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RESEARCH ARTICLE

From The Front de gauche to La France insoumise: Causes and Consequences of the Conversion of the French Radical Left to Populism

Chloé Alexandre
Univ. Grenoble Alpes, CNRS, Sciences Po Grenoble, Pacte, Grenoble, France

Antoine Bristielle
Univ. Grenoble Alpes, CNRS, Sciences Po Grenoble, Pacte, Grenoble, France

Laura Chazel
Univ. Grenoble Alpes, CNRS, Sciences Po Grenoble, Pacte, Grenoble, France;Facultad de CienciasPolíticas y Sociología, UniversidadComplutense, Madrid, Spain

ABSTRACT: Combining a variety of materials and a mixed methods approach, this article shows how the space of the French radical left has evolved since the 2000s. It outlines the transition from a Marxist to a post-Marxist ideology, and the creation of two new organizations — the Front de gauche (Left Front), which aimed to bring together the radical left, and La France insoumise (Unbowed France), which sought to federate the people using a more transversal populist strategy. The similarities and differences between the two strategies are put into perspective, from a discursive point of view and at the level of the electorate.

KEYWORDS: Discourse analysis, Electoral analysis, Populism, post-Marxism, Radical left

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR(S): Laura Chazel, laura.chazel@sciencespo-grenoble.fr

1. Introduction

Ideological and organizational reconfigurations from the extreme right to the radical and populist right have been a major focus area of European political science over the past two decades (Mudde, 2007). However, the equally profound mutations of parties that pertain to the communist and radical left family have attracted less attention, until the electoral success of the Spanish party Podemos (We Can) and the Greek coalition Syriza illustrated the strategy of left-wing populism (Kioupkiolis, 2016; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, 2014). Regarding populism in France, while the radical right party Front national (National Front, FN) has been the center of much research, very few studies focused on the evolution of the French radical left since the collapse of the Parti communiste français (French Communist Party, PCF) and the ephemeral success of the extreme left in the early 2000s (Raynaud, 2006; Reynié, 2007). This research aims to fill this gap and contribute to existing literature by shedding light on the theoretical and organizational transitions of the French radical left since that period.

We focus on one political actor — Jean-Luc Mélenchon — who has been the architect of new forms of electoral coalitions of the French radical left family and of the populist strategy. After leaving the Parti socialiste (Socialist Party, PS) in 2008, Mélenchon ran in the presidential elections twice. First, in 2012, as the candidate of the Front de gauche (Left Front, FG); his objective then was to "bring the left together." In 2017, he ran as the candidate of the new movement he created one year earlier, La France insoumise (Unbowed France, LFI), in order to "federate the people." To do so, he mobilized a people-elite axis instead of a left-right one and presented LFI as a "popular movement" freed from any political party. This evolution has often been described as a radical shift from a traditional radical left strategy (in 2012) to the adoption of a populist strategy (in 2017). However, we argue that the transition was rather a slow process and entailed three dimensions that did not occur at the same time and pace. We contend that Mélenchon's ideological evolution paved the way for a strategical change in terms of campaigning, and that the discursive and organizational evolution toward populism during the presidential campaigns he led was dependent on the political context. As such, both movements can be qualified as populist to some extent, and Mélenchon's 2017 campaign merely constituted a step further in the progression of populism. The main objective of this paper is to analyze these transformations by focusing on: Mélenchon's ideological evolution and strategic changes in terms of organization and coalitions, and discursive choices during the campaigns which we put in perspective with the evolution of his electorate. This choice allows us to understand the genesis, manifestations, and consequences of left-wing populism in France.

For our analysis, we adopt a minimal definition of populism. Scholars of populism still discuss the degree to which populism can be considered as a (thin) ideology (Mudde, 2004) or a type of discourse (Laclau, 2005) that can be used by any party family across the political spectrum. Nevertheless, they agree on a minimal definition of populism based on three elements: (1) anti-elitism, (2) the appeal to the people based on an antagonistic boundary between the people and the elite, and (3) popular sovereignty as the idea that "politics should be an expression of the volonté générale [general will] of the people." Other elements, such as the adoption of a patriotic discourse (De Cleen and Stavrakakis, 2020), the presence of a strong leadership (Mouffe, 2018), and the "proclamation of a crisis" (Moffitt, 2015; Rooduijn, 2014) can be considered as corollaries of the minimal definition of populism.

March and Mudde (2005) show how radical left parties have sought to reinvent themselves after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the communist model, and increasingly turned to populism (March, 2011; 2008). Populist socialist parties refer to the articulation of the socialist ideology and the populist worldview. March notes that from the mid-2000s, across Europe, a new subtype of parties often embodied this combina-

tion. These parties are part of the radical left family: they are located to the left of social democracy, and are characterized by their anti-capitalism, their opposition to globalized neoliberalism, their defense of a mixed economy model, and their adherence to liberal democracy. However, they rather call upon the people than upon the working class. Their anti-capitalism is manifested by a critique of the establishment and of a "corrupt elite"; they focus on identity rather than on the notion of social class, and are more oriented toward post-materialist demands. Die Linke (The Left) in Germany and the Socialistische Partij (Socialist Party, SP) in the Netherlands epitomized this new type of parties. However, no radical left party in France at the time was classified as a populist socialist party, as the PCF was a reformed communist party, and the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (New Anti-Capitalist Party, NPA) was an extreme left party.

We propose to analyze the slow mutations of part of the French radical left toward populism in the 2010s by focusing on Mélenchon's presidential campaigns. The first part of this paper traces Mélenchon's long-term intellectual trajectory. We document Mélenchon's important intellectual transition from orthodox Marxism to post-Marxism, which implies to rethink the political subject of change from the "working class" to the "people") and can be considered a precondition for the adoption of a populist strategy. We then compare, through the prism of populism, the two organizations — FG and LFI — on two particular points: the discourse used, on the one hand, and the electorate reached, on the other. We rely on a mixed methodology: a qualitative analysis with data retrieved from participant observations and a collection of activist productions, and a quantitative analysis exploring the content of speeches through a lexicometric analysis and the data from large-scale national post-elections surveys. The methods are presented in detail at the beginning of each section.

