Pen and Zemmour mobilize the populist style, each emphasizes a different component of it, and this partly accounts for their difference in political appeal. The most obvious commonality between Le Pen and Zemmour is the performance of a crisis narrative. The notion of a France in crisis is central in both of their rhetorics, as it underpins their ideological arguments. That said, Zemmour is much more dramatic in his assessment of the crisis, which he stresses more explicitly and more often. The first line of his program is “It is no longer time to reform France, we need to save her.”

The antagonism between people and elite, is, conversely, more explicitly emphasized by Le Pen. As developed by her right-hand man Jordan Bardella, Le Pen's electoral strategy is premised on the possibility of creating a *front populaire populiste*. Fighting against the pejorative “far right” label, Le Pen has over the years embraced a reframing of her nationalist agenda as a struggle between the “patriotic French people” against a failing political establishment that has repeatedly betrayed its promise to protect the people. Zemmour shares part of this strategy, criticizing, in particular, the cultural and academic elites that are guilty of what he calls “*Islam-leftism*,” or “*wokeism*,” a perversion of leftist ideals that is leading France toward decline. However, while the antiestablishment part of the antagonism is as prominent in Zemmour's rhetoric as it is in Le Pen's, references to “the people” are much rarer in his discourse than in Le Pen's.

Moreover, the two candidates diverge over their use of transgressive provocations. Indeed, because Le Pen's “*de-demonization*” relies so much on normalization, she has, campaign after campaign, reduced the importance of her transgressions of political norms. Although she does attempt to maintain enough radical edge to stand out from more mainstream parties — keeping a firm stance on immigration and security — her emphasis on portraying herself as a serious politician ready for the presidency has led her to subdue this part of the populist style. Zemmour does the opposite: he has become the transgressive politician *par excellence*.

Telling is the different language in which they talk about Islam. Le Pen relies on the classic far-right strategy of [dog-whistling](#): using expressions with an implicit layer of meaning that her nationalist

supporters will interpret differently than other audience members. One example is her frequent references to the Christian [roots](#) (*racines*) of France, echoing the controversial expression *français de souche* (*the French of French stock*) to refer to French people with an alleged ethnic purity. Zemmour, conversely, is much more direct and explicit about his Islamophobia, even earning criminal convictions for his racist and Islamophobic statements that “[most drug dealers are black or Arab](#),” in 2011, or that “[French Muslims should choose between France and Islam](#),” in 2016.

Zemmour’s controversial statements are, indeed, a signature of his political style. He elaborated on various sexist theses in [Le premier sexe](#) (a play on the title of Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*), like his claim that power “gets diluted” in the hands of women or that “manliness goes hand in hand with violence, . . . men are sexual predators and conquerors.” He also argued on television that isolated underage migrants “[are all thieves, they are all murderers, they are all rapists](#).” More recently, he made headlines after his proposal to [ban foreign-sounding first names](#) and only allowing French names drawn from the Christian calendar.

Zemmour and Trump

While many commentators both in [France](#) and [abroad](#) saw in Zemmour a Trump-like figure, the analogy only holds partly. There are overlaps: they are both TV personalities and political novices with no experience of elected office who turned their media fame into political capital. More important is the dominance of transgression as their central strategy for political communication — attracting mainstream media attention with controversial statements and using the outraged reaction to increase their own public visibility.

However, they differ radically in the sense that Trump is an ideological opportunist, while Zemmour is a reactionary ideologue. In their thorough [biography of Trump](#), Michael Kranish and Mark Fisher have aptly described Trump as holding a “transactional approach to politics” — i.e., opportunistically committing to whatever political ideology or party best served his business interests. Even though he most closely associated with the Republicans in the last decade, he switched parties seven times between 1999 and 2012, with ideology always playing second fiddle to his personal interests.

Zemmour, on the other hand, has remained unwavering in his ideological position since the beginning of his career in the public eye, even when that meant holding opinions completely opposed to the political mainstream. This is particularly evident in his stubborn commitment to restoring the tarnished reputation of Philippe Pétain, the former French hero of World War I who actively collaborated with the Nazi occupier. Practically every French politician, particularly on the Right, officially supports the national consensus that Pétain was a fallen hero who betrayed France while De Gaulle was representing the “real” France, resisting from abroad. As part of her “*de-demonization*”, Le Pen herself shed her father’s opposition to Charles de Gaulle and [embraced him](#) as an icon of French sovereignism. In contrast, Zemmour stayed true to the traditional far-right argument of “[the shield and the sword](#).” In this revisionist perspective, Marshal Pétain is framed as the “shield,” protecting the French people from the inside, whereas de Gaulle was the “sword” fighting for France’s liberation from abroad.

This rewriting of French history for the purpose of developing a grand narrative of the French nation is a signature rhetorical weapon for Zemmour. Unlike Trump, who relies on posturing as a savvy businessman, Zemmour’s *persona* is constructed around the image of a serious intellectual with a deep knowledge of French history. He fancies himself a historian without having to commit to the academic rigor and peer review of a professional historian. As Zemmour’s prominence rose in the 2022 campaign, this blatant manipulation of history has led French historians to take a series of

initiatives, including a [book](#) and a lengthy [YouTube video](#), to debunk his most egregious lies.

Zemmour and the Future of the Traditionalist Line

While this ideological stubbornness has been one of Zemmour's greatest strengths for his supporters, it has become a liability in the last stretch of the campaign. Zemmour's momentum was cut short by the [Russian invasion of Ukraine](#), forcing him to reckon with his past praise of Vladimir Putin, whom he repeatedly framed as a model leader. Instead of making amends, like Le Pen, in a pragmatic attempt at damage limitation, Zemmour doubled down on his admiration for the Russian leader. Even though this might have reassured his most faithful supporters of his unwavering convictions, this transgression stood so far opposed to the political consensus that it finally began to affect his polling performance. As Le Pen widened her lead in the last weeks of the campaign, it seems that Zemmour's hopes of contesting her leadership of the far right have failed.

However, the fact that his polling has remained stable, at around 10 percent, seems to not only demonstrate that Zemmour's voice still remains influential — it also hints at the resilience of the traditionalist line that is carefully waiting to assess its future. Maréchal was crystal clear in her aspirations to reshape the future of the far right, and more generally of the Right in France, as she [emphasized her divergences with Zemmour](#). Regardless of his final score, Zemmour has shaken the political field and proven that the “union of the right wings” strategy has yet to say its last words.

Théo Aiolfi

P.S.

- Jacobin. 04.10.2022:
<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2022/04/far-right-split-french-presidential-election-le-pen-zemmour>
- Théo Aiolfi is a political scientist and Early Career Fellow at the University of Warwick, England.