This paper provides a dual contribution to the literature. On the one hand, it documents the organizational transformations of part of the radical left in France, its ideological and discursive foundations, and the discrepancy between the electoral target and the actual pool of supporters. On the other hand, it nourishes the theoretical reflections on the conditions for the emergence of left-wing populism insofar as the French case presents many differences from the usual reference cases from Southern Europe. Contrary to other forms of southern left-wing populism: (1) the emergence of LFI was not the result of an economic and political crisis; (2) LFI was created after its leader had reached the limits of his first strategy (the union of the left); and (3) in France, the political arena was already familiar with a populist discourse — the radical right one of FN — which forced Mélenchon to constantly distance himself from it in order to prevent any amalgam.

2. The Genesis of the Populist Strategy in France: From the Front de gauche to La France insoumise

In France, the advent of a populist left political force appeared after a decade of reconfigurations of the radical left family. As we will show, the adoption of a populist discourse goes hand in hand with the adherence to post-Marxist ideologies and with the abandonment of orthodox Marxism to which the traditional radical left used to refer. Mélenchon's intellectual trajectory illustrates this ideological shift well. It was followed by a strategic evolution (adoption of a populist discourse) and an organizational evolution. In this section, we address these different elements by using various sources to reconstitute Mélenchon's trajectory and his political endeavors. We mainly mobilize a collection of activist productions in paper and digital form.

2.1 The ideological foundations of left-wing populism: from orthodox Marxism to post-Marxism

Although Jean-Luc Mélenchon became a central actor during the 2010s, he was not new to French politics. Born in 1951, he joined the Parti socialiste in 1976 to support François Mitterrand, after a short career in small Trotskyist parties during his studies. He was an elected member of the Senate in the socialist group from 1986 to 2008, and participated in Jospin's socialist government from 2000 to 2002. In total, Mélenchon dedicated thirty years of his political life to the PS, twenty of which were spent in the most left-wing factions to push the party toward the left, an important signifier for him at the time. Indeed, like many political actors from his generation, Mélenchon grew up in politics leaning on the left-right continuum that was essentially conceived in terms of economic conflicts. He stated several times that he "built himself intellectually on Marxism" [1] (Mouffe and Mélenchon, 2016), referring to the propensity to explain the state of society through the economic conflict and class struggle. However, at the same time, he also drew on other intellectual and historical traditions such as French socialism, French communism, left republicanism, alter-mondialism, Latin American socialism, radical ecology, and techno-progressivism (Chiocchetti, 2019). Yet, through a slow evolution, Mélenchon increasingly adopted the populist worldview and replaced the interpretation of the society in terms of class struggle with the conflict between the people and the elite — the people being an articulation through a "chain of equivalence" of several social groups with different causes that share an opposition to the elite. In the mid-2010s, in his book L'ère du people (The Age of the People, 2014), he theorized the emergence of a new political subject: the "urban people" (homo urbanus). His intellectual evolution must be understood more broadly by looking at the changes of the theoretical references used by left-wing actors, which can be explained by at least three elements.

First, the expansion of the tertiary sector in the 1970s, the rise of post-materialist aspirations and values, and the emergence of the new social movements (NSMs) in the 1960s and 1970s challenged the reach of the orthodox Marxist heuristic and its interpretation of social conflict solely in economic and materialist terms (Escalona and Vieira, 2013). Indeed, the NSMs — by prioritizing demands related to identity rather than social classes and post-materialist claims — showed the limits of class essentialism and economism developed in orthodox Marxist analyses. As a result, some political actors of the traditional radical left, such as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, began to show interest in post-Marxist theories. In 1985, Laclau and Mouffe emphasized the proliferation of new post-materialist struggles and the inability of the left to understand these new forms of contestation. Facing this changed context, they advocated the adoption of another political logic: left-wing populism. From the 2000s, Laclau and Mouffe became the "theoretical references" of several movements and actors of the radical left, including Kirchnerism in Argentina, Podemos in Spain, and Mélenchon in France. Mélenchon considered that their role as intellectuals is to "lead the way" (Mélenchon, 2012) for radical left political leaders and activists.

Second, the fall of the communist model is a key event in order to understand the mutations of the contemporary radical left and the growing recourse to post-Marxism by left-wing actors. Following Keucheyan (2017), we consider that theories are "dependent on their socio-political conditions of elaboration and circulation," which implies that a political defeat can also lead to the "defeat" of a theory. March (2007) shows how, in this new context, part of the radical left — in search of a new ideology, of new theoretical references, and of a new strategy — adopted a populist socialist strategy that emphasizes the people rather than the working class. Mélenchon's initial distancing from the unique prism of class struggle began in the early

[1] We translated all the French quotes directly into English in the text.

1990s. In his book À la conquête du chaos (Conquering Chaos, 1991), he laments the "bankruptcy of the predictive schemes of the left" (1991, 24), and explains that the scientific model to which the left refers has shown its limits. According to him, this theoretical reconsideration also questions "the identity of and the reason for being part of the socialist movement" (1991, 35). From then on, Mélenchon detached himself from economic and materialist essentialism, and started to add a cultural dimension to his analyses by relying on the writings of Antonio Gramsci, and by beginning to defend probabilistic materialism against linear materialism. In his own words, that period represented a "renewal of [his] fundamental philosophical base" that "also modified [his] tactical visions" (Benbara and Cargoët, 2018).

Third, the victories of left-wing populist movements in Latin America in the 1990s and in the 2000s — known as the "pink tide" — explain the concretization of the interest in populism as a new discourse and a new theoretical reference. The "pink tide" gave visibility to the work of Ernesto Laclau, who considered that populism can take a progressive form that revitalizes democracy. The "pink tide" also validated the effectiveness of the populist discourse as a strategy for gaining power. These events nourished the intellectual transition of Mélenchon, who considered that there is a "history of the movement of ideas embodied by political movements" (Mouffe and Mélenchon, 2016). Mélenchon looked closely at those Latin American governments and was particularly interested in three cases: Lula's Workers' Party in Brazil, Chavism in Venezuela, and Rafael Correa's "citizen's revolution." He even developed personal ties with these political actors (Marlière, 2019). Mélenchon explained that the Latin American experiences "produce[d] a change of perspective": he stated that "it [was] no longer a question of building a revolutionary vanguard but of making of a revolting people a revolutionary people" (Benbara and Cargoët, 2018). At the beginning of the 2010s, he declared that he undertakes the term populist (Mélenchon, 2011), even though at the same time he considered that claiming this term, which is negatively connoted in ordinary language, was a difficult task" (Mélenchon, 2012). During the 2017 presidential campaign, he appeared publicly many times alongside Chantal Mouffe, who sees left populism as the only progressive strategy capable of countering the populist right and fighting against neoliberalism.

As we see in the next section, Mélenchon's gradual intellectual evolution and interest in populism did not have an immediate impact on his political trajectory, as he remained an active member of the left-wing faction of the PS until 2008. However, it certainly paved the way for the adoption of a populist strategy when a window of opportunity opened up.

2.2 The Front de gauche: "gathering the left" to build a political majority

Building on his search for new intellectual references to rebuild the left ideological framework, Mélenchon first organized within the PS in the early 1990s, with no intention to leave. This period enabled him to build a solid theoretical corpus and a loyal activist network around him. Yet, after the strong defeat of the PS in the 2002 presidential election, Mélenchon and those close to him (often named "Mélenchonists") eventually began to contemplate the possibility for them to act outside the party, and especially the opportunity to work more closely with radical left parties, which appeared as allies who shared the need to reinvent themselves (Mathieu, 2015). They imagined that building ties with the radical left within a large coalition would anchor the PS on the left and stop the drift toward social liberalism. As such, since 2003, Mélenchonist activists have engaged with radical left activists and have supported several public pleas to "rebuild the true left." However, at first, they did not push the logic to the end. They continued to prioritize their loyalty to the PS and to believe they would be able to enact a change of political orientation from within the party.

From the mid-2000s, the emancipation from the PS started with Mélenchonists experimenting with new coalitions, but still on a left-wing basis. In 2005, they opposed the European Constitutional Treaty and decided to campaign against it alongside radical left parties, while the PS officially supported it. To gain more autonomy, they created a club called Pour la république sociale (For the Social Republic), which would serve as a tool for emancipating themselves from the PS without formally leaving it. That period laid the first milestones of the Mélenchonists' shift toward dissidence with the PS (Crespy, 2008). Indeed, the growing ties between Mélenchonist activists and radical left activists led them to rethink the costs and benefits of the intra-partisan game compared to the investment in extra-partisan actions. Mélenchon participated in the design of an "anti-liberal charter" (activists' writing, 2006) that was supposed to serve as a unitary platform for the presidential campaign of 2007. For a short time he was even considered as the potential unitary candidate of the radical left, but his socialist membership worried some of the activists. In the end, the PS lost the 2007 presidential elections after supporting a moderate candidate — Ségolène Royal — and the radical left failed to agree on a common candidate.

In the aftermath of the 2007 presidential election, Mélenchon and his faction decided it was time to officially split with the Parti socialiste and to prepare an exit plan by working with the radical left. Mélenchon and those close to him theorized the need for a new unitary left-wing party that would encompass them as former members of the PS along all existing radical left parties, with the goal of regaining cultural hegemony, becoming a majoritarian party, and leading a governmental coalition (activists' writing, 2007). Citing the German model of Die Linke as a reference and as proof of the success of the cooperation between former socialists and the radical left, Mélenchonists based their hopes on privileged collaboration with the PCF. The communists responded positively, but amended the project: they did not wish to disappear as a party, and instead proposed to form a strong electoral coalition (activists' writing, 2008). Eventually, Mélenchon and his faction officially announced their resignation from the Parti socialiste on 7 November 2008 (Mélenchon and Dolez, 2008). A few days later, they also put an end to their club and instead founded a new party called Parti de Gauche (Left Party, PG). On 18 November, the Front de gauche coalition was launched to prepare for the 2009 European elections.

The dynamic of the Front de gauche generated a lot of enthusiasm. Activists of the French radical left, whose occasional cooperation had so far struggled to achieve lasting objectives, was quickly restructured around this new coalition (Alexandre, 2014). The cartel expanded to new collaborators[2], until it included almost all French radical left parties. At the ballot box, the Front de gauche gradually saturated the radical left electorate as well (Confesson, 2013). The 2009 European elections were a first satisfactory test, convincing the communists to renew the electoral cartel for the following local intermediate elections. The Front de gauche reached its electoral peak during the 2012 presidential campaign after communists agreed to support Mélenchon's candidacy instead of their own candidate. They agreed on a common platform, and even though Mélenchon was the candidate on the ballot, the communists strongly weighed in the campaign as they worked within a coalition of parties; most of the campaigning in the field was supported by the numerous communist activists, while Mélenchonists had no big organization to rely on. This collective candidacy scored 11% of the vote share during the first round of the presidential election.

However, the strategy of the Front de gauche entered a phase of turbulence after 2012, as the interests of the two main components — the PG for the Mélenchonists and the PCF for the communists — diverged too

[2] Notably smaller radical left parties such as the *Fédération pour une alternative sociale et écologique* (Federation for a Social and Ecological Alternative, FASE), or activists who split from the Trotskyist party labeled *Nouveau partianticapitaliste* (New Anti-Capitalist Party, NPA) considering that they were at a dead end if they remained on their own.

much. Among the subjects of disagreement was the stance toward the Parti socialiste who won the presidential and legislative elections in 2012. Their win brought François Hollande to power, and members of the Front de Gauche were called to position on whether or not they would support a socialist government. Mélenchonists were strictly against it, while communists were tempted. In addition, the question of the nature of the Front de gauche became central. Conceived as an electoral coalition, it was after all no more than a symbolic empty shell in terms of organization. There was no independent leadership, and all decisions had to be approved by consensus among party members (activists' writing, 2013). Elected MPs from the FG were not in the same political group in the National Assembly, and the question of the mutualization of budgets, expenses, and reimbursements remained an unresolved conflict. As such, some party members claimed that the Front de Gauche should be more formally organized. They argued that it should be able to welcome activists without party membership to participate directly, and that spokespersons should be designated to deal with the media and with other parties in the name of Front de Gauche, outside of the control of the communists or the Mélenchonists.

The latter were quite in favor of institutionalizing the Front de Gauche, as it was their aim from the beginning to form a large radical left party. Nevertheless, communists still vetoed this possibility, and the relationship continued to deteriorate. Against this backdrop, the FG approached the local and European elections of 2014 without enthusiasm and the regional elections of 2015 were chaotic, as the coalitions varied across localities. In consequence, strengthened by his presidential fame, Mélenchon and his close associates began to consider a new strategy to free themselves from the constraints of the electoral cartel.

2.3. La France insoumise: "federate the people" to build a social majority

Unlike other European countries in which left-wing populism arose in reaction to austerity plans following the economic crisis of 2008 and the debt crisis in 2010, the French case is different. Its implementation by Mélenchon stemmed from a strategic reorientation, following the limits of the strategy of the Front de gauche and under the influence of new inspirational models that had emerged in the meantime, especially the Spanish political party Podemos which was built on a populist hypothesis largely inspired by the theory of Ernesto Laclau and Latin American inclusive populism (Chazel, 2019; Nez, 2015). Indeed, Mélenchon later declared that LFI, the new movement he founded in 2016, was "the son, the daughter of Podemos" (Mélenchon, 2018).

As demonstrated in the first section of this paper, Mélenchon was confronted with post-Marxism and left-wing populist theories quite early on, before he formed a radical left electoral coalition together with the communists, and even before he left the Parti socialiste. His decision to gradually adopt a transversal discourse instead of a left-oriented discourse was also justified by the fact that, according to him, the "left" signifier had been emptied of its substance because of the neoliberal turn of the social democrats in power under Hollande's presidency. In addition, he set on a mission to reach out to part of the RN voters, who vote for the populist radical right to express their anger with the political system but do not truly share radical right values. In addition, realizing that the Front de Gauche was in a deadlock as long as the communists do not abandon their party and their left-wing strategy, he progressively became interested in implementing the populist strategy on his own in terms of organization. He aimed to emancipate himself from political parties' games and try to reach a broader electorate than the one already covered by the radical left. To justify the change in terms of party organization, Mélenchon lamented "the necrosis of the Front de gauche, transformed into a small cartel of parties" (Mouffe and Mélenchon, 2016). He explained that the organization of

the Front de gauche corresponded to "a tool for class action," whereas LFI, a party-movement, represented "the organized form of the people" (Mélenchon, 2017).

In August 2014, Mélenchon slowly initiated the transition. He left his position as co-president of the Parti de gauche and founded in parallel the Mouvement pour la sixième république (Movement for the Sixth Republic, M6R) in September that same year. The main demands of the M6R largely echoed the Front de gauche's political platform, but the movement — which was defined as "neither a political party nor an association" — claimed to be a "citizen's network" (activists' writing, 2014) without any political affiliation. The M6R consisted of a national board to lead and an ethics committee, but above all it presented itself as a horizontally organized network that relied on an online participatory platform called Nous le peuple (We the People). The M6R was meant to be a "non-electoral test" of the effectiveness of the populist strategy (Confesson 2019, 312). Yet, the failure of this movement did not slow Mélenchon down in his evolution toward a populist strategy for the 2017 presidential elections, a ballot that is particularly fitted for charismatic leaders' rhetoric, a recurring corollary of populism.

This strategic evolution culminated in February 2016, when Mélenchon officially declared himself candidate for the 2017 presidential election, "outside any party framework." His objective was no longer to "bring the left together," but to "federate the people" through a new party-movement called La France insoumise (LFI), founded at the same time. LFI was presented as a "gaseous" movement organized in transversal networks. Under the claimed influence of Bernie Sanders's democratic primary campaign and based on the M6R model, LFI was organized through an online platform that allowed Internet users to become members without paying fees, and to participate, online, in the expansion of the political platform. Inspired by the "Circles" organization of Podemos, LFI built its territorial organization on "support groups" created spontaneously by the movement's members. The Parti de gauche eventually dissolved into La France insoumise in 2017. The main leaders of the PG then became the main media figures of LFI.

Mélenchon was thus emancipated from a left-wing coalition and no longer needed to concede strategic orientations to partners. Even though the PCF and other small radical left parties finally rallied him in his run for the 2017 presidential election, Mélenchon and his team had more room for maneuver to implement a populist strategy and deliver discourses more infused with populism than in 2012 (see Section 2.1). This strategy appeared successful, while in the meantime the Parti socialiste collapsed, pressured to the right by Emmanuel Macron's campaign. Mélenchon obtained 19.5% of the votes and narrowly missed qualifying for the second round. However, despite his desire to transcend partisan conflicts by presenting himself as the candidate of the "people," Mélenchon still remained a candidate associated with the left in the collective imagery, as the profile of his electorate illustrates (see Section 2.2). Facing this partial failure, collective enthusiasm faded and the end of the campaign led to the end of collaboration, for the second time. During the following legislative elections held on 11 and 18 June 2017, the PCF as well as other allies of LFI presented independent candidatures. Relations between LFI and the PCF began to deteriorate again, and the communist MPs preferred to form their own parliamentary group.

Since the first comparative studies of Mudde and March (2005) on the transformation of the radical left family and the advent of the socialist populist sub-family, it took about a decade for a French case to emerge. Scrutinizing the genesis of LFI, it is necessary to stress that it is the result of both (1) a long-term mutation of ideological and intellectual resources that circulate among the radical left family between countries and inspire leaders to experiment with new strategies, and (2) contextual considerations, such as material resources and relationships between parties that enable a window of opportunity to substantiate such a populist strategy.

In the next section, we illustrate how the populist turn of Jean-Luc Mélenchon stands out in his discourses between 2012 and 2017. In counterpoint, we show that the populist strategy did not produce the expected results in terms of electorate.

3. Discursive and Electoral Comparison of the Front de gauche and La France insoumise Strategies in the 2012 and 2017 Presidential Elections

3.1. The populist rhetoric in action: an analysis of Jean-Luc Mélenchon's campaign speeches

In the minimal, formal, and discursive definition of populism we have adopted, populism is defined based on three elements: the appeal to the people, anti-elitism, and popular sovereignty (Laclau, 2005; Mudde, 2004). The appeal to the people and anti-elitist elements imply a (relative) detachment from the left-right axis — and thus from the mythology and phraseology of the traditional radical left — in favor of drawing an antagonistic border between the people and the elite. Regarding the third element, the emphasis on popular sovereignty goes hand in hand with the defense of a radicalization of democracy (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001), a kind of "democratic extremism" (Charalambous and Ioannou, 2019). As explained in the introduction, we also added other elements to this definition. In order to identify the degree of populism in a discourse, we examined five elements: (1) the relationship between the left-right and the people-elite axes (which implies detachment from the leftist symbology); (2) popular sovereignty (radicalization of democracy); (3) a national-popular discourse; (4) the "proclamation of a crisis"; and (5) strong leadership.

Based on these criteria, both the 2012 and 2017 campaigns led by Mélenchon can be described as populist. However, in 2017 one can observe a greater degree of populism in his discourse, as Mélenchon added two populist elements to it: the mobilization of an opposition between the people and the elite which implies a partial rejection of the identity of the left, and greater personalization around his figure.

We conducted a corpus-based analysis by exploiting a highly diverse set of data of different nature (oral and written) in order to generate a "system of assumptions where the multiple variables of communication are controlled" (Bonnafous and Tournier, 1995). As corpora are always non-exhaustive (Charaudeau, 2009), completeness of a corpus is not sought, and the corpus is therefore considered "partial" and "open." The choice was made to combine quantitative (lexicometric) and qualitative methods, considering that scholars highlighted the advantage of combining the two methods, which complement each other and produce similar results, when studying populism (Font et al., 2021; Rooduijn and Pauwels, 2011).

The lexicometric analysis was carried out by using a corpus of meetings, blog posts, press interviews, and the political program in the 2012 and 2017 campaigns[3], and treated through Iramuteq, a textual analysis software enabling to perform frequency analyses. The frequency analysis involves comparing different corpora to one another. Since the size of the corpora is not homogeneous, we reduced the frequency to 100,000 words in order to compare the two campaigns. The lexicometric analysis was complemented by a qualitative

[3] Twelve meetings were randomly selected for the 2012 campaign, and nine for the 2017 campaign. The higher number of meetings in 2012 is explained by their shorter duration compared to the meetings in 2017, and the aim to have two corpora of relatively equivalent size.

analysis of the discourse and ethnographic fieldwork, which allowed, for example, to recontextualize the leader's statements and study aesthetic changes.

Table 1– Corpus used to analyze Jean-Luc Mélenchon's campaigns during the French 2012 and 2017 presidential elections

		Meeting speeches	*Blog post*	*Press interview*	*Program*
2012	Number of texts	12	33	6	1
	Time span	29 June 2011 to 6 May 2012	1 February 2011 to 12 April 2012	21 June 2011 to 7 January 2012	2012
2017	Number of texts	9	28	10	1
	Time span	5 June 2016 to 6 May 2012	8 July 2016 to 7 May 2017	26 August 2016 to 16 April 2017	2017

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Table 2 - Absolute (relative/100 000) frequencies of use of lemmas related to the right/left axis and the people-power axis in France

	2012	*2017*
	Signifiers of the left	
Capitalisme [Capitalism]	147 (82)	15 (7,6)
Socialisme [Socialism]	122 (68)	49 (24,9)
Classe [Class]	42 (23,4)	36 (18,3)
Ouvrier [Worker]	81 (45,2)	72 (36,5)
Gauche [Left]	260 (145)	110 (55,9)
Droite [Right]	149 (83,1)	97 (49,2)
Révolution [Revolution]	50 (27,9)	46 (23,3)
Camarade [Comrade]	84 (46,8)	23 (11,7)
	Signifiers of the people-elites axis	
Caste [Caste]	4 (2,2)	16 (8,1)
Oligarchie [Oligarchy]	10 (5,6)	16 (8,1)
Elites [Elite]	11(6,1)	0 (0)
Peuple [People]	265 (147,8)	227 (115,2)

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

The ethnographic fieldwork was based on participant observation conducted in three meetings during the 2017 electoral campaign: the "March for the 6th Republic" held in Paris on 18 March 2017, the "Meeting for

Peace" held in Marseille on 9 April 2017, and the "Meeting for Freedom" held in Toulouse on 16 April 2017. The qualitative analysis allowed us to correct the biases associated with the purely quantitative analysis.

Mélenchon's discourses in 2012 and in 2017 show several similarities. In both campaigns, Mélenchon developed a strong populist discourse, relying on three elements: popular sovereignty, patriotism, and the notion that society is going through a crisis. The popular sovereignty element has been identified by scholars as the backbone of populism and is often associated with the necessity for a radicalization of democracy. There is thus an affinity between populism and direct democracy (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). In Mélenchon's discourse, the idea of a democratic revolution finds its origins in his Latin American inspirations, which encouraged him to theorize the need for a citizen's revolution linked to a constituent process. This is reflected in his 2012 and 2017 campaigns in a relatively similar way; for example, in his speech in which he insists on the "stolen sovereignty" by denouncing the "presidential monarchy," and in him proposing the adoption of a Constituent Assembly and intending to lead a citizen revolution. In his written program, on the other hand, the convocation of a Constituent Assembly holds a central place in both campaigns.

Many scholars have emphasized the links — contingent (Charalambous and Ioannou, 2019) or mechanical — between populism and nationalism. Nationalist rhetoric is said to structure the discourse of left-wing populist movements — in Latin America and in Europe. In Mélenchon's discourse, the "republican homeland" holds an important place. Mélenchon competes with Marine Le Pen's radical right Rassemblement national to re-signify the term "nation." He rejects the ethnocultural conceptions of the nation used by the right, and proposes a socioeconomic and democratic conception of the nation that emphasizes the importance of public services and social rights, with the intention of protecting the poorest citizens from the enemies of the homeland which are the financial oligarchy, neoliberalism, and "ceux qui se gavent" ("those who fatten themselves"). Mélenchon associates the French nation with a political regime, the republic (more precisely, the social republic), which is based on the motto of "liberty, equality, fraternity." As shown by Chiocchetti (2019), the adoption of a nationalist discourse by Mélenchon, both in 2012 and in 2017, represented a break from the traditional French radical left. Indeed, even if the French radical left has not always rejected the mobilization of a patriotic imagery, it had recently used the symbols of "the people, the nation, and the Republic" with "less vehemence and intensity." In 2012, as in 2017, Mélenchon presented the Front de gauche and then La France insoumise as the culmination of the republican history. He constantly referred to the "great and glorious" revolutions of 1789 and 1870. In his patriotic narrative, one can find the idea of the "greatness" of France, which, as a "universalist nation," must present itself as an example for the rest of the world, as well as the idea of the importance of recovering the sovereignty stolen from the people by the European Union. The national imagery is thus widely present in the speeches of his two campaigns:

> France is not a Western nation, it is not [a Western nation] because of the diversity of its people, and because [France] is present in all the oceans of the world […] No, France is not a Western nation, it is a universalist nation! We are, and we want to be, because of what history has bequeathed to us, the first model of universalist nation." Paris, 5 April 2012.

Many scholars have also emphasized that the emergence and/or consolidation of populist movements, on both the right and the left, was largely propelled by contexts of crisis, or even that the crisis was a necessary condition for the appearance of populism. While in France the financial crisis of 2008 had a significant psychological impact on the population, its economic impact was relatively low (Betz, 2016). Unlike his Euro-

pean counterparts who identified the 2008 crisis as an important turning point, Mélenchon insists above all on the "multiplication of crises" (Mélenchon, 2014) — social, ecological, capitalism, sovereignty, and democracy crises which materialize in a "crisis of civilization" (Charalambous and Ioannou, 2019). On 5 February 2017, during a meeting held in Lyon, he explained that:

> Human civilization is not only threatened, it has the means to surpass the crisis it has entered because of climate disruption and other aspects that concern the human ecosystem only derailed by greed, by the will to appropriate everything, everywhere, without ceasing. Lyon, 5 February 2017.

The adoption of a populist discourse contrasting the people with the elite does not always imply a total rejection of the left-right axis, as demonstrated, for instance, by the Latin American populism of the 1990s and 2000s, which claimed to be socialist (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). Nevertheless, the adoption of a populist discourse implies a certain degree of detachment from this axis in favor of the adoption of a more transversal rhetoric. When looking at this criterion, the 2012 and 2017 campaigns reveal notable differences. Indeed, contrary to 2012, in 2017 Mélenchon abandoned many left-wing signifiers. In 2017, Mélenchon continued to mobilize leftist symbols and rhetoric but far less vigorously than in 2012. The frequency analysis of the rhetoric used by Mélenchon in his discourses in 2012 and in 2017 indicates that he continued to address the social classes and workers, but mainly shows that some very strong signifiers of the left (capitalism, socialism, comrade) were used much less in 2017 than in 2012. In order to conduct the analysis, we selected the terms that were related to socialist identity and populist identity (Chiocchetti, 2019). The most striking example is certainly the term "left" itself, which was used 145 times in every 100,000 words in 2012, and only 55.9 times in every 100,000 words in 2017. Regarding the signifiers linked to the people-elite axis, the analysis shows that the term "people" was used in a similar way in 2012 and in 2017. However, strong differences can be seen between 2012 and 2017 regarding the "elite." In 2017 the signifiers "caste" and "oligarchy" were used much more frequently than in 2012.

Table 3 - Lexicometric characteristics of the corpora used for the lexicometric analyses

Number of texts	*2012*	53
	2017	55
Number of occurrences	*2012*	179331
	2017	197108
Number of terms	*2012*	11020
	2017	8326
Number of hapaxes	*2012*	4967
	2017	3439
Average occurrences per text	*2012*	3383.60
	2017	3583.78

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

This abandonment of left-wing signifiers is observed not only in verbal communication, but also in other important aspects. Mélenchon has not relinquished all the elements of the left; for instance, he continued to routinely wear the red triangle on his jacket, a working-class symbol and an opposition to the far-right. However, important aesthetic changes could be observed, for example, on campaign posters. In 2012, Mélenchon was presented alone, on a red background, with the slogan "Take the power," while in 2017, a blue background was used with the slogan "The strength of the people." We can also note that in 2012, at the end of each meeting, the communist and revolutionary song The Internationale was sung, followed by the French national anthem La Marseillaise, while in 2017 only the national anthem was sung. During the "Parade for the 6th Republic" organized on 18 March 2017, from the Bastille to the Place de la République, French flags were distributed to participants by the party. A scene observed during the "Meeting for Freedom" held on 16 April 2017 in Toulouse illustrates this change in strategy. Security personnel asked the public to put away their red flags and union flags before entering the prairie des filtres where the meeting was held. At the end of the meeting, a few activists attempted to sing The Internationale, but were not joined by the rest of the audience.

Apart from its discourse, according to other scholars, populism is also characterized by an organization and a particular style of communication centered around the figure of the movement's leader (Engesser et al., 2017). The individualization of politics — the staging of the political representative — is far more developed among populist actors compared to traditional political formations (de Vreese et al., 2018). Regarding Mélenchon, the communication strategy adopted by La France insoumise in 2017 was far more personalized than that of the Front de gauche in 2012, following the evolution from the strategy of a union of radical left parties to a populist strategy. This personalization can be seen in the formats and tools of communication used by the leader.

Indeed, the personalization of Mélenchon's communication can be observed in the choice of the communication tools used, and in particular by the increasing use of social networks in 2017 and in particular his YouTube channel. While this change was undeniably due to technological considerations, with social networks being much more developed in 2017 than in 2012, it should still be noted that Mélenchon was the only leading political representative to massively use YouTube in his communication, with the broadcasting of a weekly program called La Revue de la semaine (Review of the week). Social networks allow political leaders to control their communication by addressing favorable topics (Enli and Skogerbø, 2013) without any contradiction. Social networks, especially audiovisual networks, also allow for greater personalization of political communication (Metz et al., 2019). It is indeed without any intermediary that Mélenchon can speak to his potential future voters by adopting a much more direct style, and not hesitate, with the prospect of building a close relationship with them, to reveal the backstage of the campaign or some personal anecdotes.

Our analysis shows that the campaign led by Mélenchon in 2017 has therefore resulted in the addition of further degree of populism compared to the 2012 campaign, especially regarding the people-elite axis, and the hyper-leadership. This confirms the existing literature which has shown that "[Mélenchon] started tapping in the rhetoric and imaginary of various populist movements across the world several years before the 2017 presidential election" (Marlière, 2020), but that "the 2017 campaign marked a further populist shift from the point of view of rhetoric" (Chiocchetti, 2019). However, it should also be noted that considering that the "left/right divide was completely eclipsed" can be reductive (Chiocchetti, 2019), as Mélenchon never completely relinquished the symbols of the left. Rather, our analysis shows that in 2012 the populist strategy coexisted with a classical left strategy, while in 2017 both strategies coexisted but the populist strategy largely dominated the rhetoric of LFI, leaving little room for the symbols and rhetoric of the left.

3.2. The left or the people: changes and continuity in the structure of Jean-Luc Mélenchon's electorate

The strategy and communication plan followed by Mélenchon and his campaign team during the 2012 and 2017 presidential elections differed. While the candidate of the Front de gauche, despite some populist inclinations, primarily aimed to bring together the anti-liberal and radical left and challenge the hegemony of the Parti socialiste's hegemony on the left of the political spectrum, the candidate of La France insoumise followed a populist logic of more intense transversality and aimed to build a popular majority by agglomerating several segments of the electorate. Apart from remobilizing his core supporters from 2012, Mélenchon aimed to extend his electorate on the left by attracting disappointed socialists. But above all, he sought to position himself as the candidate of hope for non-voters and protesters, as well as for the "angered but not fascist" voters who tend to turn to the candidate of the Rassemblement national. From 2012 to 2017, Mélenchon gained almost ten points, rising from 11.1% to 19.5% of the popular votes, creating a victorious dynamic even though he did not qualify for the second round. Nonetheless, the comparative study of the social and political dynamics of electoral choices in 2012 and 2017 shows that the populist strategy of 2017 did not reach its initial objectives. Paradoxically, in 2017, the growing support for Mélenchon was based more on a broader gathering of the left than on a federation of the people. To illustrate this, we used data from the two post-election surveys: the French Electoral Study of 2012 and of 2017[4].

From the perspective of social dynamics, the 2012 candidate attracted mixed profiles (Vasilopoulos et al., 2015), suggesting that he had managed to emancipate himself from the communist sociology and electoral geography to extend also to voters with profiles closer to the new radical left reshaped by post-materialism (Table 4). Thus, the age groups demonstrate good performance among the younger generations on the one hand, but also a respectable score among individuals of working age on the other. Similarly, the electoral penetration of professionals and socio-professional categories shows that the Mélenchon vote was not a class vote or even a popular vote (Tiberj, 2013), since while the workers are slightly over-represented, there is also an over-representation of intermediate professions and even of executives. Income does not appear to be a determining criterion, confirming that the candidate did not particularly attract the vote of the precarious (Cautrès, 2013).

In 2017, the LFI vote became even more generational, with a gap of more than 20 percentage points between the 18–34 and 65+ age groups. The level of education was a determining factor among young people. In terms of social class, the strong increase in Mélenchon's scores among the working class, particularly among employees, should not detract from the very sharp increase in the votes of craftsmen, shopkeepers, and company directors. Overall, the vote for Mélenchon was even less determined by profession than in 2012, and was more characterized by low income. Paradoxically, this dynamic among the most precarious was concomitant with a strong breakthrough among the highly educated. It is therefore not just any faction of the working class that voted for Mélenchon in 2017, but those whose social status does not correspond to their level of education, while he failed to compete with the Rassemblement national among the less educated (Cautrès, 2017).

[4] Surveys are part of the global research program Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES). The French Electoral Study 2012 was a face-to-face (CAPI) fieldwork conducted in May 2012, with a quota sample of 1,830 individuals. The French Electoral Study 2017 was also a CAPI survey conducted in May 2017, with a stratified random sample of 2,014 individuals.

Table 4 - Evolution of Jean Luc Mélenchon's electoral share from 2012 to 2017 in different segments of the electorate (in % rounded up to the unit)[5]

	Presidential election 2012 (1st round)	*Presidential election 2017 (1st round)*	*Evolution 2012-2017*
All	11	20	+9
Age group			
18-24 years old	16	32	+16
25-34 years old	13	33	+20
35-44 years old	13	24	+11
45-54 years old	13	20	+7
55-64 years old	9	17	+8
65+ years old	6	10	+4
Social class			
Farmers	0	5	+5
Craftmen& entrepreneurs	3	20	+15
Executives and intellectual professions	12	19	+4
Middle classes	13	26	+10
Employees	9	29	+19
Manual workers	14	25	+9
Retired	7	13	+6
Unemployed	9	29	+20
Income level			
Low	12	23	+11
Middle	12	20	+8
Wealthy	10	17	+7
Education level			
Elementary	7	15	+8
Lower manual degree	11	19	+8
Baccalaureate	17	22	+5
Bachelor's degree	10	22	+12
Master's degree	11	22	+11
Crossings			
18-34 years old + manual degree	15	19	+4
18-34 years old + master's degree	11	51	+40
High income + master's degree	8	17	+9
Low income + master's degree	27	62	+35

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

[5] Data weighted by basic socio-demographics (no education level) and actual results from the first and second round weight3 in FES 212 and w6 in FES2017.

In terms of political dynamics, in 2012 Mélenchon achieved his best score among former communist voters, validating the choice of the Parti communiste français to support the former socialist. He also obtained extremely high scores among both an electorate familiar with the far-left and among ecologists. Mélenchon managed to federate the voters of the anti-liberal left who are usually split between several candidates. However, his attempt to compete with the socialist candidate for the hegemony of the left failed. On the one hand, socialist voters had little interest in Mélenchon; on the other hand, the candidate attracted only 16% of those who declared themselves to be on the left and 33% of those who declared themselves to be "very left-wing," as well as 22% of union members. In counterpoint, two trends indicated some hope for the future for the Front de gauche candidate — his emerging dynamics among non-voters and among first-time voters.

While Mélenchon increased his score considerably between 2012 and 2017, it is nevertheless necessary to note that it was not so much thanks to his populist strategy, but rather to the fact that he succeeded in federating the left. It is true that he managed to improve his score among abstainers and first-time voters, but that is not where the real dynamics occurred. Mélenchon had a large majority among individuals who declared themselves "very far-left," and a strong dynamic among individuals on the left. Sociologically and geographically, the "Mélenchon vote" was directly fed by the negative dynamics of the socialist candidacy led by Benoît Hamon. This reversal of the balance of power made him the "hidden winner" (Cautrès, 2017) of those presidential elections.

However, the popular and defiant electorate Mélenchon wanted to capture from the Rassemblement national was not reached. On the one hand, as mentioned above, the popular electorate did not particularly give their vote to LFI. On the other hand, there was no trace of a shift of votes from right-wing and populist radical right-wing voters to LFI (Table 4). We can also see the low attractiveness of Mélenchon among the most depoliticized individuals who cannot be positioned on a left-right axis. Those individuals continued to vote for Marine Le Pen much more. In 2017 Mélenchon attracted more voters from the classic left than non-voters and far-right voters. This "irony" (Marlière, 2020) can be explained in several ways. First of all, it is likely that, according to a "bandwagon" mechanism, well known in the explanation of electoral dynamics (Nadeau et al., 1993), Mélenchon became the useful vote on the left from the moment the polls placed him well ahead of the socialist party candidate Benoît Hamon. We can also assume that despite his efforts to distance himself from a solely left-wing positioning, Mélenchon remained widely identified with this camp within the electorate, especially as in 2017, just like in 2012, he developed a program in which purely materialistic issues were strongly present.

Finally, a comparison between the electoral dynamics of 2012 and 2017 concerning Mélenchon in terms of political attitudes and major areas of values shows that, taken as a whole, not many differences were present. The voters of both the Front de gauche and La France insoumise shared the main orientation of the radical left in Europe, demonstrating that whether or not a populist strategy is applied, Mélenchon remains within the field of the left: a slightly more marked interest in politics, associated with a relative mistrust toward the functioning of democratic institutions and political representatives (Gomez et al., 2016), an ambivalent criticism of European integration which is not fully integrated into Euroscepticism, a rejection of xenophobia and authoritarianism, and an ambition for social justice (Visser et al., 2014).

Table 5 - Evolution of Jean Mélenchon's electoral share from 2012 to 2017 in different segments of the electorate (in % rounded up to the unit)[6]

	Presidential election 2012 (1st round)	*Presidential election 2017 (1st round)*	*Evolution 2012-2017*
All	11	20	+9
Past voting behaviour			
Abstainers	14	27	+13
First time voter	21	32	+11
Laguiller/Arthaud (extreme left)	31	62	+31
Besancenot/Poutou (extreme left)	44	42	-2
Buffet / Mélenchon (radical left)	79	77	-2
Royal/ Hollande (socialist party)	11	24	+13
Voynet / Joly (greens)	29	25	-4
Bayrou (center)	7	12	+5
Sarkozy (rightwing party)	2	4	+2
Le Pen (populist radical right)	2	1	-1
Political attitudes			
Very left-wing	33	63	+30
Left-wing	16	34	+18
Right-wing	3	3	=
Very right-wing	1	2	+1
Interested in politics	16	20	+4
Not interested in politics	9	19	+10
Not interested + neither left-wing nor righ-wing	8	14	+6
Union member	22	33	+11
Dissatisfied with democracy	14	24	+10
Defiant towards representatives	14	24	+10
Values			
Xenophobia	6	12	+6
Authoritarianism	10	17	+7
Euroscepticism	12	19	+7
Social justice	13	24	+11

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

[6] Data weighted by basic socio-demographics (no education level) and actual results from the first and second round with the variable weight3 in FES 212 and w6 in FES2017. Values and opinions about the political system are measured from the following four variables replicated in both surveys: 'There are too many immigrants in France' (w1_1/O12); In society, there should be a hierarchy and leaders" (w1_2/O47); "The government should take measures to reduce the income gap" (r1/O24) “Do you think that France has benefited or not from its membership of the European Union? "(g2/EU2); "Are you satisfied with the way the democracy works in France” (I3/ PR14) ; “To what extent do you trust politicians in France” (I6) and “The majority of politicians are trustworthy” (O39). The variables are scales of agreement with four positions except for support for European integration and confidence in representatives (respectively 3 positions / 0-10 scale). We gathered positive and negative answers as to obtain a binary statistic of support or non-support but we reported only one side to avoid an overloaded table.

4. Conclusion

This article has discussed the evolution of the French radical left since the 2000s and the left populist turn across several dimensions: from an ideological point of view (with the shift from Marxism to post-Marxism), from an organizational and strategic point of view (with the creation of the Front de gauche, founded in 2009, which was supposed to bring together the forces of the radical left, and which was replaced by La France insoumise in 2016), and from a discursive point of view. These three elements (ideological, organizational, and discursive) did not mutate at the same time. We have shown that the ideological bases of populism were present in Mélenchon's trajectory since the early 1990s, but that it was not until a specific political context appeared that Mélenchon actually put this new strategy into practice, in a different context than Podemos which he used as a model (without a strong economic crisis but with strong competition with a populist radical right party). We believe that the case of La France insoumise is a good example of a long-term change, and how the implementation of the populist strategy, notwithstanding its ideological grounding, is dependent on the political context.

This article also shows that a vision which opposes the strategies of the Front de Gauche and of La France insoumise too strongly would be too simplistic. Several elements of the populist discourse were already present in 2012 (patriotism, crisis, popular sovereignty). However, two new elements were mobilized by Mélenchon much more in 2017 (the people-elite axis, strong leadership), rendering his populist discourse more complete. It is therefore a rather gradual evolution that we are witnessing between 2012 and 2017, with the particular context of the 2017 campaign encouraging Mélenchon to develop additional populist elements with the creation of La France insoumise. In 2017, with this strategy, Mélenchon sought to go beyond the electorate of the radical left that he was able to win over in 2012, but he only partially succeeded in achieving this objective. Although his electoral result improved considerably between the two elections, his gains were mainly among left-wing voters, benefiting from the collapse of the Parti socialiste as much as contributing to it.

If Jean-Luc Mélenchon's strategy in 2017 consisted of an additional degree of populism compared to the one adopted in 2012, he appears to have taken a step backwards since the end of the presidential election For instance, the choice of Manon Aubry, an Oxfam activist and rising figure on the left, as head of La France insoumise's list for the European elections in May 2019 seemed to suggest a return to a more classical left-wing strategy. In the same way, in the June 2021 regional elections, LFI formed alliances with various other left-wing parties, which also suggested a setback for the populist strategy. However, regarding the advent of new presidential election in 2022, Mélenchon seems to have opted again for the populist strategy. Like in 2017, he declared himself a candidate very early and outside of any party strategy. He recently chose the name Union populaire (Popular Union) to lead the movement, and reminds us that he will not go back to a union of the left strategy by declaring that "after the union of the left, it is time for the people's union!".

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Author's Information:

Chloé Alexandre (chloe.alexandre@sciencespo-grenoble.fr) is a Ph.D student in political science at Sciences Po Grenoble, PACTE research center working on values, political attitudes and electoral behaviors. She focuses on the drivers of radical and populist vote in Europe and the demand for a democratic renewal.

Antoine Bristielle (antoine.bristielle@umrpacte.fr) is a Ph.D student in political science at Sciences Po Grenoble, UMR PACTE. His work focuses on political communication, media transformations and the effects of the media on young people's relationship with politics.

Laura Chazel (laura.chazel@sciencespo-grenoble.fr) is a Ph.D student at Sciences Po Grenoble and at the University Complutense of Madrid. Her research focuses on the (re)construction of the notion of populism in/by left-wing political parties with a focus of attention on two movements: Podemos and La France insoumise. She works on the flow of ideas between political parties (especially between the Latin American Left and the European Left); on the relationship between social movements and institutions; and on the influence of the academic world on political parties.